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The arts and changing rural places

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Figure 1: Visual Arts Centre, Carlow (Photograph taken by Bernadette Quinn)

The arts and changing rural places

Dr Bernadette Quinn

Rural places are experiencing a great deal of change. Recently, NESC commented on the need to understand the changes rural Ireland is undergoing (National Economic and Social Council 2021). It emphasised how the Covid 19 pandemic has encouraged the practice of remote working and given more people greater flexibility to settle and relocate to rural areas outside of cities and big towns. Earlier this year, preliminary reports from the 2022 census confirmed this, with statistics showing that all counties experienced both population growth and an increase in net migration over the six years 2016–2022. As populations across rural Ireland expand, they are becoming increasingly diverse in cultural and ethnical terms, not only because of population movements within Ireland but also because of increased migration from abroad. As of June 2022, over 35,000 Ukrainians (<https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublicatns/fp/p-ai/arrivalsfromukraineinirelandseries1/>) had arrived in Ireland.

While the highest concentration of these arrivals is in Dublin's north inner city, Ukrainians have been dispersed throughout the country with notable clusters in the rural counties of Clare and Kerry. The influx of people moving into rural areas, both from elsewhere in Ireland and from abroad, injects dynamism and change into local and rural contexts in ways that represent both opportunity and challenge. Meanwhile, as NESC also noted, some rural places continue to experience long-standing socio-economic issues like uneven and unstable access to high-quality broadband, a lack of sustainable quality employment and social isolation.

The Irish Research Council funded research project FADE (Festivals, Audiences and Digital Engagement) asks questions about changing rural places, aiming to understand the rural in



Figure 2: Fleadh Cheoil 2022, Mullingar (Photograph taken by Bernadette Quinn)

the context of making art today. Following NESC, it recognises that rural places are very vibrant and dynamic, and that this offers many opportunities and challenges from an arts perspective. The panel discussion that the project team hosted on 'The arts and changing rural places' at the Arts Council & Local Government's biennial Places Matter conference in March 2022 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=41UA9OPKfo> aired perspectives and experiences from a number of arts practitioners working in different capacities in the field. Central to the discussions was an understanding that rural places create very particular contexts for making art that differ substantially from the urban. Of course, not all rural places are equal in terms of rurality. FADE researchers find it helpful to draw on the CSO's (2019) six-way area classification which sees cities with a population of 50,000+ placed at one end of a spectrum and areas with populations of less than 1,500 located in highly rural/remote areas at the other extreme. In between, are satellite urban towns with

populations of 1,500 – 49,999 where 20% or more of resident employees work in cities; independent urban towns where less than 20% of resident employees work in cities, and rural areas with populations of less than 1,550 characterised by either high or moderate urban influence.

All of these rural settings are heterogeneous, complex and multi-dimensional in nature. Fundamentally, they constitute important sites of exchange between artists and the human, social, cultural and environmental contexts that they encounter. Environmentally, natural settings can offer tranquillity, an escape from urban life and the time-space that encourages creativity. Rural settings offer unique routeways into encountering and learning about cultural aspects of community involving local people, local lifestyles and local practices. These might relate to ways of life associated with older rural dwellers, activities associated with how people work the land (e.g. uplands / boglands) or depend for their livelihoods on the sea (fishing villages/port towns); lifestyle practices associated with Gaeltacht communities or with communities that continue to thrive on off-shore islands communities; or particular cultural practices (sporting traditions or music styles) associated with rural pockets found in counties across the country. Panel discussants were unanimously of the view that the possibilities that arise for close encounters with local people in rural contexts are hugely important. These create opportunities for artists to connect with a wealth of cultural riches, and also to respond to pertinent social issues like social isolation, the changing rural economy, depopulation or loss of traditions. Thus artistic-local engagements not only shape the creative practice of individual artists and open up

The ARTS and CHANGING RURAL PLACES

A panel discussion held as part of the Arts Council/Local Government Places Matter Conference 2022

Thanks to documents like these (left), Julia's Painting (Open Arts Office) for James O'Connell (right) and Dara Miller (left) (Dr. Rosalind C. Quane (18 July))



Figure 3: Understanding the rural in the context of making art today (Graphic produced by Maia Thomas, June 2022)

cultural participation opportunities for rural dwellers of all ages, but vitally, they inform the ongoing reproduction and development of local identities.

However, there is nothing inevitable or natural about artists being able to achieve creative immersion in rural places. Rural places need to be serviced. Our panel discussion made it clear that some rural places are much better connected than others. Accessibility is highly variable, both in terms of transport and digital infrastructures. This has immense implications for artists' ability to base themselves, however temporarily, in rural places. It also has implications for the visibility of the art produced and showcased in these contexts and for rural dwellers' ability to access, experience and engage with artistic work. Equally, some rural places are much

better served than others in terms of cultural infrastructures and the availability of supports. While the romantic notion of artists moving to rural areas to escape the busyness of city life and be inspired by the landscape remains valid for artists working in many genre, creative practice always needs supports. Artists benefit greatly from the availability of residential centres, especially now that digital access holds the promise of working from a rural base and remaining connected to collaborators and important gatekeepers based elsewhere. They need access to workspace and studios and places to perform, exhibit and showcase their output. This requires hard infrastructure in the guise of buildings but also networks of supports and resources of all kinds such as those provided through local government arts offices.

Figure 3 captures some of the main points of conversation raised by the arts practitioners who contributed to FADE's panel discussion on the Arts and Changing Rural Place. The conversation served to highlight issues that this research project will continue to probe as it progresses. At this point it seems relevant to consider how issues pertaining to the arts in rural Ireland, such as those highlighted here, are addressed in wider national policy and planning arenas. In terms of rural policy discourse, part of Ireland's current Rural Development vision (*Our Rural Future* <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/4c236-our-rural-future-vision-and-policy-context/>) is to nurture culture. There is an acknowledgement that Ireland's '... culture is heavily dependent on the contribution of rural areas, and that 'rural communities are important guardians of our cultural capital' (p7). Culture and the arts are treated in policy actions listed e.g. in respect of Enhancing Participation, Leadership and Resilience in Rural Communities (chapter 6). However, a cursory reading of these rural policy narratives suggests that 'culture' is often most clearly understood in respect of its 'heritage' dimensions. There is quite a firm material basis to the heritage at issue, with frequent reference to human made buildings, streetscapes, civic spaces and to natural environment like parks, woodlands and agricultural land. Intangible cultural forms like the performing, visual and literary arts as well as to arts festivals feature less strongly. Quite why these intangible forms of culture are less apparent is not clear. Perhaps their small scale, dispersed and diverse nature lends a degree of invisibility to these activities? Perhaps it relates to the relative size of the local authority budgets allocated to county arts offices? Or perhaps there is a

deficit of data documenting the nature and scale of arts activities happening in rural places. All of these questions are of interest to the FADE project. Very importantly, in a national rural context, is the roll out of the National Broadband Plan which envisages a network of Broadband Connection Points (BCPs) as well as the Connectedhubs.ie initiative which will see Digital Hubs developed countrywide as part of *Our Rural Future*. The BCPs operate 4 thematic programmes, one of which is Arts and Culture. So far, the development of this thematic programme is at a very early stage but plans to advance a BCP Development Strategy commence shortly. Developing digital infrastructure is critically important for the vitality of rural art activities. Investigating how such infrastructure can nurture and support cultural development in rural places will be a key focus of FADE research.

About the author: Dr Bernadette Quinn is a senior lecturer in TU Dublin. A Human Geographer, with a strong research interest in arts festivals, her research has been widely published in geography, urban studies, leisure and tourism journals. She is currently the Co-PI on the Irish Research Council funded Festivals, Audiences and the Digital Experience (FADE) research project (2021 – 2023).

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