Understanding the influence of place on festival making and artistic production in the local urban festival context

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Understanding the influence of place on festival making and artistic production in the local urban festival context

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ABSTRACT
Recent decades have seen a dramatic increase in research output on arts festivals and cultural events, and a growing focus on the role festivals play in negotiating and constructing meanings of place. However, little attention has been paid to how place shapes the process of festival making and artistic production. This paper attempts to address this shortcoming by examining the extent to which place matters to the production of festival activity and asks: how does place influence festival making and artistic production in a local arts festival context? The study is part of ongoing qualitative research into the Five Lamps Arts Festival, a local urban festival in Dublin’s North Inner-City and employs a mixed methods approach. Findings indicate that processes of festival making and artistic production are permeated by the social, cultural, and physical dimensions of place, thereby revealing the potent and mutually inter-dependent relationship between place and festivals.

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Introduction
In the ever expanding, multi-disciplinary literature on festivals, studies continue to emphasise the important role festivals play in constructing place meanings and contributing to the social, cultural, political and economic activities of places, particularly in cities (Johansson & Kociatkiewicz, 2011). Researchers have observed how local festivals contribute to a sense of belonging, providing ‘opportunities for drawing on shared histories, shared cultural practices and ideals’ (Quinn, 2005a, p. 4) that inform place identity (Jaeger & Mykletun, 2013). Studies highlight how festivals encompass a wide variety of cultural practices which, overtime, can enhance and broadly define the cultural expressions and traditions of place (Duxbury et al., 2011, p. 114). Indeed, Derrett (2003) suggests that annual festivals allow humans to integrate change and revive communities by creating a ‘community of witness that marks the passage of time’ (p. 41). Elsewhere, attention has focused on the role of festivals in the social and cultural sustainability of places, and in the symbolic and political constructions of place (Gusfield & Michalowicz, 1984; Jamieson, 2004; Quinn, 2003, 2018).
It is clear from the above that much is known about how festivals shape and contribute to place, but does place also contribute to shaping festivals? This question has received much less attention, in contrast, for example, to the attention that community-engaged arts practice has garnered in the context of urban policy more broadly (McLean, 2018). Here, Olsen (2018) conceives of artistic performance as a ‘crucial creative means of empowerment in the midst of urban transformation’ (p. 1). In respect of festivals, Van Aalst & Van Melik’s (2012) study of the North Sea Jazz Festival which relocated to Rotterdam after 30 years in the Dutch city of The Hague, found the festival to be ‘not really grounded in local identity, and therefore, more or less placeless’ (p. 204). Similarly, MacLeod (2006, p. 236) argued that while large-scale international urban festivals may strive to emphasise the cultural distinctiveness of place, they can, overtime, become ‘placeless’ and less grounded in the ‘local place and society’. The problem with urban festivals (Evans, 2001; Richards & Wilson, 2004; Waitt, 2008), is that as forms of cultural production and consumption become globalised, they risk becoming homogenised and ‘devoid of any real connections with place’ (Quinn, 2005a, p. 928). Clearly, the relationship between festivals and place needs further investigation, and this paper takes on the task by examining how place influences the artistic work created in festival settings.

It examines a case study of the Five Lamps Arts Festival (FLAF), an established local arts festival that takes place annually in Dublin’s North Inner City, to ask the question: how does place influence festival making and artistic production in a local arts festival context?

Literature review

Festivals, artistic production, and place

Scholars have observed the potent connections between festival and place, noting, for example, their importance in selling cities and positioning them advantageously in a globally competitive marketplace (Cudny, 2016; Ward & Ward, 1998). Richards and Palmer (2010) comment that ‘Cultural events have become central to processes of urban development and revitalisation, as cultural production becomes a major element of the urban economy, and cultural consumption can dominate both the image of places and urban life in general’ (p. 3). Consequently, an abundance of research now exists on the role of events and festivals in urban transformation, with researchers arguing that festivals animate cities (Maguire, 2016; Smith et al., 2021) and make cities more vibrant and cosmopolitan (Moscardo, 2008). Festivals are thought to be particularly valuable in this respect because they can conceal ‘the less palatable elements of the urban experience’ by presenting a sanitised account of the urban cultural landscape (Johansson & Kociatkiewicz, 2011, p. 403).

While such claims point to the ostensible value of festivals for urban places, the last decade has seen a gradually shifting narrative with some researchers calling for more empirical evidence (Quinn, 2005b); for a greater understanding of the cultural depth of place and the ‘intertwined relationship between festivals and uniqueness of place’ (Lau & Li, 2015, p. 56); and for more studies on the complex relationship between festivals and place in cities (Jordan, 2014; Sassatelli, 2011). Simons’
(2017) study is particularly insightful, showing how event practices are tightly woven into the city. She argues that both the city and the festival are performed within a practice which only ‘makes sense’ because the two are continuously interacting.

However, an often overlooked dimension of festivals, as Edensor and Sumartojo (2018) note, is an analysis of the festival’s artistic activity, the intentions of its creators, and the specific circumstances underpinning the creation of artistic work. They suggest that studies of small-scale, participatory arts festivals may help elucidate how festival activity is rooted in material and social contexts, as some of the work on community-engaged arts practice in cities has done (McLean, 2018). McLean’s work builds on a longstanding geographical concern with the relationship between artistic production and location. Hawkins (2014) explains that artistic production has long been recognised as being a situated activity and has been a key analytical concern since Antiquity. Cant and Morris (2006, p. 857), pointing to Kaufmann’s (2004) work, show that geographers have long mapped, analysed, and interpreted art in order to understand where art is located and 'how material and vernacular culture [has] shaped the human environment'. They note a long-standing geographical interest in how sculpture, landscape painting, iconography, and the aesthetics of scenery draw attention to the layers of social and cultural meanings of the landscape. A key strength of this work is to reveal how interpretive and reflexive approaches within geography lead to greater understandings about how contemporary art can be ‘sensitive to social and spatial contexts’ (Cant & Morris, 2006, p. 858). Indeed, Hawkins (2014) has noted an ‘exponential increase in artistic practices for which a specific localised “situation” or “context” is variously understood as impetus, inspiration, research subject, and medium for art making’ (p. 87).

Studies of the geographies of the performing arts also reflect a strong conceptual overlap between scholars concerned with place-based/site-specific performances (Rogers, 2012). Noting the work of theatre scholars Pearson and Shanks (2014) on how site-specific work emerges from, or is created for, a particular place, Rogers (2012) contends that site-specific work is often embedded within, or created in relation to, the ‘living communities of those places’ (p. 65). Interestingly, she observes that geographical writings on site-specific work have tended to focus on how artistic place-based work illuminates place, rather than exploring how work is socially and culturally responsive to place. Similarly, Tompkins (2012) notes that in site-specific theatre, the site itself becomes ‘an active component in the creation of performative meaning, rather than a neutral space of exposition or a scenic backdrop’ (p. 8). Reading festivals in this way underlines that place is more than a mere backdrop to festival activity; rather it shapes the form, meaning, location, content, and framing of the work (Pearson, 2010; Pearson & Shanks, 2014) and is intimately bound up with, and continuously reproduced through, festival activity, and vice versa. This is particularly apparent in studies on the urban, where scholars argue that festivals are place-specific (Sassatelli, 2011; Simons, 2017).

These literatures investigating artistic production and practice in the visual arts and geographies of the performing arts advance both theorisations of place and understandings of creative practices. They encourage a focus on research questions including; do festival directors actively seek to embed the artistic programme in the locale? How does commissioned work resonate with place? Where specifically in the process of artistic production can place be located?
**Place and festival as creative practice**

Waterman (1998) asserts the significance of place for festivals, emphasising that ‘arts festivals have as much to do with place as with art, and this concerns not just where they are held but why, and it refers to how they contribute to and assimilate from the characters of the places’ (p. 60). In studies of ‘local’ festivals, however, the concept of local is rarely defined. Gibson and Connell (2012) differentiate between high-profile commercial festivals where the roster of acts is crucial for attracting audiences, versus local festivals, which they suggest place a ‘higher priority on community building and are keen to showcase local talent without need for big name imported acts’ (p. 4). This study is informed by geographical understandings of the ‘built and social context of community relations, and the particular worldview or way of life associated with the place in general’ (Anderson et al., 2010, p. 591). Following MacLeod (2006), it understands that the ‘local’ in this context ‘represents the particular way to define such social identities in relation to a place’ (p. 228). Additionally, it subscribes to relational approaches in human geography in which local places are conceptualised as both porous and emerging processes (Massey, 1991, 2005).

The concept of ‘local’ employed here implies a specific relationship with place that is important for the production and/or consumption of festival activity. In examining how local festivals connect with place, we argue that programming decisions can be particularly important. Recently, festivals have increasingly collaborated with local and non-local artists to commission new works that respond to a particular place, employing locally resonant themes. This tendency has grown as festivals evolve from events that principally present and host pre-existing work, to entities that involve themselves in the production/co-production of new work (Teevan, 2020). Finkel (2009) states that while arts festivals often boast international links, most remain ‘primarily local affairs’ (p. 15). At the international events scale, the European Capital of Culture initiative simultaneously involves representing local culture while also balancing the demands of international programming (Palmer, 2004). Not surprisingly, even international events frequently commission local or regional artists to produce work, as in the case of Galway International Arts Festival’s commissioning of *Mirror Pavilion, Corn Work* from Tipperary artist John Gerrard as part of Galway 2020. However, this is also apparent in more localised settings such as the *Lumiere* project developed for Durham, where UK-based producers Artichoke commissioned new works by local and international artists and by communities within the city (Maguire, 2016).

Building on studies from Waterman (1998), Quinn (2005a), and Sassatelli (2011) on the ‘situatedness’ of arts festivals, Merrington (2016) enquires how the process of commissioning artwork specifically seeks to engage with place. Merrington’s (2016) findings reveal the AV Festival in North East England ‘as a process of listening, of paying attention, often to what is already there’ in place (p. 205). Analysing the festival’s commissioned artworks, Merrington observes how the festival developed a thematic and situated programme that responded to, and was shaped by, the regional identity and history of North East England. Festival activity was rooted in and responsive to the social and material fabric of the locale, while individual artworks were shaped by mobile forces stretching beyond the boundaries of the festival sites where the works were situated.
Elsewhere, exploring cases from Denmark, Austria, Finland, and Hungary, Tuukkanen (2020) considers how new genre public artworks engage with urban places through festivals. In the context of new genre public art, the focus is not only on the cultural object created, but on the process of its creation. This places a particular demand on the networks of actors involved in the creative practice, requiring them to understand the wider context of the urban setting, as well as the precise location of the festival. Tuukkanen’s analysis of festival curators’ practices provides several important insights into how artistic works emerge in the festival context and how, through their connection with the urban, festivals not only spatially transform the environment, but remain in constant dialogue with the city. This dialogue is understood in three ways (1) a commission built locally or 'from scratch’ -these types of projects appear to maintain strong connections to the local context and local people and are embedded in the city (2) a ‘spatial adaptation of an existing project’ – a type of commission that maintains a connection to the locale although it refers to pre-existing work which was not commissioned directly in response to local themes (3) a project commissioned from a local artist who knows the city and the local context – this type of commission provides opportunities and employment for artists immersed in the local context to engage overtly through the festival with local subjects (Tuukkanen, 2020, p. 76).

Merrington, Tuukkanen, Pearson and Shanks, and Hawkins’ work pays close attention to the ‘situatedness’ or ‘locatedness’ of artistic production, endeavouring to understand how artistic production and place are inter-related. However, many questions remain unanswered, particularly with regards to the influence of the place on artistic production in the local urban arts festival context. To address this, the paper analyses how place shapes artistic production in the making of a local festival in Dublin’s North Inner City.

Methodology

This paper develops a qualitative case study of a local arts festival in Dublin’s North Inner City using mixed methods. The researcher spent time immersed in the festival’s planning process, attending 11 programming/planning meetings (each lasting an average of 50 min) leading up to the 2021 edition of the festival (Bernard, 2013). Here, observation was conducted and field notes were recorded following Merriam’s (1998) guide to Being a Careful Researcher. Data gathered from attending a ‘Community Meet-up’, festival planning and board meetings, as well as meetings about initiatives and artistic ideas between artists and organisers, meant the researcher was privy to discussions about specific venues and locations, local history and local issues, and local artists and other creatives. All of this helped to develop an understanding of how place is situated in the creative practice.

In addition, semi-structured interviews, each lasting between 35 min and 1 h 40 min in duration, were conducted with four participants: the festival’s Director (Róisín), two artists (Rebecca and John) and an Art Writer (Ingrid). Interviewees were recruited using purposive sampling (Patton, 2002). The Director was an obvious choice for interview. The purposeful sampling of the two artists emerged from the initial participant observations, as they provided information-rich cases which offered an in-depth focus into the process of artistic production in a festival context (Schoch, 2020). The Art Writer was selected because she had been researching the local area as part of a writing commission to contextualise the group exhibition Palimpsest staged as part of the festival.
Interview questions were derived from the observation data and from field notes, as well as from the literature. The literature points, rather ambiguously, to the ‘situated’ and context-driven nature of artistic production, and this prompted the researcher to formulate questions that helped to draw out more precisely how the local area informs artistic production. Two interview protocols were developed: in the protocol for the Director, questions probed e.g. the origins of the festival, how work is selected or commissioned, what local spaces and places are used for festival activity, and what collaborators are involved, etc. The protocol for the artistic respondents concentrated on how they became involved, how their project emerged, and the creative process. All interviews asked participants to describe, among other things, their role in the festival, their connection to the local area and how this has informed their involvement. Themes emerging from this line of questioning gave insight into how the respondents’ local connections and knowledge of the area became a motivational factor for their involvement in the festival. Interviews were recorded online and transcribed verbatim. The interview transcriptions underwent several rounds of coding using interpretive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Finally, an archival reading of festival programmes from 2013 to 2020 was conducted to determine the geographical locations of festival activity from previous events. The result is a descriptive and exploratory study grounded in the particulars of the festival, the location where the festival occurs, and the festival practitioners’ engagement with both (Mills et al., 2009).

Case study context

The festival is situated in Dublin’s North Inner City (Figure 1). The district is bounded to the south by the River Liffey, and by Dublin Port to the east, incorporating some of Dublin’s regenerated docklands, which now functions as a globally integrated financial district. Dublin’s inner city stretches north to the low-rise residential areas of Cabra, Drumcondra, and Glasnevin. Moving west, the area takes in Dublin’s main thoroughfare, O’Connell Street, often used for national civic events. On the west boundary, the North Inner City includes the enclaves of Smithfield and Stoneybatter, areas historically known for their public markets and artisan dwellings.

Dublin’s North Inner City is rich in history and heritage and many of Ireland’s literary heavyweights such as James Joyce, Sean O’Casey, Bram Stoker, and Brendan Behan have connections to the area. Ireland’s national theatre, the Abbey Theatre, is located here, as well as several renowned cultural institutions. A range of local small-scale festivals take place throughout the year, including seasonal festivals for Halloween and Christmas. The area has a culturally diverse population of 18,000 that includes long-standing residents and substantial cohorts of more recent arrivals, with 55% of current residents being born outside of Ireland (Mulvey, 2017). Some localised areas in Dublin’s North Inner City have experienced a degree of socio-economic disadvantage, however, regeneration plans driven at both local authority and state level are ongoing.

Analysis

Analysis of the findings elucidated a number of themes which while presented individually, deal with overlapping concepts that could be considered as interconnected practices.
Firstly, there is the matter of how festival organisers engage with what might be referred to as local geographies. This in turn influences the decisions taken in relation to programming and particularly about commissioning work. Once artists become involved, the question of how their creative practices are influenced by local geographies then becomes important. Once embodied in the emergent performance/artwork and made public, these new/reworked ideas of the local then stand as new and further connections between festival and place. The three key areas of thematic analysis are outlined in Table 1.

**Findings**

**Understanding how the ‘local’ informs the making of the festival**

A key starting point is how the Director engages with local geographies in making the FLAF. The festival originated as a local initiative established by the current Festival Director, Róisín Lonergan, in 2007. Traditionally held annually in springtime, the festival maintains strong connections with a range of local community groups. Interview data and archival readings of past programmes illustrate how the festival defines itself geographically and artistically. Its primary focus is to draw upon ‘the Five Lamps landmark and surrounding community’ to showcase ‘a range of art forms including literature, dance, music, visual art and theatre’ (2013 Programme). The festival recently
initiated the process of formally establishing itself as a charitable organisation to promote local artists and enhance the community through the arts within the geographic area of Dublin 1.

**Physical – geographic location of festival activity**

Physically, the Five Lamps is a settlement within the North Inner City emblemised by an historical landmark, a highly decorated lamp post with five lanterns, situated at the junction of five streets in the area, and from which the festival takes its name. Over the years, organisers have incorporated the symbol of the Five Lamps into the festival logo and into marketing material (Figure 2). Archival programme readings revealed that festival activity has occurred in a range of local settings; in schools on Sheriff Street; in the public library on Charleville Mall; in the Marino College of Further Education; in a local community and day-care centre; at the local community swimming pool; as well as in local pubs and cafés. Festival activities have been programmed into professional cultural spaces, such as The Abbey Theatre, Ireland’s national theatre. Activities such as walking tours have also guided festival visitors through the area, highlighting buildings and points of interest in Dublin’s Inner City. Interview data emphasised the importance of utilising local, publicly accessible, venues and spaces for festival activity. Equally important is the programming of work into what organisers deem to be under-utilised spaces in the local area: ‘we’ve got lots of churches in our communities. And they’re empty … up to 2018, every year we used one of the churches either one St. Laurence O’Toole’s or St. Agatha’s for an event’ (Róisín). Additionally, in previous years locations have thematically connected with programmed work: ‘two artists … did a big project a few years back … on the canal where they did storytelling … with young kids. And they made … a large craft that they put on the canal and the children made models of boat’ (Róisín).

**Cultural – local history and cultural memory**

Central to the festival’s construction is the interconnection between history and the material environment. Traditionally a heavily industrialised area through which goods and livestock from around the world were distributed (Sweeney, 2012), it has experienced industrial decline since the 1960s following containerisation in the docklands (O’Carroll, 2006). In recent decades, the inner city has witnessed rapid change and an influx of many multinational corporations. This has impacted upon the urban physical environment with many historical buildings being demolished or redeveloped for housing and office spaces. Thus, a key motive for the Director, is to preserve the history of the local area.
and to give ‘people back … their history that they can build on’ (Róisín). There was a strong sense in both the interview data and discussions observed in planning and meetings that recent and ongoing urban regeneration is impacting negatively on the area. Both Ingrid and Róisín comment on the physical layers of the community; Róisín explained that the area is in a constant state of flux with buildings being ‘knocked down [and] rebuilt … the whole thing keeps changing’. But she notes that: ‘the people that are living around, they’re all kind of the same, you know, and there’s a lot of connections’. Echoing this, Ingrid commented: ‘the area is totally prone to this, these
aggressive developments’. Ingrid explained that in her contextualisation of the artists’ work through a commissioned essay as part of the *Palimpsest* exhibition, she begins by making connections between how artistic/cultural production in this area acts as a means for storing ‘social and oral histories [that] are a crucial part of history of places that have been transient and vulnerable to development’.

**Social – local actors and artistic community**

Róisín has a community development background, having studied local and regional development. Being interested in how the arts can be used as tools for engaging communities, she had ‘used an idea … about drama being around community development’ (Róisín). Subsequently, she has been teaching drama for several years in Marino College of Further Education, in the North Inner City, close to the Five Lamps. Interview data show that her experiences of living, working, and teaching in the locale acts as a motivator. In particular, anti-social issues in residential parts of the district provides ongoing impetus for Róisín to deliver the festival:

> There was seven or eight lads dealing drugs right in front of me in the middle of the day … you’re going, this is just crazy. There’s children still at school here … there’s parents gonna come and pick up kids from the crèche. And it’s all here in the one street. And I just think that people deserve more than that.

In addition, Róisín recognises the important role the festival plays in connecting with the histories of new communities: ‘you’ve got lots of new communities coming in, and then they’ve got all kinds of interesting histories. And they’re part of that pattern. And they were always coming in. But they didn’t always get written into history’. The festival prides itself on collaborating and working with both Irish and non-Irish communities and over the years, many of the festival’s volunteers, Board members, and project workers are either indigenous members of the local community or foreign nationals from places such as Italy or South America.

Thus, engagement with the multi-cultural community of people living in the area shapes the vision of the festival. This vision is largely informed by the cultural context of the area and by an understanding of what might be deemed to be culturally ‘acceptable’ to community members. Róisín explained ‘it’s about knowing the community, it’s about knowing what they’ll accept, and pushing it … that little bit further’. Equally, the vision is defined by contributing artists, many of whom have deep connections to the local area: ‘a lot of people that come to live in the area … are artists’, ‘[it is] important that they’re acknowledged in the community’ (Róisín). Accordingly, a lot of artists ‘either have worked in the area, lived there, or they’re from there, or their families have always been from there … as far back as they can remember’ (Ingrid). The commitment to engaging artists with local connections stems from the festival core vision to support and promote local artists through a multi-disciplinary programme of activities that celebrates the Five Lamps landmark and its surrounding communities, but it is also influenced by other stakeholders. While core funders like Dublin City Council’s North East Inner City (NEIC) initiative don’t prescribe what type of work the festival selects, there is an innate understanding that the festival should feature local artists and contribute to improving social cohesion and wellbeing in the north inner city community through the arts (NEIC, 2020). Hence, organisers delineate between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ the community.
in terms of the artists they work with: ‘it has to be an arts project, like … arts [is] really [what] the NEIC wants to deliver. They want to deliver artists that live in the community. They don’t necessarily want artists to come in from outside’ (Róisín).

**Thinking locally in programming the festival**

In the early stages of planning the festival, organisers invited local artists to attend an online ‘Community Meet-up’ promoted as an opportunity to meet the people from the Five Lamps to create an arts festival that is made for the community by the community. Artists were invited to contribute: ‘Come along and bring your ideas with you!’ The group appeared to be familiar with each other with one of the organisers commenting how it was ‘like friends meeting, everybody knows everybody’. An open discussion ensued with members of the group keen to understand more about what organisers had planned for the festival. Observations conducted here highlighted the open and fluid nature of planning the festival in terms of the contribution of festival ideas. One meeting participant commented that the festival maintained an ‘open-door policy’, welcoming ideas for artistic project from the wider community.

**Local ideation – emergence and exchange of ideas**

Interviews revealed that artistic ideas emerge in a myriad of ways and through a range of festival networks, for instance, artists approach festival organisers through local acquaintance, as Róisín explained: ‘a lot of artists come to us through friends’; through volunteers, ‘sometimes the volunteers lead you into things’; and through links that Board members have to the community; ‘Mick [a Board Member] came to me with an idea about the fox book … his granddaughter did the drawings … That sort of came to me, you know, all in one piece’; artistic work is included by invitation and artists are invited because ‘they live in the area’ (Róisín). Projects often emerge serendipitously. Reflecting on the process of her involvement in the 2021 festival, Rebecca, a visual artist living in the area, explained how Róisín saw her work exhibited in a local café and following this, she ‘contacted me because my details were there … you know, she said she was admiring it … we just kind of made contact then about a few things’. Rebecca described her involvement in the festival as ‘just kind of a happy coincidence in a way that it ties in very neatly with what they’re about’ and that she worked with the festival to identify overlapping themes between her work that was about ‘drawing Dublin, essentially and connecting this to the vision of the festival’.

**Artistic work and local resonance**

Finally, the festival also programmes pre-existing work from local artists. While this work is not always directly commissioned by the festival, the organisers select the work because it has a local resonance. For the Palimpsest exhibition, Róisín brought together the work of three local artists who she ‘figured … would work together’. However, Róisín commented that she had to ‘manipulate it a little bit’ to better connect the artists’ works and to more overtly correspond with the festival’s vision of engaging with local themes. In deciding what artistic ideas are brought forward for commissions, Róisín explained that while the festival has an established Board of Directors, she remains the primary gatekeeper to the commissioning process:
it’s really me that decides because … I was running the festival before I had a Board. So that’s why it’s like that … sometimes people from the Board come to me and say "I think we should do this", and … if it’s worthy, or if I think it can work, we’ll give it a go … we try and see would it work in the community that we’re in.

**Place and artistic practice**

To understand how place influences the festival artists’ practice, analysis concentrated on the work of two artists which featured as part of the 2021 festival; John Scott, an Irish Choreographer who was commissioned to produce a short online dance film entitled, *In the Vicinity of the Sun*; and Rebecca Kehoe, a visual artist who utilises the medium of drawing and photography in her work to explore a range of subject matter. Rebecca’s work featured as part of a group exhibition, *Palimpsest*, and was presented in a regenerated industrial building on the banks of the River Liffey in the heart of North Dublin’s financial district. Through drawing, Rebecca’s work documents the lives of local people and places in the Five Lamps including *Gerry and Mark* (Figure 3), a local man and his son who run a shop on Sheriff Street; and *Preloved* (Figure 4), a scene featuring women’s shoes from a local charity shop on North Strand Road. Meanwhile John’s work, *In the Vicinity of the Sun*, suggests a more abstract and universal interpretation of place which emphasises the materiality of the local area through the medium of dance. John’s response to the locale manifests in the form of a short film in which a group of dancers, placed in different locations around the inner city, create movements in response to its physical environment.

![Figure 3. Gerry and Mark by Rebecca Kehoe. Source/Permission: Artist Rebecca Kehoe. Property of the artist.](image-url)
Place attachment and practice
As regards artistic inspiration, several factors shaped the artists’ work; the connection they have to the local area from living and working there; the physical environment of

Figure 4. Pre-loved by Rebecca Kehoe. Source/Permission: Artist Rebecca Kehoe. Property of the artist.
the area; and their embodied understandings of the social and material dimensions of place. Rebecca explained that she had ‘lived here for a long time now’ and she ‘just wouldn’t be anywhere else’. She says she grew up in ‘very nice … suburban surroundings … very picturesque … nothing like the gritty city life that I like to enjoy’ stressing that she is ‘ … not interested in pretty landscapes’. Meanwhile, John lives and works locally, and has a ‘very special affinity with the area’. His engagement with the local area informs his practice and stimulates the geographic and artistic imagination: ‘I live in the North Strand area … as I go through it, I see all these wonderful spaces … as a Choreographer, you’re always thinking of the next piece, or the piece you’re working on, or just having these movement dreams’. John explained how the process of making work for the festival generated a dialogue between his work, the festival, and the local area: ‘it’s a festival that has a really interesting attitude to space’ and

for me, living in the area … with my stories and my mythologies, which are maybe through movement … being able to fit in, and finding things that can fit into the geographical place … it feels like it makes me whole in the area. And it gives us a sense of a completion, and a sense of a place, and a context.

**Embodiment, place, and practice**

Artists are drawn to different elements of place through interactions in the physical environment. Seeking out the subject matter of her work, Rebecca explained that she likes to experience ‘the grittiness of the city’ through walking:

if I get a chance to walk on my own, that’s what I do. And I might listen to some music, and I might just take in what I’m seeing. And a lot of the beautiful streets are very rundown … they’re fascinating places.

Additionally, everyday scenes attract her: ‘ … I’m always drawn to those sorts of scenes that maybe people aren’t interested in looking at really, you know, or don’t think that there’s anything particularly interesting about’.

Meanwhile for John, the physical environment cultivates a very explicit geographical response. In his work for the festival, an international cast of dancers are paired with particular urban locations and invited to respond through movement to different locations, including a stairwell of a local block of flats, the bank of The Royal Canal, and local streets or bridges. John explained that in his practice as both a Choreographer and separately as a Dance Festival Director, a pre-requisite for site responsive work is that the practitioners involved in the work be: ‘in Ireland, to be in the room when the movement was born and to give birth to the movements’. For *In the Vicinity of the Sun*, he explained how the dancers ‘took the bus, they cycled, they walked to the places, and then they danced in them. And then they had their lunch there. And then they walked around, smoked a cigarette, had a coffee’, experiences which helped to inform how they understood the context of the inner city and thus, their site-specific responses to the locations in which their movements were situated.

**Capturing the social and cultural dimensions of place**

The social and cultural dimensions of the inner city appear to be an active component in the subject matter of both works. For instance, in *Gerry and Mark* (Figure 3), a local shop
owner is depicted standing among his produce and Rebecca has given careful attention to incorporating the background of the shop. Reflecting on the work, Ingrid explained that the backdrop to these images ‘is as important’, and that the portrait of the local shop keeper is ‘inseparable’ because the subject matter is about depicting local actors ‘in the context of their livelihood’. Meanwhile, *Preloved* (Figure 4) depicts a local charity shop on North Strand Road in which second-hand shoes are displayed on a metal railing. Rebecca explained how in the process of reproducing the charity shop scene through drawing, she is reminded of social issues in the local area that she feels is reflected through the work:

> I suppose I think about these things a lot … sadly, I suppose, there’s a lot of poverty in the North Inner City, and that is a reflection, even in the … Sue Ryder shop, like, you know … a lot of the stuff being regurgitated is not expensive … like it’s bought through necessity as well, you know.

For John, permeating the work is the social experience of place which the international migrant cast of dancers, who are not from the local area, have had. He utilises the idea of ‘aliens’ for artistic inspiration: ‘aliens, in any sense of the word alien … be they someone coming from another country or another culture, another background’. John recounts that some of the cast have experienced ‘minor’ and ‘major’ issues due to their nationality or race, and implies that this experience of place materialises through their response to the local area in the work. More broadly, John explains, these experiences have created another context for his creative practice as a Dancer and Choreographer.

**Festival as practice and place**

Finally, interview data illustrated the mutually inter-dependent process between the festival, place, and the creative process. This was particularly evident in Rebecca’s practice, which Ingrid explained required ‘a certain level of engagement with the community in making these portraits which are to express … people who are living in the area and working in the area’. This engagement was initiated by the organisers. Using local knowledge, they brought Rebecca on a tour, introducing her to local people and locations. The artistic process involved Rebecca visiting the places and taking a series of photographs. She spent time speaking with the workers/people in each location, before returning to her studio to create the drawings. For John meanwhile, creating the work was a more independent affair. Reflecting on his previous involvement in the festival, he explained that although *In the Vicinity of the Sun* was a new commission: ‘every piece that you have made is somehow embodied in everything else you do, even if it’s subconscious. And it’s often possible to take a thread from a previous movement, or a previous piece that then you build on’.

**Discussion**

This paper sought to understand how place influences festival making and artistic production in a local arts festival. Our analysis points strongly to the ‘situatedness’ of artistic production noted by Sassatelli (2015). The findings also support Merrington’s (2016) observations that far from being isolated pockets of activity, festivals are processes
shaped by the social, cultural, and material dimensions of the locality in which they occur. These dimensions of place permeate the process of festival making, guiding organisers in selecting artists and commissioning work, and providing inspiration for artists.

Socially, Dublin’s North Inner City is a complex and changing place occupied by both an indigenous and multi-cultural community, with a multitude of local and foreign histories and traditions. Organisers see these groups as crucial to the festival and the locality and as ‘part of the pattern’ of the inner city. Equally shaping the festival are experiences and reports of anti-social behaviour (McCárthaigh, 2019) and the media-portrayed image of inner city Dublin as ‘a war zone’ (Lynott, 2017). These challenges offer strong motivations for the Director to provide positive arts experiences that counter these perceptions of place.

Physically, the built environment plays an influential role in the festival, being tightly woven into the collective memory of the local area (i.e. the materiality of the local area is understood to contain distinguishing social and oral histories) which organisers strive to preserve. According to Waitt (2008, p. 519), local urban festivals create a ‘distinctive local profile’ in the context of globalisation and urban regeneration strategies. Meanwhile for Quinn (2005b, p. 928), festivals constitute areas that ‘engender local continuity’ through the production and reproduction of local knowledge, culture, and history, which ‘distinguish one place from another’. In this case, however, urban redevelopment and changes to the material character of the locale appear to pose a significant threat to the distinctiveness of the area, its social histories and, therefore, to the continuity of the past. The construction of the festival partially responds to this challenge, as both organisers and artists actively seek to incorporate the physical layers of the community into the making of the festival, thereby preserving and remaking both the festival and the place in the process.

Tackling/preserving ideas of history, culture, and memory through the making of the festival requires festival makers to have tacit knowledge about the local context, its history, and the precise location of the festival. Comunian (2015, p. 55) sees such knowledge, commonly linked to place or to an organisation, as ‘sticky’, acquired through practice, experience, observation and ‘doing or sharing’. This study illustrates the importance of tacit knowledge, about both the local community and the tensions of social order that exist in the inner city (Ryan, 2021). Here, organisers rely upon an innate understanding acquired through living, working and delivering artistic projects in the local community.

Artistic projects emerge in a myriad of ways, but it seems clear that local actors can play a formative role in shaping artistic direction. This analysis confirms Tuukkanen’s (2020) framework for how artistic ideas are realised or emerge in a festival environment. We extend the framework by moving the focus away from the festival initiating and commissioning work on local themes, toward artistic ideas and commissions emerging also from local social actors including volunteers and ‘friends of the festival’ who ‘lead’ organisers in the direction of particular ideas. Regardless of how the work emerges, analysis shows that the festival ultimately maintains a dialogue with the city through its vision to showcase the work of local artists, and through a celebration of the place by connecting into locally resonant themes.

Participant narratives revealed that both organisers and artists are attuned to the local area and to the community. Findings emphasise that place attachment provides a tremendous source of inspiration and motivation for the production of work. All
respondents expressed a sense of embodiment that played an important role in gaining a visceral understanding about the place, using the senses to guide the artistic response to the inner city, be it through walking or cycling. These findings draw attention to the Situationist notions of Psychogeography and the effects that geographical locations have on our interpretation of urban places and artistic production (Coverley, 2018). Equally, this corresponds with the literature on the geographies of artistic production mentioned earlier, demonstrating that festival artists are involved in the creation of work that is ‘sensitive to social and spatial contexts’ (Cant & Morris, 2006, p. 858).

**Conclusion**

Festivals continue to proliferate in live and virtual environments, however, practices of festival making remain under-theorised. This study provides deeper insights into the complexities of festival making and artistic production in a local urban context, showing how these practices are constituted through ongoing interactions between the festival, festival makers, and the social, cultural, and physical dimensions of place, resonating with findings on practice from Simons’ (2017) work. These findings have implications for developing future festival policy directions which, hitherto, have maintained a strong focus on public engagement and the role of festivals in cultural tourism, community development and as platforms for artistic experimentation (Jordan, 2014). In Ireland, there have been welcome policy developments from The Arts Council (2020) which recognises ‘the complex and special nature of “festival-making” as a creative act’ and ‘the increasing role that localism plays in the development and sustainability of festival programmes’. This study confirms the embeddedness of place in this complex practice. Although limited to a single context-specific case study, it paves the way for future studies to disentangle the relationship between festivals and place through comparative examinations of how festival making practices vary across contexts, geographical settings, and through different festival typologies. Undoubtedly, these avenues of research can extend understandings around the place/festival relationship, and also generate valuable insights into how societies reconnect with place through festivals and *vice versa* in a post-pandemic environment.

**Disclosure statement**

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