

DRAW-DOWN-THE-WALLS

(the partnerships, the story and the modest achievements)

Background Information on the Partnerships

Draw-Down-the-Walls

Draw-Down-The-Walls (DDTW) is a partnership between North Belfast interface Network, Lower Shankill Community Association and Golden Thread Gallery set up to provoke discussion about barriers by using art and community engagement to inspire, question and surprise.

Golden Thread Gallery

Golden Thread Gallery (GTG) is a contemporary art gallery based close to the Cathedral Quarter in Belfast. GTG is concerned with creating a context, challenging perceptions, promoting creativity and delivering contemporary visual art for all.

North Belfast Interface Network

North Belfast Interface Network was set up by community organisations in 2002 to develop a strategic response to interface violence and to advance community relations work in North Belfast. NBIN's purpose is to transform and regenerate interface communities in North Belfast by involving local residents in community relations activity.

Lower Shankill Community Association

Lower Shankill Community Association is focussed on reimagining the Lower Shankill. By encouraging residents to cut old ties with paramilitaries and to work with the Police Service Northern Ireland, they have tried to make the Shankill a more welcoming place. They have removed some of the more extreme paramilitary murals and replaced them with other aspects of the Shankill culture.

The Story

The story has to begin somewhere. It had already started when Golden Thread Gallery was based in Brookfield Mill off the Crumlin Road in North Belfast.

In the summer of 2008 NBIN asked GTG if they would be interested in developing a summer intervention project with a group of young men living in Ardoyne. The group presented a number of challenges, not least being that they wouldn't even talk to adult males in the area because of a breakdown of trust between generations. Round about the same time Flax Art Studios invited Nayla Dabaji and Ziad Bitar, two artists from Beirut in Lebanon to visit Belfast on a residency.

Breandán Clarke from NBIN came up with the idea of introducing Nayla and Ziad to the group as a last-ditch effort that swiftly turned into a breakthrough in communication. By introducing the young men to the artists from Beirut and initiating conversations about living in a post-conflict zone the parameters for a future project were defiantly mapped.

The encounter with the Lebanese artists was not planned but it was great. We were testing out the potential of using the arts to engage a hard to reach group of participants and "telling it like it was" brought authenticity and meaning to the process. This introduction was different to anything that the group had come across before. Ziad, in particular, could articulate his experiences of war and conflict in a way that resonated with and captivated the group. However, the artists also knew the language of respect and manners between generations and this led to a discussion that was hard, meaningful and very productive.

NBIN had some funding for a summer intervention project and GTG proposed two artists who might work well with the group. The first thing they did was go on a tour of the area with the young men to map the area in terms of where the group felt safe. The idea was to make a film and to work on a photography project with the group at the same time. GTG liked the film a lot but NBIN thought the young men were self-conscious and the dialogue was driven by

bravado and showing off on camera and they did not think this was helpful as a positive summer intervention.

Nevertheless, the raw material was there and by shifting the focus very slightly a series of images emerged that encouraged the young men to observe their community from a different perspective. The photographic images were visually very strong with a conceptual basis. The artists worked with the group to select the best images and add captions. Twelve images were chosen and a North Belfast Calendar was created. The responses to this led to a billboard project along with a public consultation on the future of interfaces.

LSCA were invited to join DDTW around this time. The early DDTW projects had all been youth focussed but the LSCA were keen to bring in opportunities for adults to take part. They were particularly interested in regeneration, community involvement and participation. Their concerns were that lip service had been paid to community consultation and they wanted a new kind of regeneration that was informed by listening to the voices from within their community.

A series of meetings looking at regeneration and planning issues was developed by DDTW with support from the Forum For Alternative Belfast and the Participation and Practice of Rights Project under the banner of Sharing the Urban Agenda.

The partnership between NBIN, LSCA and GTG endured along with a consistent focuses on re-imagining the city through community engagement and visual arts activities. Some aspects of DDTW were led by the community partners and some by GTG.

In 2011 GTG was invited to propose an idea to the London 2012 Cultural Olympiad Festival and as a result of this Oscar Muñoz, one of Colombia's most respected artists was invited to develop an artwork, *Ambulatorio Belfast*, at the Flax Street / Crumlin Road interface. The artwork was a direct response to a research trip where he was invited to meet communities from both sides of the interfaces in Ardoyne and Shankill in a visit arranged by DDTW. The project was co-commissioned by the London 2012 Festival and GTG on behalf of DDTW. *Ambulatorio Belfast* used aerial maps of North Belfast sealed under a layer of cracked glass to

transform the 'no man's land' between the barriers that separate the Crumlin Road and Flax Street. Muñoz's experience of working in another conflict zone put the local into an international context and provided a window of opportunity to put a spotlight on the relationships that are being built between historically divided communities. *Ambulatorio Belfast* managed to capture the essence of re-imagining a city without barriers and provided a context for discussions about the future use of the area. These discussions are still ongoing but the groups are adamant that Flax Street should be opened, even it is only during the daytime at first and if the Hillview site is to be redeveloped it must be redeveloped into a site that can be accessed and used by everyone.

The relative success of *Ambulatorio Belfast* created new challenges for planning the next phase of DDTW. It was neither possible nor useful to create an *Ambulatorio Belfast* part 2. This would not have worked contextually and it would not have made the same impact on the participating groups. After a long process of consultation and dialogue between the strategic partners and some of the groups the template for a very different project was developed. The project that emerged from this was *Invisible Barriers: Moving Images*

Invisible Barriers: Moving Images was a Creative Belfast project funded through the Arts Council of Northern Ireland and Belfast City Council and developed by DDTW. Artist/filmmaker Zhenia Mahdi-Nau was commissioned to create 5 short films about invisible barriers with 5 very different groups. The brief emphasised that the films should reflect the experiences of the groups and explore barriers that they identified themselves. The commissioned films were screened alongside moving image artworks and feature films in a programme of special cinema events with Belfast Film Festival.

Participating groups were: Marrowbone Youth Club, Lower Shankill Youth Project; Lower Shankill Adults; Golden Thread Gallery Summer School 2015 and the Participation and Practice of Rights organisation's Right to Work, Right to Welfare campaign.

Lower Shankill Adults had perceptions of their community and the interface itself as their barrier ... their film *Across the Lines* was shown in Hillview Retail Park alongside *History Zero* by Greek artist Stefanos Tsivipopolous and *Trading Places*.

GTG Summer School identified the gap between internships and paid workers as their barrier and their film, *Intern 3* was shown alongside Anna Konnik's *In the same city under the same sky* and *To Kill A Mockingbird* in the Harbour Commissioner's Office.

Carcass by Marrowbone Youth Club highlighted generational barriers along with the positive aspects of group loyalty and was shown with *The Hunger Games* and Francis Alys' *When Faith Moves Mountains*

Lower Shankill Youth presented their film *The Wall* dealing with perception based on where you come from with *The Other North* by Jesse Presley Jones and *Dr Strangelove*.

The R2W film '*Copies*' was shown as a Drive in Movie in Hillview Retail Park along with *Jeremy Deller's Battle of Orgreave* and *Pride*, the true story of a lesbian & gay activist group who wanted to support the miner's strike in 1984.

GTG had worked with the Right To Work / Right To Welfare Campaign previously. PPR uses a human rights approach to equip those who need it most with the skills to effect change. GTG had always wanted to attract people claiming benefits into the Gallery because the it is literally 1 minute away from the DHSS office. PPR leafleted outside the dole office and people who showed an interest were invited to pop into the Gallery, have a cup of tea, engage with the arts and find out more about their rights and what to do if they were sanctioned. A *Right to Work / Right to Welfare* campaign emerged out of these informal meetings.

The group created an exhibition, a short film and a hydro-graffitti statement on the wall of the DHSS building, approximately 100 yards from GTG. The exhibition mocked up the interior of the DHSS in the gallery and filmed interviews were screened in signing on booths. This gave audience an almost claustrophobic experience that echoed the way you feel when you have to sign on and have your life means tested. The Hydro-graffitti statement has been there for over four years now and people still stop and look at it. The message is full of statistics but it reminds people that they are more than statistics and that they just happen to live in an unequal society.

Since 2013, the R2W group has gathered surveys from unemployed people from all over Belfast. They have also succeeded in getting a commitment from BCC to include a 'Real Jobs' clause to guarantee ring fenced, fully paid jobs and apprenticeships for the long-term unemployed. They have also drafted a People's Proposal which is worth signing up to.

It is apt to talk about the R2W group at some length because the reason our two community partners are not with me today is because NBIN had its funding cut and the staff are on redundancy notice. Breandán was very keen to talk to you all today but he had to be at emergency meetings with funders. Ian has been having similar issues at LSCA.

The Modest Achievements

It's such a shame because there is still so much work to do and there is a real appetite for change in terms of removing interfaces. GTG have been cautious about crediting DDTW for playing a role in this but both LSCA and NBIN have said that DDTW provided a crucial shift in perceptions within interface communities. In February 2016 a wall at a north Belfast interface was dismantled, 30 years after it was erected. The removal of this interface has been hailed as a watershed moment in cross-community relations in the area especially because it is so close to Twadell, Woodvale and Ardoyne. The brick wall has given way to railings and landscaped greenery as part of on-going efforts to remove the physical divisions of the past. The community-led decision to transform the interface came after years of talks, which first began eight years ago. Most of these talks were brokered by DDTW community partners – NBIN and LSCA: both of whom are integral members of the Twaddell Ardoyne Shankill Communities In Transition who, along with representative from Housing Executive, Department of Justice, Belfast City Council and PSNI, helped to bring about the change.

"It didn't happen in a bubble, it has been a long process to get here," said Rab McCallum, NBIN Coordinator. *"Hopefully people will take a bit of inspiration from what's happened here. If you can do it here, you can do it anywhere,"* he added. It's a great pity that Rab, Breandan and Ian are not here to tell you more in their own words.