

The Eco Showboat and the river communities of Limerick: when art and science weave new territories

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Abstract

The Eco Showboat project, led by artists Anne Cleary and Denis Connolly in 2022 and 2023, in collaboration with scientists, local artists, and communities, promoted activist artistic actions advocating for an ecological approach to urban and non-urban territories traversed by Ireland's waterways. By navigating rivers, lakes, and canals and engaging with diverse territories, the solar-powered boat Mayfly connected actions carried out along the water, and aimed to weave links between aquatic environments, the territories concerned, and the practices and visions of local populations. This article focuses on the Limerick stage of the journey and its broader territory, where relationships between river communities and the river itself emerged through meaningful engagement—not only in collaborative artistic processes but also in ecological awareness initiatives. These efforts highlighted the role of local inhabitants in the sustainable management of rivers and in their enhanced integration into the urban fabric. The actions carried out by Eco Showboat illustrate how artistic activism, supported by science, strengthens the connections between the river, the city, and its inhabitants. It consolidates the emotional bond with the fluvial environment while also raising awareness of environmental issues and encouraging more responsible practices. These initiatives also contribute to the regeneration of rivers, foster interaction between the river and the city, and support a broader vision of the city as an integral part of a larger territorial ecosystem.

Keywords: inland waterways of Ireland, urban territory, communities, artistic activism, Eco Showboat, co-creation

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1. Mobilizing the territories of water: strengthening community bonds with the river

This article analyzes a project that promoted artistic activist actions in favor of an ecological approach to urban and non-urban territories traversed by Ireland's waterways: the Eco Showboat, focusing on the phase carried out in Limerick. The activities, organized near the point where the waters of the Shannon River, originating from the Ardnacrusha hydroelectric dam meet the city, reveal a territory shaped by close relationships between the river and the urban space.

The aim of this study is to bring a reflection on the process and its effects in the context of its implementation while also determining how the lessons learned can be used to strengthen similar initiatives.

Cities exert significant pressure on water resources, particularly through soil artificialization, industrial and domestic pollution, as well as in the management of stormwater and wastewater. Urban water management takes place in a complex setting where environmental, social, and economic challenges intersect, interact, and evolve under the influence of moving flows.

In Ireland, water management follows the Integrated Catchment Management (ICM) approach, which considers the complexity of hydrological, biophysical, and environmental interactions, along with political, socio-economic, and cultural influences. Despite European directives (Water Framework Directive, Habitats and Nitrates Directives) and national laws and policies, the quality of water and biodiversity in Irish rivers continue to decline (Weiner et al., 2022). Regulations and incentives aimed at protecting natural habitats and water quality sometimes face challenges to be accepted and enforced. As a result, cities must rethink their relationship with water by promoting resilient infrastructures, better resource management, and greater public awareness.

In response to this situation, ICM emphasizes a participatory and local approach, relying on citizen science and nature-based solutions to foster community cooperation and engagement in environmental preservation. This approach aligns with the recommendations of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, 2019), which highlight that: "The effectiveness of decision-making and governance is strengthened by the participation of local stakeholders [...] Integration across sectors and scales increases the chances of maximizing co-benefits and minimizing trade-offs".

The 2018-2021 River Basin Management Plan (RBMP) strengthened the implementation of the ICM by emphasizing the need for greater public participation and stakeholder involvement in decision-making. Engaging citizens in water resource protection has thus become a key lever for overcoming the limitations of top-down approaches, which, despite being regulatory, have failed to achieve the set objectives (Weiner et al., 2022).

Community engagement in water protection is built on several concrete actions: participation in decision-making processes, active involvement on the ground, and the development of citizen science initiatives. These efforts contribute not only to more effective and integrated ecosystem management but also to environmental education and strengthening citizens' sense of belonging to their territory (Weiner et al., 2022).

Initiatives aimed at bridging the gap between top-down and bottom-up strategies have been implemented by the Local Authority Waters Programme (LAWPRO) in collaboration with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and local authorities. However, despite the recognized importance of involving local communities, their participation remains insufficient, posing a major challenge identified by experts and environmental institutions.

This is precisely the gap that the Eco Showboat project seeks to address through a bottom-up approach, raising environmental awareness and fostering citizen engagement through participatory and immersive initiatives. The project has received active support from LAWPRO, which acknowledges its role in disseminating the principles of ICM. By facilitating connections between experts, local communities, and citizens, the project directly contributes to the RBMP's objectives, particularly by enhancing public participation and raising awareness of water-related issues.

However, its transversal approach extends beyond this framework. Thanks to its innovative format,

Eco Showboat also aligns with the goals of institutions promoting arts and sciences. Therefore, it has received support from a SFI Discover Award and multiple organizations, including the Arts Council, Creative Ireland, Waterways Ireland, and local authorities across the country.

At the heart of the project is the Mayfly, a traveling riverboat that navigated Ireland's rivers and canals from East to West, South to North, carrying out artistic actions—in collaboration with scientists and local populations—that serve as both awareness-raising events and educational, participatory workshops.

The project was not conceived as an isolated artistic initiative, but rather as a series of interconnected actions led by diverse actors—artists, scientists, and local inhabitants—creating a true collective movement. It follows the artistic approach of its founders, Anne Cleary and Denis Connolly, who have developed over the years a participatory practice that blurs the line between spectators and actors. Their concept of “entanglement” illustrates this dynamic, applied to the Eco Showboat project. By integrating musicians, dancers, writers, teachers, scientists, and local communities, they have created experiences that place art and the environment in dialogue. Far from being a simple way of expression, the Eco Showboat is an invitation to experience, feel, and become aware of the landscape through a variety of artistic forms: installations, performances, concerts, participatory activities, and scientific discussions.

By involving other artists and scientists in the project and engaging local communities, these activities have become powerful awareness tools, capable of weaving connections between people and their environment. This dialogue between artistic creation and scientific knowledge enriches the understanding of climate and biodiversity issues while offering new ways of interacting with the territory.

Creating this connection requires going beyond rational discourse and scientific data. It is about offering a sensory and emotional experience that allows individuals to rediscover their bond with the landscapes and ecosystems that shape their daily lives. This, in turn, helps them realize that they are active participants rather than mere spectators in maintaining this natural balance.

This direct interaction transforms the perception of the environment, making it a shared heritage, embedded in the living experience of communities. This newfound awareness fosters a natural sense of responsibility, reinforcing the understanding that protecting the environment means preserving a part of oneself and one's collective history.

Community involvement in the project took place through various means and stages. The artistic actions were co-designed with regional actors, reflecting both the intentions of the organizers and local traditions. This strategy involved partnerships with local institutions, and the engagement of institutional leaders facilitated connections with regional artists, strengthening ties with the community. As a result, the community identified with the project and supported its vision, fostering a strong and lasting relationship between the initiative and local stakeholders.

The invitation to regional artists to participate allowed the organizers to learn from them and the community about the local landscape, while also ensuring that participants felt like active contributors rather than mere spectators. More broadly, the project aimed to create flows of creativity and communication along its journey, connecting communities and fostering interactions that opened new possibilities for engagement and dialogue.

The establishment of these creative and communicative flows was based on several dynamics. For instance, on multiple occasions, artists presented and discussed their works at different stages of the journey. In other cases, videos and images produced at one stage were showcased in subsequent ones. Additionally, some artists accompanied the organizers along part of the route, further deepening their engagement with the project.

The Limerick stage and its surroundings exemplify the mobilization of the territory and the strengthening of the relationship between the river and the city.

The present study is based on qualitative, *in situ* data collection carried out in 2024, after the completion of the Eco Showboat project's phase in Limerick. During this visit, the researchers conducted interviews with both participants and project promoters, aiming to explore their perceptions and document factual elements of the initiative. These interviews were conducted

on site and complemented by photographic documentation of the materials produced during the project, to which the researchers had access. In addition to this post-project fieldwork, the researchers had previously engaged with the Eco Showboat in 2023, actively participating in other phases of the journey, including navigating aboard the *Mayfly* and taking part in several activities. This direct involvement provided valuable contextual understanding and insight into the project's processes and intentions. Given this level of engagement, the researchers had both observational and participatory perspectives, which informed the analysis.

2. Limerick: strengthening the relationships between individuals and their community

The work carried out with the community in Limerick was exemplary in terms of mobilizing creative and social flows, as it extended into other stages of the project through various activities. The initiatives developed by the local community were not only presented at the Hunt Museum in Limerick but also in Killaloe, upstream on the River Shannon.

Additionally, navigating through the Ardnacrusha locks, located between Limerick and Killaloe, was only possible with the help of a member of the local boat club. The River Shannon flows southward from Shannon Pot in County Cavan, then turns westward until its waters reach the estuary in Limerick. It divides the West of Ireland from the East and South, forming a major physical barrier, with fewer than thirty-five crossing points between the North and Limerick in the South. The Shannon is tidal east of Limerick up to the base of the Ardnacrusha dam (Gunn, 1996).

Historically, Limerick served as the main Viking stronghold for exploring and settling the region, significantly shaping the landscape despite few remaining structures from that era. These Viking explorations were conducted primarily via the river, making the Shannon a defining feature in the city's development since its foundation (Comerford, 2018).

In the medieval period, Limerick was a major city, divided by the River Shannon into two districts: Englishtown, which developed from the Norman settlement on King's Island, and Irishtown, located to the southeast (Scott *et al.*, 2020). From the 18th century onward, the construction of a new Georgian district in Newtown Perry, southwest of the city, reflected its expansion.

Over the past two decades, Limerick has experienced "unsustainable expansion" beyond its administrative boundaries, driven by high real estate costs (Campos, 2011). This has resulted in significant vacancy rates in the historic city center. Economically, the city has struggled, leading to high unemployment levels (Scott *et al.*, 2020). Despite these social and economic challenges, Limerick remains Ireland's third-largest city, with a population exceeding 90,000 inhabitants.

The River Shannon still holds great potential for urban planning, reinforcing its central role in shaping Limerick's past, present, and future (Campos, 2011). Its influence on urban development, as well as on the social and economic dynamics of the city, highlights the need for an integrated approach to rethinking Limerick's relationship with its river.

This is precisely the context in which the Eco Showboat project finds its meaning and relevance. By establishing itself along the banks of the Shannon, the project's actions targeted strategic urban locations where Limerick's environmental, cultural, and social challenges intersect. Key sites included the Curraghgour Boat Club on Merchant's Quay and the Marina House, home to the Hunt Museum.

The Curraghgour Boat Club, as a landmark and symbol of local identity, was at the heart of the project's activities. It acted as a catalyst, fostering interactions among existing local networks. The project revealed the deep entanglement between the river and the city, highlighting how the landscape, built heritage, and local communities are interconnected.

By integrating the historical significance of the site, the project emphasized Limerick's layered heritage—from the lost Viking port to the remnants of the Norman legacy, which still persist in collective memory through spectacular events and meaningful interactions in this emblematic space (Figure 1) (O'Donovan, 2018).

Figure 1. Panel outside the Curraghgour Boatclub



Source: Authors, Limerick, 2024.

The boat club also brought elements of its essence to the project through the integration of the daily life and routine of the local community members in their relationship with the river, biodiversity, and climate – the awareness of tidal movements, the boating and fishing practices, and the leisure activities such as swimming, as well as the environment of the fishermen's houses.

Indeed, the Curraghgour Boat Club is not just an urban location; it is an integral part of the landscape, made up of an active community that brings together fishermen, swimmers, artists, local residents, and others, who interact with each other and with the river in different ways, transforming the flows that cross it, imprinting their own dynamic. It enables and encourages new discoveries, contemplation, encounters, and exploration (O'Donovan, 2018).

Since 1877, the Curraghgour Boat Club has occupied this historic site, preserving the heritage of Limerick's old port. Its members, many of whom trace their ancestry back to the sieges of Limerick, maintain traditions of boat-making and fishing on the River Shannon. Coming from diverse backgrounds, they share a deep passion for the river and embody a living connection to the city's cultural and historical identity (O'Donovan, 2018).

The project not only highlighted the importance of the river in urban life but also encouraged a rediscovery of this territory by its inhabitants, promoting collective and sustainable reappropriation.

The second significant location for this phase of the project was the Hunt Museum. This is where the results of the workshops were exhibited and where conversations with scientists took place. The museum's origins already show a tradition of openness to the public: it stems from the donation of a private art collection belonging to the Hunt family, who were eager to share their accumulated artistic heritage. The museum is located in the former Customs House, a building dating from the late 18th century that hosts various activities focused on community participation.

The Eco Showboat activities first took place in the gardens of the Hunt Museum, and when the weather deteriorated, they were moved indoors to the "Captain's Room". Despite the fact that the community had expanded at this stage (190 participants registered that day), the activities were still connected to the identity of the boat club, incorporating its key figures, images, and stories.

The activities carried out by the project throughout the Irish waterways were characterized by a diversification of artistic modes and media: from installations to co-creation, performance to conference or debate. The activities in Limerick remained focused on community participation. The commissioned artists – Deirdre Power and Chelsea Canavan – who already had a history with the local community, stimulated and catalyzed creativity, promoted a sense of belonging, and fostered

connections, not only among people but also between people and their environment, grounded in sustained, long-term relationships. In Limerick, the artists had already established relationships with various communities, including swimmers, boating club members, and others connected to the river's environment.

Deirdre Power is an artist deeply connected to the river and the communities that live around it. Throughout her career, she has participated in several artistic and social projects, exploring the relationship between art and community engagement. Her connection to the river dates back to her childhood when she and her colleagues tried to establish an art center in the city – and this relationship influenced her artistic and activist trajectory.

In addition to her artwork, the artist is actively involved in politics. For her, art goes beyond aesthetic expression – it is a tool for empathy and social connection. She participates in several community projects and views art not only as a profession but also as the center of her life, valuing the relationships she builds along the way (D. Power, personal communication, May 2024).

She had previously collaborated with Chelsea Canavan, whose artistic path is also deeply linked to social engagement and the appreciation of creative processes. Chelsea moved to Limerick in 2016-2017 and now resides in the metropolitan area of Castleconnell. Her involvement with the local community reflects her belief that the process is as important as the outcome. She believes that art should play a functional role in society by promoting inclusion and accessibility. Furthermore, she emphasizes the importance of recognizing the effort behind each project and the indirect impacts they may generate. Her experience with previous projects has prepared her for bigger challenges, broadening her perspective on the transformative impact of art. Chelsea continues to explore new ways to create connections and use art as a tool for social change (C. Donovan, personal communication, May 2024).

For Deirdre and Chelsea, the Eco Showboat was not a project designed to teach communities something, but rather to foster exchanges and shared experiences. More than creating artistic objects, their desire was to strengthen relationships and expand connections between individuals and their communities.

3. The activities: Art as a way of existing

The first activities and artworks created as part of the Eco Showboat project involved selecting a symbol and a name for the project, as well as adapting an existing boat with photovoltaic panels. This modification allowed artists Anne Cleary and Dennis Connolly to travel along Ireland's rivers and canals without generating CO₂ emissions, thus contributing to the reduction of the carbon footprint associated with their travel.

The symbol chosen to represent the project was the mayfly, a characteristic insect found in aquatic environments. This choice highlights the project's focus on sustainability and the environment, with the mayfly symbolizing the delicate balance of aquatic ecosystems.

The mayfly, along with species like the Caddisfly and Stonefly, is considered an "indicator species" by biologists, as its presence in large swarms above the water during early summer suggests that the water is relatively unpolluted and ecologically healthy (School of Looking, 2022).

The insect also serves as a symbol of the growing concerns about the role of rivers and their waters in relation to the surrounding communities. More broadly, it represents the issues related to ecological preservation, highlighting the importance of sustainable management of aquatic ecosystems.

The choice of the mayfly as a central symbol and reference for the project reflects the essence of its concerns, while aiming to add a more sensitive dimension to the ecological narrative it conveys. As an indicator of environmental quality, this symbol holds fundamental importance for promoting conservation by giving materiality to a concept that could otherwise seem abstract. Furthermore, it introduces an emotional dimension to a logic that might otherwise remain purely rational, making the message more accessible and relevant (Berque, 1993).

The reference to the mayfly first materialized in the boat itself, which was named Mayfly, and later through the flag representing the project (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Dennis and Anne on the Mayfly, at the launch of the project, with the flag on the façade of the Boat Club



Source: School of looking, Limerick, 2022.

A flag plays a role of articulation, as it “provides the individual with a manifest object of identification” and “and magnify(ies) social identity motives” (Schatz, 2007, p. 332). Additionally, it “connects the individual to larger meaning and purpose, superceding the individual’s personal existence” (Schatz, 2007, p. 333). The flag aimed to provide the group with the opportunity to identify themselves and a symbol around which to organize, thus allowing them to position themselves in relation to the themes that matter to them over time.

The flag for the Eco Showboat project was commissioned to artists Deirdre Power and Chelsea Canavan and designed by Chelsea using the stylized image of the mayfly, incorporating the colors of water and plants, conveying the aspirations of the project throughout the spatio-temporal journey made by the artists: raising awareness and inspiring a collective action for ecological goals.

The Mayfly flag was selected for The Flag Project in New York, supported by the Rockefeller Center, the Climate Museum, and the United Nations Environment Programme, and it flew over the iconic Rockefeller Center ice rink during Earth Day celebrations in April 2022. Upon its return, it was hung on the facade of the Curraghgour Boat Club to mark the launch of the Eco Showboat project and later continued its journey aboard the Mayfly from Limerick to Enniskillen.

Deirdre and Chelsea also proposed other activities aimed at community participation and its active involvement in the creation of objects and narratives. Participants, for their part, were encouraged to discover themselves as artists and to develop or strengthen an emotional connection with the environment.

The central activity in Limerick—The Water Paths Archive—was a long-term project developed over a year but rooted in much older habits of the local community members. The goal was to deepen the awakening of local identity and its relationship to the environment, which, little by little, materializes through daily interaction.

This project involved a series of notebooks, written and illustrated by members of the riverside community, offering a rich record of various perspectives on daily life by the water, depicting aspects ranging from the richness of flora and fauna to daily water-related activities. Several residents participated by illustrating the notebooks they were given, in the form of a sort of journal, adding photos, drawings, comments, observations, and their feelings (see Figures 3 to 6).

Figure 3. Page from Rosalyn's notebook

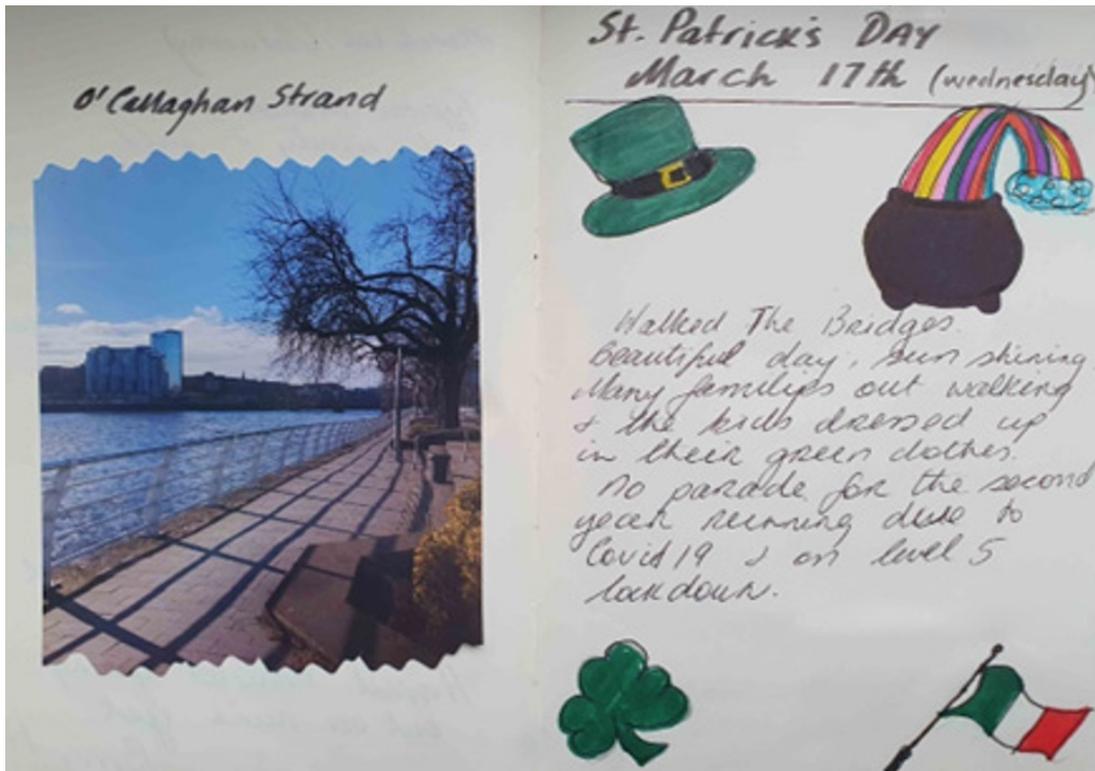


Figure 4. Page from Rosalyn's notebook

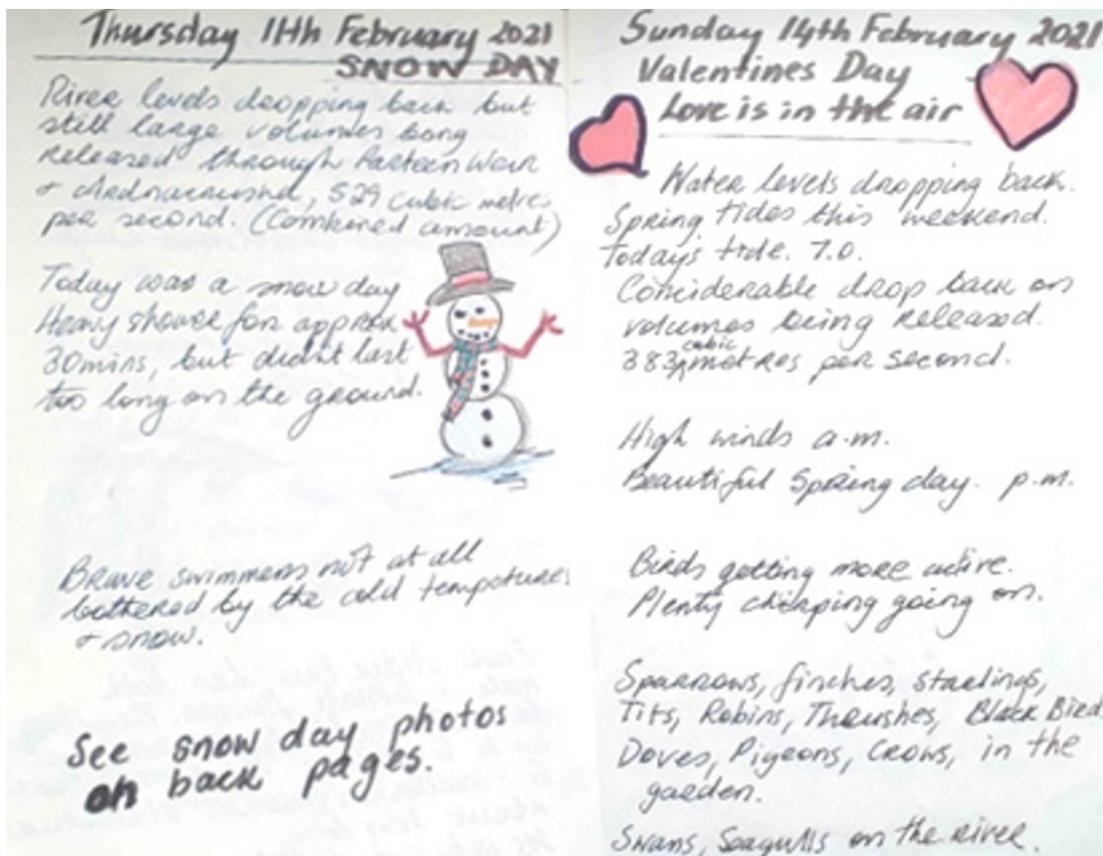
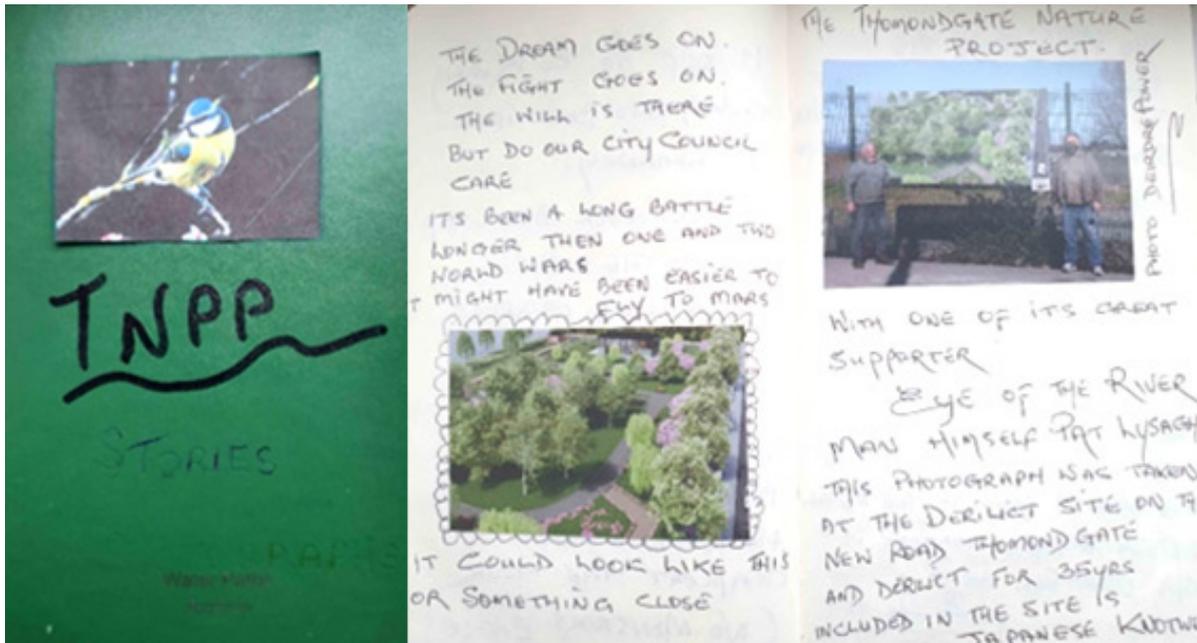


Figure 5. Cover and pages of the notebook proposing the Thomondgate Project on Nature



Source: Authors, Limerick, 2024.

Hereunder we highlight the statements of two participants in the project, Ann Lister and Pat Lysaght, with whom we conducted interviews.

Ann Lister has a deep and personal connection with the river, shaped by her family history and years of involvement in the region. Since her childhood, the river has always been an integral part of her life, both as a recreational space and as a central element of her family's memory and identity. For nine years, she maintained a website dedicated to sharing her memories and knowledge of the river, generating interest and engagement from many local residents and researchers. Although the website has recently been deactivated, her participation in the project encapsulated its essence. She believes that this initiative had a positive impact on raising citizens' awareness.

Figure 6. Pages from Ann Lister's notebook



Source: Authors, Limerick, 2024.

The interview highlighted the essential role of the river in shaping the identity and character of urban territory. Through Ann Lister's experience, it is clear that the river is not only a physical element within the city but also a space that shapes collective memory, public space use, and social dynamics over time.

Her testimony illustrates how the river once occupied a central place in the lives of the inhabitants, serving as a natural extension of homes and gardens. The fact that her family spent summers in a cabin near the river reinforces the idea of a space for recreation and belonging. This emotional and daily connection contributes to defining the identity of the territory.

However, with urban expansion and the construction of new homes, this relationship with the river has evolved. She observes that the increase in pollution and the reduction of green spaces have altered the river's quality and accessibility. These transformations illustrate the dynamic nature of the urban territory, shaped by human occupation and the constant interaction between the environment and urbanization.

Despite these changes, the river remains a place for meeting and social interaction. People still walk along its banks, take their dogs out, and find a space to connect with others. This continuity of social practices emphasizes that the character of the urban territory is primarily defined by human interactions that take place within it.

The website created by Ann Lister to share stories about the river also highlights the fundamental role of memory in shaping the territory. The engagement of residents and researchers with the content suggests that, despite physical and environmental changes, the river remains a structural element of local identity, carrying persistent cultural and historical significance.

Finally, the issues related to flooding and pollution reveal the impact of social and political dynamics on defining the territory. The increasing urbanization along the riverbank directly affects its sustainability and the quality of life for residents. The presence of waste in the water reflects

how society manages its natural resources, influencing the relationship between the city and its environment.

The interview thus shows that the relationship between the inhabitants and the river is a determining factor in structuring urban space. Whether as a recreational area, a site of memory, or an environmental concern, the river transcends its simple physical dimension: it shapes community bonds, public space use, and social dynamics over time. (A. Lister, personal communication, May 2024).

Another noteworthy interview was with Pat Lysaght: “Pat is a legend. He has been helping boats navigate the Abbey River for decades. He knows all the secrets of the tides and turbines” (School of Looking, 2022).

His participation on the Eco Showboat project reflects his relationship with the community, the landscape, and the river. He participated on the Water Paths Archives by including a childhood photo in his journal showing him on the river, as he has been attached to it since the age of four. This choice reflects his emotional memory and shows a deep emotional connection to the river. These memories have shaped his identity and influenced his relationship with the environment, highlighting the personal and implicit nature of his knowledge.

His world is unique; he expresses himself and communicates through his relationship with people and nature. His narrative is vivid, and it cannot be confined to a simple journal.

During the interview, he took us on his boat, offering a truly immersive experience. He shared his knowledge of salmon fishing in the river, mentioning an old trap structure, as well as his concerns about the construction of a potential road. The conversation also touched on his role as a river guide, helping boats and people in difficulty and performing rescues. His boat, lower than the others, passes where others cannot, going further. He also spoke about his passion for nature, observing local wildlife such as geese, foxes, and flowers, and sharing his discoveries. This reflects his genuine interest in the local nature, like the discovery of lily seeds and the introduction of wild geese, showing a personal connection to the river that goes beyond mere professional activity interest.

His passion for the river is evident in his words, and this identification motivates him to protect and preserve the environment while sharing his knowledge and experience with others. Pat’s knowledge and passion for the river attract visitors and researchers, fostering tourism and promoting the region. His experience as a guide and his ability to build connections with people make the river more accessible and interesting to visitors. He interacts with local residents, fishermen, and tourists, creating a sense of community around the river. By sharing his stories and knowledge, he strengthens the bonds between people and the river, promoting a sense of belonging and responsibility. He therefore plays a crucial role in connecting the river with the city. (P. Lysaght, personal communication, May 2024).

The project granted visibility to the drawings and photos of community members, giving them a chance to be represented and recognized, which strengthened their connection with the river and the territory. Perceptions, memories, and experiences were transformed into works of art, contributing to a sense of belonging and collective identity.

The spotlight on the creations of local residents thus legitimized their lived experiences and perspectives, making their emotional and historical attachment to the river manifest. The community was encouraged to see the river not only as a natural resource but also as a central element of its identity and culture.

By encouraging active participation in artistic creation, the project affirmed the river as a shared space where diverse voices could express themselves and exchange. The exhibition of the works reinforced the emotional connection to the river, fostering their commitment to its preservation and thus consolidating the symbolic and tangible appropriation of the space by the population. Therefore, seeing their creations exhibited led community members to feel responsible for the future of the river, while also encouraging them to actively participate in environmental initiatives and discussions on its conservation.

By merging art and activism, the project served as a catalyst for local mobilization. Thus, the exhibition of the works, first at the Hunt Museum and later in Killaloe, became more than just a

show: it served as a platform for the community to reflect on the environment and strengthen its ability to mobilize for change. The river, in this context, was transformed from a passive element into a dynamic space for engagement.

Another activity promoted by Deirdre Power and Chelsea Canavan was the Ljusne Stich'n Limerick, an artistic project between Limerick and Ljusne in Sweden, where the two communities worked on embroidery pieces representing small freshwater invertebrates.

Figure 7. Embroidery made in the context of Ljusne Stich'n for the project



Source: Authors, Limerick, 2024.

This activity holds particular significance as it projects actions into a larger context and establishes international connections, showing that the issues addressed resonate in various other contexts. The embroidery activity is also highly representative because, as Barber and Gilson (2023) state, "in the face of an uncertain future, the stitching together of meaning, the weaving of interconnections of empathy, affect, and resistance becomes even more important" (Barber, Gilson, 2023, p. 517).

In working on the analysis of textile craft projects, Barber and Gilson believe it is possible to move "from critic to storyteller, from one thread to another," emphasizing that we are dealing with:

(“...”) an act of repair in a time of growing damage, not in ways which suggest an actual repair of the damage caused by climate change, but repair to the terror of feeling that we can do nothing. Such affective and material modeling of repair also enables the possibility of broader reparation processes.” (Barber & Gilson, 2023. p. 518)

The Ljusne Stitch’n Limerick and Water Paths Archive projects were developed in 2022, and their evolution was tracked during the 2023 edition of the Eco Showboat. Among the other activities developed in Limerick, a few deserve to be mentioned: the creation and installation of banners on the Pangolin Pavilion, the collection of aquatic species for ecosystem observation workshops, and the scientific exchanges with the local population.

The creation and installation of the banners on the Pavilion were activities designed to engage visitors during the launch event for the exhibitions and expedition, involving the active participation of everyone present. Children from the community created silkscreened flags, which became a striking visual element to encourage engagement. These banners were installed on the Pangolin Pavilion, a structure made from umbrellas, designed and assembled specifically to host the project’s activities and exhibitions. Visitors who entered this installation were surrounded by the flags, transforming the experience into an immersive, sensory journey.

The collection of aquatic species consisted of a workshop preceded by the collection of a “kick sample,” a sampling method used by biologists—by kicking through mud, silt, and stones in the riverbed. Anything dislodged by this action is captured in a net, which allows for the study of macroinvertebrates living in the river. Indicator species such as the stonefly, mayfly nymph, or caddisfly were identified in a workshop involving children, offering clear indications of the water quality at that location. This activity was part of the “Slow Looking” strategy, implemented by Anne and Dennis, the project’s designers, throughout its development. The goal was to cultivate an awareness of slow, attentive observation of nature to better understand its characteristics and the environmental challenges it faces. Led by biologist Rachel O’Malley, the observation of small macroinvertebrates created a strong continuity in the flow of the project, as it was repeated at each stop of the expedition.

One of the core principles on which Eco Showboat based its interventions was the integration of art and science in the process of mobilizing communities, fostering both a sensitive and rational understanding of the themes addressed, thus enriching the dialogue and strengthening participant engagement. By combining emotion and reason, this approach encourages a deeper perception of the issues while stimulating creativity and involvement from participants.

Scientific interventions were conducted informally, in the form of conversations. In this context, activities in Limerick included an exchange with an agent from the South West Region who discussed concrete actions that could be taken to improve water quality in Ireland. Additionally, a conversation took place with an analytical chemistry professor from Dublin City University, who presented an innovative water sensor recently developed. This device, later deployed on the Mayfly, continuously collects real-time data on water quality, making a valuable contribution to environmental monitoring.

The next phase of the project, still around Limerick, involved navigating the canal leading to the Ardnacrusha power station and passing through its locks, activities that were thoroughly documented, producing high-quality aesthetic images used in the project’s dissemination and part of a film.

The height difference created by the hydroelectric dam remains a significant physical barrier, impacting both ecological processes—such as the migration of eels and salmon, which can no longer swim upstream—and the social dynamics between communities in the region.

When the turbines at Ardnacrusha are operating and the tide is low, the water current accelerates significantly, making navigation particularly difficult. This crossing was made possible thanks to the expertise and assistance of Pat Lysaght (also a participant in the Water Paths Archive).

Rather than adopting a confrontational approach, Pat’s strategy was to understand the dynamics of the tides and turbines and to interact with them on an individual scale. This approach highlighted a different relationship with the forces at play, contrasting with the monumental scale of the dam

infrastructure and the raw power of nature. Pat Lysaght's experience illustrates the idea that, no matter the dominant forces, individual action can influence the outcome and enable an adapted interaction with the environment.

This reflection underscores the importance of knowledge of local landscape as a means of adaptation and engagement. Far from being a mere prerequisite, this understanding is an active element of a contextual approach, enabling harmonious and effective interaction with the environment.

4. In conclusion: Art and community - weaving the territories of the future

A multi-voiced interview with Deirdre Power and Chelsea Canavan, the two artists who engaged in the Eco Showboat project in the sequences held in Limerick, brings out the main arguments summarizing the key aspects to take away in conclusion from this contribution.

During the interview, the discussions focused on the impact and scope of the actions undertaken so that the artists could assess the activities carried out, both in terms of their objectives and their own learning.

Chelsea Canavan explained that her interactions with different communities helped her develop a strong sense of empathy, which shaped all aspects of her work. She believes that art is not separate from everyday life, it is a way of being, not just a way of creating. In this context, empathy becomes a central element, as art takes on its full depth when it arises from active listening and recognition of the needs and experiences of the people involved. This sensitivity is all the more crucial in a context where the river structures the city, both as a physical element of the territory and as a space of memory, sociability, and exchange.

The impact of the artistic projects on the communities was also highlighted. Chelsea stressed that these initiatives generate a real ripple effect, showing that art can provoke lasting transformations when it is based on sincere engagement. (C. Canavan, personal communication, May 2024)

From this perspective, the artists believe that art plays a crucial role in social change, by challenging barriers and stimulating access to culture. For them, active political participation is essential, as is pushing for public authorities to encourage the democratization of art and cultural resources.

Deirdre Power, for her part, criticized the trivialization of the term "socially engaged artist", which she believes has lost its authenticity and has become more of a constraint than a true calling. Chelsea added to this reflection, stating that, for her, it's not just about producing art, but living it fully, as an integral part of her identity and her relationship with the world.

From these exchanges, as well as from the projects undertaken within the framework of the Eco Showboat, emerges the importance of recognizing art and artists as agents of innovation and transformation. Deirdre condemned the reductive view that limits art to a simple "creative industry," stressing the fundamental role of artists as critical thinkers and catalysts of new ideas (D. Power, personal communication, May 2024).

In this context, the river represents a privileged space for experimentation: it embodies both a historical legacy and a field for innovation, where environmental issues, economic challenges, and civic mobilizations intersect.

For both artists, strengthening local initiatives and community mobilization are essential forms of resistance to exclusionary power structures. They celebrate the capacity of communities to self-organize, creating their own solutions to their challenges – often without relying on government support or external funding. The experience they put into practice within the Eco Showboat project allowed them to acquire deep knowledge of art, community engagement, and the challenges faced by artists working in complex social and environmental contexts. They emphasize the need to keep community ties alive and revisit projects to constantly reinvent them, ensuring that their work has a real and lasting impact on the construction of territories and the invention of new landscapes.

In this sense, the activities carried out within the Eco Showboat project can be understood as a tactic,

in the sense of Michel de Certeau (1990)¹, aimed at engaging riverine communities by connecting them and encouraging the exchange of experiences and perceptions about the relationships between the river and its environment. By doing so, the project adopted various forms of resistance and action: the activities sought to weave alliances between different groups and communities sharing common interests, such as swimmers, rowers, fishermen, artists, and environmental defenders.

This commitment is especially meaningful in the river context, as Limerick's identity is intrinsically tied to the Shannon. Often seen as a natural boundary, the river becomes a space for claims and reappropriation, connecting the residents to each other and to their environment. The creation of networks of mutual support and collaboration strengthens the capacity for action and resistance against external pressures, while offering alternative channels for communication and resources, thus bypassing the established official and hierarchical structures. These networks give the project greater robustness and a broader reach, allowing the communities involved to share their perspectives and practices.

The activities also challenged and deconstructed conventional forms of representing the river. Rather than passively accepting the dominant narratives promoted by the media, public policies, or common sense, the project explored new narratives, shedding light not only on the beauty, interactions, and feelings related to the river, but also on the environmental and social challenges it faces within a territory. This process contributes to redefining the relationship between the city and its river, no longer as a separation but as a link to preserve and value.

The immediate results of the project, although important, are not as significant as the long-term impact of creating strong bonds between people. The true success lies in strengthening the ties between members of the local community, as well as between them, their territory, the city, and the river. In this sense, it was not about solving short-term problems but about weaving the threads of a lasting relationship that, over time, would allow for collective solutions to social and environmental challenges. It is in this perspective that the territories of tomorrow can be shaped by a collective vision and ambition, even before they are physically made tangible by the competent authorities.

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¹ «Ces «manières de faire» constituent les mille pratiques par lesquelles des utilisateurs se réapproprient l'espace organisé par les techniques de la production socioculturelle.» (De Certeau, 1990, p. XL) (*These 'ways of doing' constitute the countless practices through which users reclaim the space organized by the techniques of sociocultural production.*) [translated by the author]

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