



Creative Engagement with Young Asylum Seekers, Refugees and Migrants The Glucksman, University College Cork

Introduction

The first Direct Provision Centres were set up as a temporary measure in 1999 when Ireland experienced a surge in the numbers of asylum seekers coming to our shores. At present, there are 691 people living in Direct Provision in Cork, 223 of whom are children. Some of these children (up to ages 8-9 years) were born here in Ireland and have spent their entire childhood living within this deeply flawed system. Research undertaken by UCC staff has shown that “Direct Provision is a key contributor to and has caused serious mental and physical health deterioration in people seeking asylum; as a system, it fails to recognise people’s most basic social, cultural, gender, ethnic, and religious needs; it enforces penal conditions on people over long periods of time, and couples with this a continual boredom; it systematically isolates those seeking asylum, and enforces institutionalisation and powerlessness. It represents a state-imposed system of marginalisation and subjugation, and negatively impacts on people’s roles as parents with significant consequences for their children.”¹

In December 2014, UCC staff member, Mike Fitzgibbon, sent an email to University staff seeking donations to assist with a Christmas Day event for children living in Direct Provision. The email described the lack of resources, activities or enjoyment in their lives, and included some startling images created by the children that vividly depicted their troubled living conditions. Glucksman Director Fiona Kearney brought the email to the attention of the curatorial team with the view to running an art project/event for the children, as part of the museum’s core commitment to providing access to great art for all ages and abilities.

¹ *Institutionalised Infantilisation and State Subjugation: state control of the mundane in an environment of uncertainty*, Fitzgibbon M., & O’Riordan J., Development Studies Association of Ireland annual conference, 2013.

Our Place project

In discussions with UCC colleagues, it became clear that in order to enable children living in Direct Provision to fully participate in creative activities, the Glucksman would need to ensure that other supports such as transport and meals would be provided. Funding for a pilot project was sourced from philanthropic sources as well as UCC student societies and the UCC Visitors Centre.

Working with partners who knew the residents, the needs of the children and the expectations of a project was crucial. The relationships that our colleagues in UCC have developed over 15 years with residents of Direct Provision centres meant that they had garnered a trust and understanding that we at the museum would have been unable to achieve in such a short period of time.

In December 2015, 22 brave, wonderful young children aged 6 – 12 years came through the Glucksman's doors and in a burst of energy and excitement they embarked on an artistic adventure that ran all the way into the Spring. There were beautiful moments, saddening glimpses at their domestic realities and lots and lots of laughter.

Under the direction of Tadhg Crowley, Curator of Education, the group were encouraged to create artworks that looked at 'place', both imaginative and real, using a wide variety of materials including film, print, drawing, painting, animation and collage. The *Our Place* workshops took place over six weeks and were framed within *Once Upon a Place*, a larger project at the Glucksman run in



partnership with Children's Books Ireland and the Laureate na nÓg initiative. *Once Upon a Place* invited school and community groups to the Glucksman to create artworks that reflected on their sense of place.

For children living in Direct Provision, place is an important but delicate topic that needed to be navigated properly. In order to ensure the Glucksman was seen as a creative space that offered respite from cramped living conditions, the focus of the workshops was on the potential of place and asked them to consider, with no restrictions or limits, where was their place?

There were two sessions prior to Christmas 2015 and, during the second workshop, each child was given an art pack with sketchbook and materials. In early 2016, one of the older boys showed Tadhg Crowley the sketchbook that he had been working on. Even in a few weeks there was a marked improvement in his drawing ability. He spoke about his delight at having these materials to create with and how he would spend time every evening working on his sketches. For this boy and others in the group the opportunity to interact with extracurricular activities and to get creative was having a considerable impact.

A public exhibition featuring the artworks of all children involved in the larger *Once Upon a Place* project was presented at the Glucksman in March 2016 and launched with a storytelling session by



Laureate na nÓg Eoin Colfer. The artworks created by children living in Direct Provision were displayed alongside their peers and created public awareness of both the terrible reality of the children's lives, as well as their extraordinary potential to contribute to society once they are supported to do so.

Our Place was a new experience for the museum. Focusing and channelling

the children's dynamism was the most challenging aspect to the workshops. The group's attention would fall off very quickly and having multiple short activities worked best. It was easier to return to core projects over a few weeks rather than attempting to see a project through during a single session. Over the six sessions we saw the physical and mental impact that life in Direct Provision was having on these children. On certain days, some of the children would be drowsy, despondent and unresponsive to projects. These same children the following week would be full of life and enthused about everything we were doing. These shifts in mood and energy were apparent across many children. We sought to stimulate the children by undertaking short exercises and involving them in tasks around filmmaking and documenting workshops.

Our Place heightened the museum's awareness as to how urgent the work was and its success created a demand among older children to be given an opportunity to get involved with extracurricular activities. With the support of the Arts Council of Ireland through its Young Ensembles Scheme, the Glucksman welcomed teenagers to take part in their first project at the museum in Autumn 2016.



Navigating the Urban Landscape project

Teenage years can be difficult as everything begins to change both physically and emotionally. Living out your teenage years in a Direct Provision centre is even more challenging, sharing a single room with your entire family, little or no opportunities for extracurricular activities or creative outputs, life can seem cruel, the world small and the future bleak. The Irish Refugee Council has reported that young people living in Direct Provision are more prone to depression and suicide than their peers.

The *Navigating the Urban Landscape* project was linked to the Glucksman's exhibition *I Went to the Woods*, and built around the idea that as we enter the teenage years we begin to gain a little more freedom. This new-found autonomy provides us with the opportunity to explore our local area through aimless wanderings and walks or by beginning the process of ownership of our locality in the corners or streets we lay claim to. This process is crucial in the development of civic pride but also in the establishment of a sense of belonging. For teenagers living in Direct Provision — who live in isolated and restrictive settings — they are not afforded the opportunity to get to know their local area in the same way as other young people.

The project invited 14 teenagers living in Direct Provision centres in Cork City and County to work with the Glucksman over a six-week period in Autumn 2016 and to create artworks with professional artists that explored the landscape of the city. This was an opportunity for these teenagers to interact with creative ideas and artistic media and to discover their own imaginative capabilities away from their restricted living quarters. From the outset, it was clear that this group had been so deprived of extra-curricular opportunities that the chance to engage in a creative project was incredibly precious. In comparison with the younger children, the teenagers were calm and capable of having lots of fun but with a much greater focus on the project.

One of the primary objectives of the art workshops was to provide the teenagers with the skills to continue with art activities after the project had concluded. From photography with Roseanne Lynch to drawing with Cassandra Eustace and film-making with Dervla Baker, it was crucial that what was learnt in the workshops could be continued and shared with others back at the centres.

Another key objective of *Navigating the Urban Landscape* was to enable these young people to develop a creative voice and tell their own stories in the public domain. The Glucksman provided both the workshops and the platform for the teenagers to do this. The project culminated with an exhibition of their artwork at the museum in early 2017. Over the exhibition's 10 day run, 7,000 visitors attended the museum, bringing the creative work of these young people to a large and diverse audience. In addition, a special feature on the UCC website extended the reach of the project to a much larger audience, profiling the experience of the teenagers and creating awareness of the potential of these young people to shape and contribute to society.

<https://www.ucc.ie/en/about/uccnews/glucksman-exhibition-navigates-the-urban-landscape.html>

The moving feedback from the teenagers involved highlights how crucial it is that these young people are given access to cultural and creative opportunities:

'Well, I must say the workshop was one of the best I've been to. They provided us with everything we needed for the course, even transport. The workshop included drawing, film making and photography. I am so happy that I got the opportunity to participate, it brought out my talent and I have become more confident standing in front of a crowd.'

'Thanks for letting me be a part of Glucksman 2016. I enjoyed every part of it and I loved the interaction with other Asylum Seekers from other parts of Cork! I loved the volunteers (they were so welcoming and humble) and a special thanks to Dan for looking after me from taking time to pick me up to being there and dropping me off. Lovely activities indeed, they were awesome!'

'My experience at the workshop in UCC was amazing. It helped me physically and mentally as I was inspired with all the activities we did. I was able to meet new people and I discovered I had a great singing voice.'



The project would not have been possible without the funding from the Arts Council of Ireland as well as an additional support provided by the Glucksman's own resources and fundraising activities.

The Big Picture

The success of the *Once Upon a Place* exhibition and *Our Place* project, and positive feedback from participants and partners provided the evidence base for the Glucksman to secure funds from the Ireland Funds to support a new series of workshops for younger children living in Direct Provision, continuing the partnership with Children's Books Ireland and the Laureate na nÓg initiative. In Spring 2017, the Glucksman presented a special project that explored storytelling and collaborative art making. *The Big Picture* invited schools, community groups and children living in Direct Provision to create and display their artworks as part of a public exhibition in the gallery.

The children aged 6-12 years from the Glouthaune and Kinsale Road Direct Provision centres worked with artists over a series of workshops to create paintings, prints, drawings and audio recordings. It was important that the children involved in the 2016 *Our Place* project would have the opportunity to build on the skills they had learnt and for the new participants that they would be afforded the chance to get to know the museum and develop their creative skills.



In *The Big Picture* workshops, participating children drew on adventures and travels from recent Irish storybooks such as *When Jessie came across the Sea* and *The Great Space Race* to classic tales like *Around the World in Eighty Days*, *Peter Pan* and *Alice in Wonderland*. They created large scale collaborative art-works in a variety of mediums at specially designed art workshops in the Glucksman.

A public exhibition in the main gallery spaces of the Glucksman from 23 – 26 March 2017 showcased the artistic responses of over 300 children from around Cork City and County, once again publicly highlighting the creative contribution possible by all children in society and crucially integrating the work of children living in Direct Provision with those of other peer groups. *The Big Picture* was opened to the public with a special reading by Laureate na nÓg PJ Lynch.

A Greener, Brighter Future

A Greener, Brighter Future invited young people to explore climate change and their local environment through creative activities at the museum. The projects looked to create an awareness of environmental issues and our responsibilities as individuals both for the children involved and for the wider community through a public exhibition. *A Greener, Brighter Future* complimented the existing Green Schools Programme and allowed students to express their learnings, concerns and aspirations around the environment through creative and imaginative activities.

As part of this project, the Glucksman welcomed children living in the Glounthaune Direct Provision centre to visit the Glucksman and take part in art workshops. The workshops gave the children living in Direct Provision the opportunity to participate in a creative project with their peers, to explore ideas of climate change and their local environment, and to provide them with a positive experience within the civic space of the museum. The children aged 7-12 years created artworks for public display at the Glucksman in July 2017. Participants worked under the guidance of experienced art facilitators using recycled and natural materials to realise their visions of our future world, with a particular focus on the environment.



Arriving Into View

The Glucksman was successful in its application to the Arts Council of Ireland Young Ensemble Scheme to fund a second programme for teenagers living in Direct Provision. We were particularly keen for their creativity and personal stories to be shared with as wide an audience as possible and focused the *Arriving Into View* project on the creation of a public artwork in a city centre. With the support of Cork City Council, a site for a new public mural was identified in Fitzgerald's Park.

The teenagers were welcomed back to the Glucksman for six art making sessions led by project artists Claire Coughlan and Helen O'Keeffe, invited artists The Project Twins and Fiona Kelly, and curator Kirstie North. They explored both individual and collaborative artmaking techniques in a variety of media and were encouraged to develop their own creative processes and skills for visual communication in a positive and friendly atmosphere. With a focus initially on personal journeys and

visual storytelling, the teenagers took direction of the sessions and began looking at ideas of identity and misperceptions. All these ideas and topics are revealed in different forms in the final artwork.

On Culture Night Friday 22nd September in Fitzgerald's Park, the large scale mural will be unveiled to the public and will remain on view for over two months. As a complement to this very public display and to root their experience in the museum, an exhibition of artworks the teenagers created with the Project Twins and Fiona Kelly will go on display in the Glucksman Foyer from 22 September to 8 October. The Irish Times did a full-page feature on this work on Thursday 14 September 2017. You can read it here: <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/art-and-design/people-say-don-t-you-have-your-own-country-we-reply-mind-your-own-goddamn-business-1.3217027>



Blueprints

Building on the experience of working with children living in Direct Provision, the Glucksman evolved a new strand of integrated arts experiences in partnership with Cloghroe Scouts and Crosshaven Brownies, and funded by the Department of Justice and Equality's Communities Integration Fund. *Blueprints* ran at the Glucksman during the Autumn of 2017 and invited the participating children to enjoy collaborative art activities in the museum. Through a series of creative workshops the children explored ideas of identity and community and broadened their understanding of how people and nature interconnect.

The integrated art workshops provided an opportunity for all the participating children to learn about the differences and similarities of their lives, to develop friendships and to make connections through positive shared experiences. They were enabled in this by student volunteers from UCC's STAR (Student Action for Refugees) Society.

Cloghroe Scouts and the children from Drishane Castle Accommodation Centre worked together to create field guides and collages inspired by the nature that could be found in the lower grounds of UCC adjacent to the River Lee and surrounded by trees. The children from Glouthaune Direct provision

Centre worked alongside Crosshaven Brownies to create maps and prints of the natural elements they discovered in close proximity to the museum.

Working under the guidance of professional artists Cat Gambel, Killian O'Dwyer and Tom Doig, the children created artworks for public exhibition at the Glucksman. The exhibition took place during the inaugural UCC Refugee week in early February 2018 and was opened by the University Deputy President Professor John O'Halloran.

The need for sustainability

One of the core concerns of the Direct Provision community and the staff at the Glucksman is ensuring the sustainability of the creative experiences we are now providing at the museum. Over the last two years, we have built up significant institutional expertise of engaging with children in Direct Provision and an awareness of their specific needs and abilities. We have sought to share this information with UCC colleagues, art educators and the wider public at conferences, and on university and educational blogs.

The Glucksman is committed to hosting the creative workshops in the civic space of the museum rather than in the confinement of the centres. Renée Marcoué in her book 'The Listening Eye' describes how the process of learning from a museum, for a young person, very much starts in the pre-visit stage. For many participants in our programmes, it was the first occasion that they were undertaking any leisure activity without their parents by their side. For the teenagers in particular this was a momentous step. One of the young people involved in *Navigating the Urban Landscape* described that for her one of the most important aspects of the project was getting out of the centre and feeling a sense of space, feeling like she could "breathe".

The Direct Provision centres are permeated with an atmosphere of lethargy, anxiety and dread and although it is more expensive and organisationally challenging to bring the young people to the museum, it is a necessary first step towards establishing a more creative dialogue with them. Reports from different projects around the country that have attempted to conduct creative activities in the centres have found that engagement levels are much lower. There is a transformational impact on the children who participate in creative programmes in the supported environment of the Glucksman, where they can enjoy not only creative activities, but also the university grounds, a meal in the restaurant and some freedom from their severely restricted living conditions.

For some of the young people involved in our projects, their families have been granted asylum. However, for those who have spent years in the system, often all they know is Direct Provision. It houses their friends and their community. An increasing number of young people returned to us over the past year who no longer reside in Direct Provision, but feel most comfortable when having the opportunity to socialise and participate creatively with their friends away from the centres. The Glucksman can provide this welcoming, safe and creative environment for both those still in Direct Provision and those seeking to adjust to life in their local community.

At the Glucksman, we believe that the opportunity for community groups to showcase their creativity in public is crucial to the overall experience of the museum as a creative and civic space. This opportunity for reflection and recognition is particularly vital for refugees and asylum seekers. The exhibitions that we have held of the young people's work to date has afforded us the opportunity to welcome in the wider Direct Provision community to honour and take pride in their young friends and family. It has also presented a moment for the public to recognise the creative contribution that these young people can make to Irish society.

Conclusion

Working with the young people living in Direct Provision has been in equal measures some of the most rewarding and most heart-breaking work undertaken at the museum. These children are incredibly brave, generous and kind-hearted. Their lives have been ones of struggle, distress and in some cases trauma, and still their determination and positivity shines through. They truly need to feel the power of creative agency.

The Glucksman is aware of the privilege and responsibility of working with young people living in Direct Provision, and the need for this work to be carried out on an ongoing basis. In this way, we hope it will have a lasting and meaningful impact on both the participants and wider Irish society. The Glucksman's twin objectives of firstly, providing meaningful, creative experiences for this severely disadvantaged community, and secondly, increasing the visibility of asylum seekers, refugees and migrants in society through their own representations, are in keeping with the strategic purpose of various funding bodies as well as being of potential interest to donors.

The Glucksman is committed to finding the resources to continue this work in a sustainable way.

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May 2018