# Wild Abandon

A new park in Dublin is a case study in material reuse and low-tech thrills.

By Tim Waterman

Dermot Foley walks from home to work and back through Bridgefoot Street Park in Dublin, Ireland, built to his designs in 2022, and keeps a close eye on the developing site, and he maintains a conversation with the groundskeepers and the community gardeners working there. I met Foley there on one such commute on a cool March morning, with the breeze carrying the sweet, earthy, beery smell from the nearby Guinness brewery. Two main but very loose diagonal routes traverse the park, allowing smooth access whether people are crossing east to west, or angling across to the River Liffey. A steady stream of walkers is passing through on all angles. The broad routes weave between three steep hillocks which invite clambering and which define the park's spaces between. A tow-headed toddler in a red hooded jacket heaves himself up over rough stone and concrete steps and runs along larchwood benches, parents ambling behind, hands in pockets.

The north side of the park is bounded by low brick commercial buildings, the east by sturdy 1930s brick social housing, the west by unimaginative but serviceable new-build apartment blocks clad in brick slips, and on the south by the high granite wall of a former debtors' prison. This area of Dublin is known as the Liberties, a name that dates to the middle ages and refers to the freedom to govern given to the local abbey. The freedoms here allowed polluting industries like prostitution and theater to thrive. In the seventeenth century, the site now occupied by Bridgefoot Street Park was used to store animal waste, and a nearby street was once known as Dunghill Lane. Poverty flourished, as evidenced by the debtors' prison, but so did innovation driven by immigrants. French Huguenots fleeing Catholic persecution built a burgeoning textile trade and contributed to the area's scrappy vitality, still very much in evidence today. Small local shops cram nearby Meath Street and the park itself is full of repurposed materials.

As building architects recalibrate their practices to address the necessity of privileging adaptive reuse over erasure and rebuild, landscape architects can showcase a model that has long been our stock-in-trade. Our work is by definition adaptive reuse. No site is virgin: There is always a larger and pre-existing context. Ecologies and natural processes and forces are always encountered in motion and over time, as are social and cultural factors. Development processes tend to treat sites, capital expenditure, and project timescales as discrete and bounded, which obviates a smooth

transition from design and build to management and maintenance. In landscapes, adaptive reuse both a reinvention of existing structures and materials and an evolving relationship.

In recent years, landscape architects have found creative ways to extend and enrich their involvement with landscape projects as they grow and change. Often this requires a pro bono investment of time and energy, as with Estudí Martí Franch's Girona Shores project, a collaboration with maintenance teams to transform a city, the results of which made the case for further landscape investment by the municipality (see *LAM* January 2017), or West 8's work on Maximapark in Utrecht, which nurtured a large project and community participation over a decade despite long periods of erratic public and private investment (see *LAM* July 2014). Dermot Foley Landscape Architects (DFLA) has likewise worked beyond and extended the brief at Bridgefoot Street Park.

The sun is struggling to peek through grey clouds when Foley arrives to show me around the park and we climb the highest of the hillocks together for an overview. A path spirals to the top, starting at the base from an equipped play area and looping the long way around to the top of the slide. . Dublin had been blanketed by an unexpected late snowstorm so the ground is saturated and cold. We slip and slide our way to the top of the hill in mud-slick grass. "On sunny days people compete for the hilltops," Foley tells me, so it's not just children who find the mounds attractive.

Waste has been a defining feature of the park's past from its days as a dung heap to two generations of community gardens, characterized by a make-do-and-mend aesthetic. Waste and repurposed materials, continues to form its creation in ways that are part of Foley's and DFLA's developing philosophy and practices. Where once animal waste was heaped, now the heaps are formed of soil gathered during the grading of the site and from other found materials. Shoring up the outside of the hillocks, and providing significant visual interest and texture, are various materials sourced from elsewhere in the city. These are classified as secondary raw materials rather than waste—and their form remains largely unchanged except for some smoothing off of sharp or rough corners and edges that might cause injury. Great chunks of concrete, repurposed kerbstones, "antique" granite, even old concrete planters are recruited into the design. "If the council was breaking up a path nearby, the materials would be brought in," he says. It creates, he says, a "craft of dismantling.". In his book, *Chronologies of Practice*, Foley wrote of this project, "this processing included a hunt for materials, a selection of materials, a putting together of materials, a refining of the tactile qualities of materials by grinding, a crushing of materials and a mixing of crushed materials, a layering of materials to different depths, a seeding of materials, a watering of materials, and now a management of the vegetation that has emerged on those materials."

Mismatched materials come into harmony on the site, and contrast is also key to the unity of the planting design. As we slip down from the top of the hillock back to the spiral path, we cling to conifers on the way down. These are rough Larch trees, “a brute forestry tree no one would expect to see in a public space,” says Foley. They are interspersed with golden willows “used for contrast and striking color,” as well as providing a bit of cosmopolitan sophistication as interplay with the working-class Larches. Larch wood is used on the carefully finished benches, which continue this smooth/rough contrast with the secondary raw materials in the material palette. The planting is also complemented with a loose circle of spring flowering trees like Magnolias. This ring of trees will swim into focus each year when in flower, then merge once again with the other greenery. We take a short cut on the descent along a desire line, which has been formalized with a layer of grit. Desire lines are welcome, Foley tells me, and they will be incorporated as they appear.

Back down on the main paths, organically shaped concrete pads began as crystalline forms in the design, which, like many of the stones and concrete chunks on the site, have had their rough and sharp edges ground down. Foley says that the eroded crystalline forms, which “reflect the unknown character of the materials that will arrive on site,” become a symbol for the project—not diamonds in the rough, but roughened diamonds. These comprise the hard paving and are strewn with crushed brick and green glass, not a waste product either, but rather classified as “defective material” and ripe for reuse. These give warmth and a bit of sparkle to the light-colored surface. There is an abundance of other secondary raw materials at work here too. A stonemason was employed to make use of various unlikely bricks and pavers brought into the site—even 1980s-vintage concrete bricks, now desperately unfashionable, are worked into the design with curious success. Many gaps are left and have been allowed to fill with adventitious plants—not rewilding, exactly, but a trusting sort of abandonment. “Abandonment,” says Foley, “is about abandoning certain practices, not places or people.”

Crafting dismantling and encouraging abandonment and wildness required building trust in the community, with the builders, and with the city. The maintenance regimes brought into the site also required a different approach to management. Some weeding takes place, but only to remove stinging nettles or to blaze through with a weed-whacker, leaving organic residue in place. Other “weeds” are allowed to flourish in low nutrient soils into which quarry dust has been incorporated. The site’s flora is encouraged through regularly disturbing the ground, and the pulling of nettles becomes part of this. To allay any skepticism and to build the required maintenance skills, DFLA built a trial garden to demonstrate planting, maintenance, and the placement of secondary raw

materials as part of the design. This encouraged a conversation about the park emerge among park staff, residents of the nearby social housing, and the diverse and more affluent community that has changed the area, and which also has, perhaps, been the greatest driver for the "wild" aesthetic and encouragement of biodiversity at Bridgefoot Street.

Foley has been encouraging and facilitating a set of landscape relations that will continue to develop over time in urban space to the greatest advantage of all. Intrigued by the unusual methods for tending the vegetation on the site, I ask if there is "some kind of bonkers maintenance manual that talks about it." "Unfortunately no," Foley laughs, "It's kind of partly in my head at the moment. He says the planting contractor has had their contract extended "The same two people—the ones pulling the nettles—know the place really well." Foley walks through the park twice a day and talks to them, and keeps in regular contact with the client, Dublin City Council, as well. "So we're building up an informal oral history of the maintenance of the place." He intends eventually to create a specifications and guidance. "If we don't get the maintenance methods right, it will become a monoculture of grasses and nettles, and you will lose biodiversity."

DFLA's work at Bridgefoot Street Park brings many long-standing discussions about landscape architectural practice into focus. There is a need for a long-term engagement with the site on the part of the landscape architect and all the participants and community members, which current budgeting and procurement practices militate against. There is a commitment to building skills and investing in maintenance—indeed with understanding that maintenance often is not just something that must be funded for the future, but that it is also an important part of design practices that seek to work more closely with existing site processes.

DFLA's model at Bridgefoot Street also reaches outside the site boundaries to ask more of practices of dismantling and salvaging as part of a city's material ecologies and maintenance regimes. It's a waste-not-want-not approach that more and more is a requirement of sustainable and regenerative practice. But a public commitment to maintenance and management as well as building those skills and knowledge into municipal scheduling, budgeting, training, and education is required. Importantly here, too, is building in a level of trust between client, landscape architect, construction firms, and maintenance staff that goes well beyond contractual principles to become a shared ethic.

A final question that arises has to do with context. Rougher, wilder sites are usually more biodiverse and ecologically functional. Here in the wild and woolly Liberties, the aesthetic feels right, and

particularly in line with the values of the new generation moving in. A dynamic neighborhood with a rough and ready park designed to take the hard knocks of heavy use is a great place to try these techniques. How such aesthetics can be introduced into more patrician parts of town where formal landscapes are *de rigueur* is an exciting and challenging question, and we can look to the deeply thoughtful and roughly beautiful work of Dermot Foley Landscape Architects for this in the future.

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