

# NatureRx



Bumble Bee Monitoring in Liffine Territory - Recording species in an abandoned field on the Royal Canal at Broombridge which is home to a diverse range of pollinating insects. Photo: Kaethe Burt-O'Dea

Kaethe  
Burt-O'Dea,  
Bí Urban

### A Green Prescription for North Central Dublin

The *Lifeline* is a community-led project based in North Central Dublin (NCD), advocating the importance of nature to our health and wellbeing. The final goal is to establish a territory dedicated to environmental regeneration that will connect the Botanic Gardens with the Liffey, creating a ribbon of biodiversity and fertile ground for social innovation, green enterprise and nature-based solutions.

#### Background

In 2007, the Grangegorman Development Agency (GDA) held a series of public consultations to inform the Masterplan for the new TU Dublin & HSE campus on the derelict St. Brendan's Hospital site. The hospital was originally designed as an asylum for the vulnerable, set in a carefully considered landscape, promoting nature as therapy. This history became more complex as care models for the mentally ill evolved and the use of psychiatry and chemical based treatments took precedence. The potential of this fascinating wild landscape, abundant with biodiversity, sparked the imagination of Stoneybatter resident Kaethe Burt-O'Dea.

Kaethe used the consultations to document needs expressed by the community for pocket parks, sensory gardens, local food production, a car free campus with areas devoted to outdoor exercise and opportunities for life-long learning. An opportunity to combine both public and private needs in the development of a sustainable exemplar emerged. Unfortunately, the demands of the building programme made it impossible to accommodate this grand vision within the confines of the site.

#### The *Lifeline*

It was the critical need to provide public transportation to the campus that led us to rediscover the disused Great Midwestern Railway (GMWR). This wasteland opened up exciting potential to the community. We could develop the public amenity we dreamed of, one that would combine green infrastructure with an inter-modal transportation and a living laboratory where TU Dublin could study the benefits of nature in the city, a *Lifeline* for NCD.

During 50 years of rewilding, the cutting had spontaneously developed an extraordinary array of environmental services for the city. It had slowly evolved into an ecological corridor hosting species rarely found in urban environments, filtering air, composting waste, diverting run-off and purifying water.

The *Lifeline* will preserve and build on what nature had developed.

In 2009, Kaethe presented the *Lifeline* to TU Dublin Sustainable Development students which launched a programme of multidisciplinary research under the Students Learning with Communities Programme (SLWC), led by Dr. Catherine Bates. A two-year study of the natural assets was conducted along the GMWR cutting with Ecologist Mary Tubridy to argue for the preservation of this stretch of rare urban biodiversity. 50 Architecture Students produced plans to incorporate the community's vision into the territory. The *Lifeline* was presented at several international conferences. 'Introducing the *Lifeline* (Dublin, 2010), a public seminar held in collaboration with TU Dublin, the GDA, the Environmental Protection Agency, Dublin City Council and Transport for Ireland (TFI), attracted over 100 participants.

In 2013, the GMWR cutting was transferred to TFI for the Luas Cross City to provide essential public transportation. Having conducted an in-depth analysis of this unique inner-city landscape, we were acutely aware of what had been lost to the NCD community.

#### Building the Community

Despite this set back, our commitment to establish a partnership with nature in the city remained strong. In the same year the *Lifeline* won a Guinness Projects Award, providing business training and funding to set up a limited company. We also began beekeeping and became intrigued by their organisational strategies and consensus decision making. We wondered if these processes could be used to guide public participation in urban design and planning.

In 2015, we hosted an International Action Science Workshop at TU Dublin to develop a new direction for the project. The two-day workshop partnered beekeepers with artists, academics, professionals, social workers, and NCD residents to examine the question: 'Are Bees leading us toward responsible urban design and health in our cities?'

Three important outcomes emerged from this workshop:

- A new site for the *Lifeline* – The former Royal Canal route from Broombridge into Broadstone through Blessington Basin.
- BÍ URBAN – A nature-based social enterprise and hub dedicated to community led development of the *Lifeline* in Stoneybatter, NCD. The studio accommodates a shop, workshop & exhibition space, resource library, and product development lab. Since its opening in 2016 BÍ URBAN has become a fertile ground for social innovation, green enterprise and nature-based solutions.
- NatureRX – With the support of GDA '...the lives we live' Grangegorman Public Art, we developed a programme which engages the public in the *Lifeline*. NatureRX workshops invite the NCD community to use creative processes to explore, map and document their personal connection with nature in the city.

#### 2020 Vision

One positive outcome of COVID-19 has been the reawakening of our relationship with the natural world and its importance to community health and wellbeing. The pandemic has asked us to revisit the utopian model of nature as cure which originally shaped the St. Brendan's Hospital site. The initial two kilometre movement restrictions were comparable to the foraging radius of a honeybee from its colony. Similar to the bees, urban residents developed expert knowledge of their local green spaces and the sanctuary they offer.

We are all citizen scientists in a global action research project. Health is the subject, the community our lab and human behaviour the instrument. Our relationship with nature is intrinsic to the solution.

Bi Urban Bee Stewardship Workshop Series – Natural Beekeeping  
with Tanguy de Toulg ot of Dunmore Country School. Photo: Kaethe Burt-O'Dea



Understanding and nurturing biodiversity is as essential to the physical and mental health of inner-city residents as it is to the future of our pollinators.

Work-life balance and its impact on climate is a key element in the study. How we learn, socialise, travel, shop, care for each other, everything we do is under scrutiny including the function and meaning of employment itself. Connecting nature, people and place is being prioritised by local authorities who are making rapid infrastructural changes to facilitate walking and cycling, demonstrating that change is possible, and at a faster pace than we previously believed. The outdoors has become our classroom.

The *Lifeline* is a think tank where individuals and groups explore these issues and trial solutions through local action. Bi Urban is its hub, run by a collective of volunteers and collaborators. Skills are shared and all contributors have value, whatever their background or discipline. Everyone has an essential role to play in how we want to live in cities going forward.

#### Biography

Nestled in the heart of Stoneybatter, Bi URBAN is a unique creative studio, founded by artist environmentalist and healthcare design consultant Kaethe Burt-O'Dea. Kaethe has won numerous awards including a TU Dublin Community Fellowship and an RIBA Award.

More recently her work was recognised by Diageo when she won the Arthur Guinness Projects Award for the *LIFELINE*, a 'living laboratory' exploring the collaborative regeneration of the urban environment with community health and public engagement as a central tenet. In 2016 she established Bi URBAN, a studio for social creativity, prominently positioned on the main street of Stoneybatter to act as a hub for the development of this project.

Bi URBAN represents the next stage of an ambitious strategy to build the *LIFELINE*, an outdoor classroom devoted to the study of nature in the inner city that will connect the Botanic Gardens to Phoenix Park, creating a ribbon of biodiversity and fertile ground for social innovation, green enterprise and nature-based solutions.

Many incredible people, businesses and organisations have generously contributed time, expertise and financial support to Lifeline. It is impossible to thank everyone individually here. We would like to use this special opportunity to publicly acknowledge the Grangegorman Development Agency as a catalyst for our vision, TU Dublin Students Learning With Communities Programme for facilitating an exciting programme of multidisciplinary research, and North Central Dublin for embracing our ambition.

#### Links

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TU Dublin is Ireland's centre of excellence for community based learning. The Grangegorman Project is linking education with healthcare on a single site, creating the perfect environment for restructuring urban design and planning strategies. Now that we have established our studio, community and network, we ask you to partner with us as we map and activate the *Lifeline*, a living laboratory where we can prototype, evaluate and construct a sustainable future.

#### The Bi Team

NatureRX Natural Treasure Jewellery Workshop in progress. Participants are introduced to the folklore and medicinal properties of local plant species and immortalise them in precious metal. Photo: Kaethe Burt-O'Dea

