

TITLE: Are We Suppressants?

WRITTEN PIECE:

We are subconsciously familiar with the fire hydrant on our streets and the purpose they hold to save life when our firefighters connect their hoses. The red hydrant is as familiar as the red postbox, a red telephone box, the black bin and the Belfast black taxi. Belfast's own Bank Buildings fire of 2018, saw the Fire Service plug their hoses into the River Farset via a manhole cover in Castle Place to douse the fire with river water. Evident in times of crisis, this was useful until it reached low tide and the historic building was sprayed with mud.

The hydrant is an outdoor connection and life-saving system which can provide a high volume of water connection for fire fighters tackling active and escalated blazes. Contrary to this, suppressant systems akin to sprinklers and misters are automatic, localized systems to detect and control a fire at its source. Also the portable devices like the fire extinguisher which require human intervention; and all of which utilise water in different textures and forms. These differing textures of output represent the life systems we require within our built environment. Visually an outdoor water feature, the installation is a representation of all systems that aid our safety. We need water.

Due to an already fully capacitated water network, it is crucial for this to operate self-sufficiently. Powered by energy exerted by the user via the mechanical hand pump adds to the two fold narrative of the installation. Interacting with the installation, a user can choose between three "taps" which connect to three different outlets. Opening these will distribute water once the mechanical hand pump has been turned. This mechanism draws the water up from the collector at the base and water releases from the outlets. The more outlets and taps that are opened and with the turning of the wheel, the less water is released as the pressure drops - reflective of the more water users put strain on the system, ultimately, the less we will get in return. On the other hand, opening one tap and turning the mechanical hand pump, will distribute a lot more concentrated water - reflective of us giving energy to the "environment" and our "waterways", will give back in return. This concentrated flow will also water the vegetation in planters below, prolonging life. These taps are representative of our exhausted system.

Historically the built environment of Belfast has redirected water courses, to hide and conceal the inner workings of the city. Showing a hint of pipework in between the timbers is subtly making these visible. Seeing creates understanding and bringing these to the forefront. We tend to forget that we are all part of a bigger network. Pipes pop up into our homes, with connections hidden behind plasterboard, and it is easy to turn the taps and overuse what we have. Education is key to understanding that small changes start with ourselves. This micro installation shows the user the impacts of more than one move by one person. By choosing to site the installation raised above ground, brings the invisible infrastructure - the pipe work below the ground - into the light and making visible the inner workings. Likewise the rainwater collection brought to the fore with Sustainable Urban Drainage Systems (SuDS) working in tandem; rainwater garden with permeable paving and seating. A combination of source control and conveyance.

Furthermore, the colour coding to these vital systems - particularly fire hydrants - are visual indicators for the Fire Service and to avoid misunderstanding in emergencies. In order to retain this purely as a 'functioning' art installation, the proposed material palette is that of the natural

environment itself. Carefully crafted and locally sourced timbers, minimising wastage by using full cuts where possible to keep costs low. Cataloguing of materials and wood timbers can allow for carbon tracking to negate a potential negative footprint. Utilising salvage yards and recycling centres for sourcing and rejuvenating, this project can be forward thinking in how we source, redefine and repurpose otherwise wasted material.

The design allows for it to be scalable from location to location, with the potential for multiple iterations throughout the city. Recreation throughout the city adjacent to other notable invisible rivers would serve as nodes of reflection. Although a new location could be proposed, Bankmore Square [Fig.1] seems timely and appropriate. A green space within the southern part of the city that has very recently been restored with outdoor furniture and landscaping to boost its potential as a usable and accessible space for the public. The proposed site sits above and next to, the Blackstaff River - one of Belfast's largely invisible rivers. Rerouted in the 1690's to make way for further building in Belfast, it later was dubbed the "greatest eyesore in town" when became dirty and polluted in the late 1800's and was subsequently covered up to permit further development within the city.

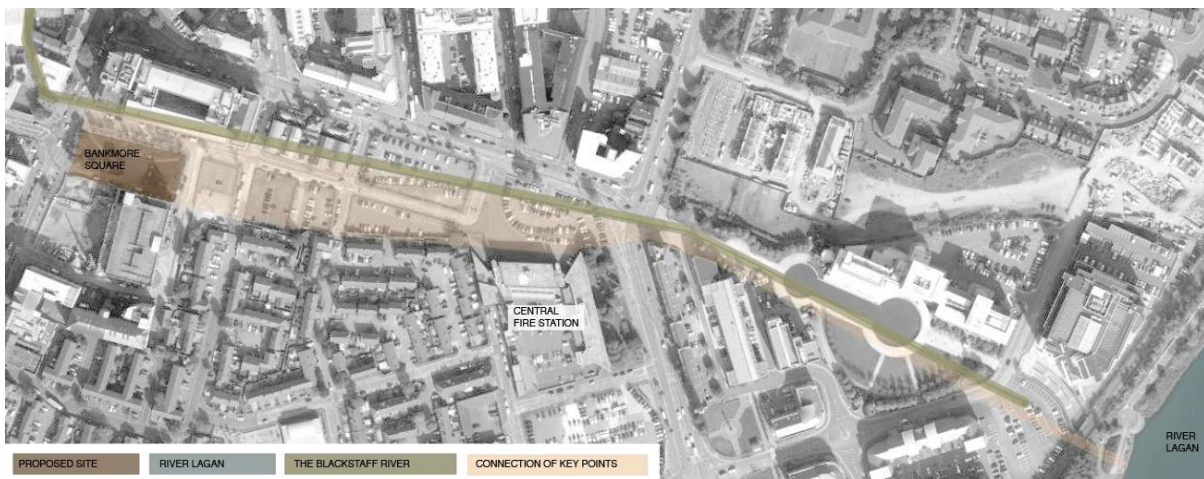


Fig.1

As a public outdoor installation, it serves to benefit the community and show how water can be better integrated into our urban environment;

- As a PLAY space - family and children interactivity
- As a REST space - integration of seating
- As a MEETING space - helpful wayfinding tool
- As a THINKING space – greenery improves health and wellbeing and reduces carbon
- As a SAFE space - utilised as a vehicle mitigation device

The reality in Belfast is, housing shortages cannot be tackled by tapping further into a system at capacity, new infrastructure needs to collect and give back. With the new SuDS bill taking steps forward, it's a start. But any new installation, MUST NOT strain the system, it must only benefit it.

Are we suppressants? Are we damaging our environment and globe? Is it in turn going to damage us? The more we take, the less we get? The more we give back, the more we will benefit? Our HEALTH, our LIFE – are we a tap turn away from irrefutable damage?