

LAGANSIDE

BELFAST SONIC POETRY APP

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It seems all too easy to criticise Belfast's tired looking Langanside development, perhaps this is because it's all too easy to forget how bad the post-industrial wasteland the banks of the Lagan were in the late eighties. It's also easy to forget how incredible the aspirations of the Laganside Corporation were, given that it formed almost a decade before the Good Friday Agreement.

A new smartphone app called 'Laganside' highlights this dichotomy, enabling users to engage with this at times forsaken area; an area where Belfast's aspirations, past, present and future, are made flesh. Developed by PhD music student John D'Arcy, the app was launched on Culture Night 2012.

Taking on and surpassing the recent sonic arts trend in 'digitised relational maps using embedded media,' 'Laganside' makes use of the contemporary epic poem of the same name, with a great reading by voice over artist Patrick FitzSymons. D'Arcy explains the reasons for choosing this particular piece by Belfast poet

Alan Gillis. "Laganside doesn't name particular places, but you know where he's talking about, or you think you know and make your own connections based on your experience of Belfast, your personal history of it." The app makes the academic fields of the sonic arts and poetry immediate and accessible, allowing the user to bridge the gap between the text and the space to which it refers.

The app's unique design, by visual artist Gerard Carson, makes use of the smart phone's 'geo-location' ability to track the user's position along a three mile walk hugging the river. As the user approaches specific areas 'soundscapes' are triggered. A flurry of distorted music, sound effects and barely audible voices heightens the experience and lends further weight to both poem and locale. "The poem remains the same," John explains, "but depending on your location your experience of it differs." There are a number of other poems which can only be 'collected' by visiting locations along the route, something which should lend the app longevity, and perhaps suggesting that further routes could be added in the future.

The first soundscape I experienced

was located at a platform jutting out into the river immediately behind the Waterfront Hall. As I ascended the short ramp to the platform a frenzy of noise overwhelmed me and the previously jovial voice in my ear took on a sinister air. I stood overlooking the river; several seagulls lined up along the steel balustrade eyed me resentfully before one by one taking off toward the lough; a train glided gently over the water; the city loomed behind. I felt consumed by sound, the rhythm of the verse and my environment.

The meandering cadence of the poem, which describes a

man's walk along the regenerated riverfront with his 'better half,' gradually builds towards an understated yet profound climax. "Leaving me to find our way back to the streets, knowing I'll never leave here, or come back again." Fighting back the lump in my throat, the words resonated so strongly. From the grit and filth of the late eighties Belfast has surpassed itself, moving so fast the city is at times hard to recognise. The Laganside area is the embodiment of Belfast's decline and regeneration; a city which never fails to impress and disappoint in equal measure.



'Laganside - Belfast Sonic Poetry App' is available for free on iTunes for iOS and Google Play for Android.

