

Launch of No 12 Fire Station Artists' Studios on 26th June 2014

Transcript of President Michael D. Higgins' Speech

I'm absolutely delighted to be here on this celebratory occasion. May I begin by saying that I am so pleased to have been asked by Clodagh Kenny to come here to the Fire Station Artists' Studios and I thank you for your very generous welcome. It's a very important occasion – the expansion of an innovative and inspiring cultural space.

In relation to the studios, 21 years is a long time. I can't say I didn't feel it passing. I remember back in 1996 when I was Minister for the Arts and visiting artist's accommodation in Cork actually, and I visited the Sculpture Factory down there. Somebody said to me at the time "all this money that is being spent on the arts, it'll all go to create white elephants". Well happily things worked out very well for the facilities that were provided back then. And to encourage the Minister for State who is here today, it was €132 million that was provided altogether and that was money very well spent. That time we were also assisted by the European Union which provided additional funding.

I think there's a lesson in all of this. If you have the opportunity you should take it in relation to leaving a legacy of facilities in communities. So this year then the Fire Station Studios are celebrating their 21st anniversary and there's so much to celebrate. The talented artists who have resided in here, who visited or have been supported by this space since its establishment, include such names as Alice Maher, Sean Hillen, and Patrick Graham. Important work. And not only did those gifted artists benefit from the studios, but I believe the Irish public have benefited. **I think for those that are seeking to create, or to bring concepts and characters to life, to build a memorable imagery, whether through words or music or visual art, the need for a quiet place for creativity, for formation of one's artistic instinct brought to delivery; a space where ideas can take hold and incubate and grow to fruition is an extremely important one.** And it was a recognition of that need which led to the reimagining of this former Fire Station, and a crafting of a living and working space, for not only Irish artists, but also those who came here from abroad to explore and to develop their creative talents in a spirit of community and togetherness.

Infrastructure of art

I also think that there is an assumption that there's something wonderful about artists being poor. It is not a necessary condition for the finest artists to be poor or to be insecure. In fact I remember before I became Minister for the Arts, back in the 1980s, it wasn't unusual for me to get messages from poets, one of whom I clearly remember, to say to come over because the electric was being cut off. And I also remember some very significant concert pianists who needed the money sent in advance to pay for the train when they came to perform at a concert. They stayed - not just for the performance -but for the few days afterwards as well to build up their nutrition. There's no point in re-imagining that that wasn't the case, and there was nothing glorious about it. It is just wonderful now that in fact we have spent 21 years here in such wonderful recognition of what in fact helps, and what is appropriate. **I think the creation of conscious spaces that allow for experimentation but also diversity and which provide the breathing space to pause and think and act, is a very essential infrastructure for all art.**

As well as that, I do believe I've heard a number of speeches spoken about the models that have descended upon us and are being imposed upon us, and I believe that artists are always ahead in recognising the disordered nature of the everyday, or the inevitabilities that are normally taken for granted. **Artists can address the confused complexity of the human psyche in conception and design and formation. To have time and space to do that here is wonderful.**

'Community' and 'Creativity'

When people are using words, I remember we were just coming out of the abuse of the word 'community' 21 years ago. Everything was 'community'; 'The European Community', there was Community Action, there was 'community this' and 'community that', to the point where the word almost couldn't be used validly for a while. But of course we know what community is - it is solidarity and sharing and being the sharer for our abilities. But we're now actually in a new era ... there's a new word that's flying around and that's the word 'creativity'. Sometimes it's called 'innovation' if you're in economic circles. But creativity was a big debate. I remember one of the newspapers writing about an art initiative I was supporting when I was the Minister for Arts. *"The Minister is talking about every child being creative when we all know that there are some people without an ounce of creativity in them"*. That was written around that time when we were providing art facilities around the country. The other part of it was, it was around the same time the people would say...about piano lessons... *"The piano will stand to her!"*.

I think in relation to creativity, there is such thing as genius and there is such a thing as excellence but you don't have to decide that creativity is for the few. It is for everyone. And I think that often, it is said that if every child had the opportunity of access to a musical instrument and if every child was able to swim and if every child was able to read, what a wonderful preparation it is for participation in society. I think that it's also in spaces like that that allow artists the freedom. Freedom doesn't mean anything unless you're really free in both a positive and negative sense to choose. **Discussing creativity and culture and the economy and the connection between them has to be part of a democratic discourse and there is nothing enormously abstract about it.** It is about the fact that everyone is capable of appreciating beauty as they see it.

Creativity and Culture

Since the global recession, some people have become fascinated by what's being termed 'the creative industries' because in recent years the creative industries have had a 12% growth rate, which is higher than every other sector in the global economy. **After people in fact imagined that we could grow rich by selling houses to each other, and when it all fell apart, people started to say, "Well maybe there's something around this creative industry idea, we'll rattle that bag". But it's more important than that. Creativity and culture is about rights. It's about the right to be able to participate fully, whether you're employed or unemployed, for everybody to participate fully in society.** And that's why it is important that you have public libraries, that you have public spaces and where it's important for people in these circumstances we're now in, to claim back the public world. I drew heavily here on Ciaran Benson's work 21 years ago in the 1990s, and I saw very well that if there was a choice to be made that was a policy decision. These kind of things we do in relation to creativity and culture they're not residuals – that you do it when you can afford it. I remember when we were creating jobs in the film industry, some of my political competitors would say *"but that's only in the arts"*. The idea was

as well that there was something wrong about artists being able to walk down the street like everybody else without their clothes falling off them.

The Infrastructure of citizenship

So the fact of the matter is the public world is important and art is making an enormous contribution to it. Those who have facilities for artists are very important. It's a part of the infrastructure of citizenship. And I think as well - getting practical about it - because we had to show what value for money we were giving, in those 4 or 5 years, and we had assessments done, we found that for example at a ratio of about 3:1 there was a better multiplier effect from the money that was spent on arts and film than there was in other areas of activities. But I believe myself that where it has lasted best is where we in fact provided for the citizens, and the whole level of artistic activity goes up, be it in relation to music, literature, theatre and visual arts. And then the whole community reaps all of the benefits from this. I think that is very important, because it is intergenerational as well. Culture can never be a residual of the marketplace.

The spaces which facilitate artistic practices are taking on the components of the society because it's very important as well, that we be able, through arts and culture, to look at the transformation and re-crafting of the society that is necessary. I was speaking yesterday at my 'Ethics in Business' event. It's an incredible assumption to say that people of their nature are instinctively selfish. That they seek only what is for themselves and so forth. This is like the old arguments as to whether a slave had a soul. It's an incredibly narrow view. It's also a view that is not based or supported by any study of any serious kind. The fact of the matter is it's as old as anything else. **We're entitled not just to exist, but we're entitled to play and to imagine and to live.** I think therefore, these facilities here, they provide an opportunity for the creation of life-affirming, caring, creative, reflective societies. And it adds to the importance of libraries, performing venues, creative spaces. I see these facilities as really infrastructure for a flourishing society.

I want to say that it is a confirmation for me, whenever I meet people in this community, of the innate creativity, the imagination and resourcefulness that lies in the heart of so many communities across the country. In these studios already for 21 years, the arts have been brought into the heart of everyday living. I think that they're being linked to community and into the everyday, in a space that is a place of everyone. No more than poverty is not being essential for a great artist, insecurity isn't necessary either to make a start. To be free, to be able to concentrate and focus on what it is that one wants to do, is very important for an artist. Also not to have to make a product that will validate what they do on a daily basis but rather contribute a body of work over time. It means you're not getting it today or tomorrow, but it will be delivered in time to future generations. The artists' studios here will free artists to make a contribution that will last into the future. I want to congratulate all those who've been involved over the 21 years, and to say what a proud testimony the success of the Fire Station Artists' Studios is there already. I commend you for that.