

# Knitted Flood Wall

## Initiating Political Entanglement through a Socially Engaged Participatory Art Project

Martina O'Brien

[martinaobrien.com](http://martinaobrien.com)



The Knitted Flood Wall, 2012, was a socially engaged participatory art project initiated by Irish Visual Artist Martina O'Brien in collaboration with The Ballsbridge Dodder Residents Association, Dublin. It was founded in the aftermath of the flooding of the River Dodder, Dublin, Ireland, 24 October 2011. The project witnessed the creation of a 45 feet long x 8 feet wide (13.7 x 2.4m) knitted replica floodwall which visually mapped the river's velocity flow and took participants six months to complete. This collaboration explored how art within the public realm can give a society a voice, how it can be utilized as an accessible language in which to mediate awareness of an issue, how it can act to gain political engagement and how it can create disaster risk reduction by pre-emption and anticipatory action.

## A History of Floods

The Dodder is one of the three main rivers in Dublin, Ireland, and has a history of flooding. The river originates on the northern slopes of the Kippure in the Dublin Mountains, and its course flows through the city before meeting The Irish Sea. Because of its steep gradient, the Dodder quickly responds to rainstorms and is known as a flashy river. In the past it has broken its banks on many occasions, causing serious damage and occasionally loss of life. The earliest references of these occurrences trace back to 1620 when it was recorded that "Some houses were swept down and many cellars and warehouses laid under water". "It [the flood] made a great havoc, carrying away banks, trees, ditches, hedges and the mill." Again, in 1754 another flood was recorded that "exceeds anything that can be remembered. Many cattle and people died and boats drove into the sea. Dublin resembled a place which had experienced all of the calamities of war. The River Dodder appeared like a sea." (Blacker, 1860)

One of the most recent severe floods prior to 2011 occurred on 25 August 1986 when Ireland was hit by the costliest tropical cyclone of the 1986 Atlantic hurricane season – Hurricane Charley. This historic event destroyed thousands of properties in the city and caused initial concern for the on-going safety of residents. Unfortunately, as often seen in similar instances, these efforts faded as quickly as the water retracted.

O'Brien moved into an area along the River Dodder in 2004 and became familiar with local narratives surrounding past floods. She also became aware that the elderly population in the area had lived with a sense of fear and anxiety for 60, 70 and in some cases 80 years, which resulted in them developing an exceptionally bitter-sweet relationship with the Dodder. Upon living through the 2011 flood herself and witnessing not only her home, contents and belongings destroyed by the deluge but also her neighbours' homes, she felt that something could be done to bring light to the vulnerability of her community's situation.

## Collecting the Threads

In early 2012 O'Brien began working on developing the idea of knitting a collaborative floodwall. The concept of utilizing knitting as a medium to create this artwork came about from conversa-

tions with residents; the act of situating wool – with its soft nature – outside in a concrete space seemed a fitting gesture. In addition to this, the aspect of comfort associated with yarn seemed to add to its suitability.

From the outset, she had a number of aims and objectives for the art project; firstly, it had to articulate the need for an immediate installation of a flood defence wall. Secondly, it was to be a genuinely collaborative and participatory project involving residents who had been directly affected by the flood. Thirdly, it was to enable a dialogue and a stronger bond within the community. She was also interested in the importance of a participatory project from a psychological perspective and felt that working together might help to strengthen the communities' interactions. Finally, it was to involve the making of a replica velocity map, taken from the Catchment Flood Risk Assessment and Management (CFRAMS) study of the River Dodder (see map on the following spread). By doing so, it allowed the artwork to become a vehicle with which to open up a conversation with local authorities and governmental bodies.

The Catchment Flood Risk Assessment and Management (CFRAMS) is the medium to long-term strategy for the reduction and management of flood risk in Ireland and delivers on core components of the National Flood Policy, adopted in 2004, and on the requirements of the EU "Floods" Directive. The Office of Public Works, Dublin, is the lead agency for flood risk management in Ireland and is the national competent authority for the EU Floods Directive. Dublin City Council worked with the Office of Public Works to produce provisional studies of the River Dodder; these included a variety of models and maps. The velocity map was one of these maps and was chosen because it visually conveyed the speed of the river and highlighted the most vulnerable areas along the periphery (see following spread at the bottom right).

O'Brien and the affected community were aware that there were plans to eventually install a flood defence wall in the area through the CFRAMS programme. However, this had to run the course of planning permission being applied for and granted, ring fencing of budgets and economic pressures, all of which could have delayed the installation of a defence floodwall by years. These possible delays were a real concern to the community since, as we all know, the concept of a "one in one hundred year flood" is now becoming a very regular occurrence globally.

## Knitting a Community

Early 2012, a new residence association was set up in the area by local householders to help residents deal with local authorities, insurance companies, politicians, and government bodies. This was called the Ballsbridge Residence Association. In April 2012, O'Brien proposed the concept of The Knitted Flood Wall to the association's committee members and received a mixed response; some amused laughs, some interested supporters and some resistance by a few concerned members who felt it might be seen as a vehicle of protest; they worried that, as a group, they may be seen as trouble makers. Regardless of the feedback received, O'Brien proceeded with the concept and presented the idea at a communi-



ty meeting where she asked people to sign up. Some twenty female participants, ranging in year from twenty to seventy, committed to the project and work got under way.

Weekly meetings were held over a six-month period so that the group could knit together, develop the overall pattern and insure that the artwork followed the pattern base of the velocity map as closely as possible. Another important aspect of the meetings was that they created a space for participants to get to know each other better, talk and bond. As people shared their experiences, these collective gatherings created an intimate space to weave together a strong bond and gave participants a sense of proactive empowerment.

Once the larger community began to see the Knitted Flood Wall artwork take shape and grow both in length and momentum, the project was given support by everyone in the area.

### Constructing the Floodwall(s)

On target, the artwork was finished early October in time to mark the first anniversary of the 2011 floods and to coincide with the CFRAMS planning permission timeline. The Knitted Flood Wall was installed along the river on 20 October 2012 for a period of seven days (see photograph on the top right). The process of installing the artwork along the river itself caused its own set of difficulties and required meetings and planning permission being applied for and granted from the Dublin City Council. Both the Ballsbridge Dodder Residents Committee and the artist invited the Office of Public Work's leading engineer, politicians from both Fine Gael and the Green Party, along with the Lord Major of Dublin to officially open the artwork once it was installed. By virtue of this process, it made all parties fully aware of the community's situation and the need for the immediate installation of a flood defence wall. In addition to this, the highly visible nature of the artwork drew attention from wider society and received a great deal of coverage through all media formats both locally, nationally and internationally. On 24 October 2012, the day of the anniversary, the Ballsbridge Dodder Residents Committee asked passers-by to sign a petition in support of the cause and as a result received thousands of signatures.

In 2013 the Office of Public Works and the Dublin City Council begun CFRAMS work on a new flood defence wall in the area around Ballsbridge, Dublin, and in 2015 the works were completed. These works received no objections during the planning stage, and it was felt that the Knitted Flood Wall project aided the timely installation of the new flood defence wall on many fronts.

Following on from the Knitted Flood Wall project, O'Brien continued to explore the relationship between communities and the River Dodder in her 2015 project *Casting Territory: A Contemporary River Keepers' Index of Lesser Known Patterns*. It was a collaborative art project with the Dodder Anglers Club, Dublin, which utilized the art of fly-tying to explore the angler's unique knowledge of flora and fauna, physical geography and role as guardians of the River Dodder, Dublin, Ireland.



### References

Blackier, Rev. B.H. 2010. *Brief Sketches of the Parishes of Booterstown and Donnybrook, in the County of Dublin*. Dublin: George Herbert.

### Illustrations

Photograph on the top of opposite page and on following spread by Michael Holly.

Illustration on the bottom of opposite page: RPS Consulting Engineers, Dodder Catchment Flood Risk Assessment and Management Study, 2010, all rights reserved © Ordnance Survey Ireland. Licence Number 2010/22/CCMA/ Dublin City Council











