



Community change in East Wall: how generations and the landscape mark a community

Background

East Wall, as a docklands community of Dublin, bears many similarities with adjoining communities. Its historical links to cultural and economic traditions based on the docks has created a very specific sense of place, which many local people liken to village living rather than inner city neighbourhood living.

East Wall, like the other docklands communities, has experienced considerable change in the last thirty years. Decline of port activities and the subsequent redevelopment of the area had an impact on the urban and demographic composition of the area. Initial declining and ageing population patterns have in recent years reversed into a trend which has seen younger and more affluent families moving into the area. These changes are visible in the structure of the community, raising the question of whether they could potentially lead to divides within the docklands neighbourhoods.

Despite these recent trends, East Wall remains a unique neighbourhood. In the face of these challenges, East Wall is still a very close knit community. This is reinforced by the strong sense of place and belonging that local residents display in relation to East Wall.

What is this brief about?

This brief is based on research that focuses on the neighbourhood of East Wall in Dublin. This is an inner city area located on the north side of Dublin city. The research that we are presenting is concerned with showing different ways in which young and older generations experience and value what is still a very close knit community. Additionally, we trace some contextual features of the neighbourhood which we believe define the landscape and have an impact on community life.

Specifically, the research looks at the two distinct themes of:

1. A comparison between young and older generations of community experiences and attitudes on daily life in East Wall.
2. East Wall, a neighbourhood surrounded by the railway: key characteristics and marking events.

The research presented in this document is the result of a Citizen Researcher Training Programme run in collaboration between local residents and researchers from the National University of Ireland Galway, as a part of the 3-Cities Project. The 3-Cities Project focuses on children and youth, older people and people with disabilities and their participation in their communities and cities.

The backgrounds and individual profiles of the citizen researchers are diverse, as are their motivations. A combination of factors motivated residents to become involved in the training. These included an interest in acquiring research skills, contributing to the community life of East Wall and the opportunity to trace back and share elements of East Wall's history.

In addition to contributing to the overall participatory methodology of the project, there are also a number of important reasons why the 3-Cities Project team wanted to work with citizen researchers. These included: providing local children and youth, older people and people with disabilities with a way to contribute to the research directly; the aspiration to promote engagement with community issues at grassroots level; to help make sure the 3-Cities Project is relevant to the lives of children and youth, older people and people with disabilities; and to harness the insights of local residents on what it is like to live in their community.



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What we did

The research was developed by four local citizen researchers from East Wall in collaboration with two NUIG researchers from the 3-Cities Project. The researchers involved represented older people, people with disabilities and young people in the community.

The Citizen Researcher Training Programme encompassed three workshops which covered the main stages of research, from developing a research question, to designing a research study, to collecting data and finally, to interpreting and reporting what was found. Key issues around how to conduct research in an ethical manner were also covered in these workshops.

The 3-Cities Project aims to engage in a collaborative process to re-imagine services and communities to maximise participation for children and youth, older people, and people with disabilities in their localities and cities. The project focuses on Galway, Limerick and Dublin.

Citizen-Led Research

The citizen led research presented here is part of other research activities conducted by the 3-Cities Project team in East Wall.¹

The 3-Cities Project research involved a Collaborative Forum with key community stakeholders and local children and youth, older people and people with disabilities who identified important topics around community participation. In East Wall these topics included:

- Intergenerational community relationships
- New developments and population change.

Project 1: How do different generations perceive and interact with the local community in East Wall?

This project was carried out in order to explore how both older people and children and youth perceive community life in East Wall, across such aspects of the local community as community spaces and amenities, community supports and daily interactions in the community. Our team of local researchers itself was composed of younger and older people.

In order to carry out this piece of research two focus groups were conducted: one with local older people (seven participants); one with local young people (four participants). We developed a set of guiding questions which we used as probes in these discussions.

As part of this project we also took photos (referred to as photos elicitation in research), in order to capture some additional information.

Project 2: East Wall: urban development and change and community participation

Our research for this smaller project entailed sourcing maps and materials in order to explore the development of the unique landscape found in East Wall, and how it impacts on participation for older people, children and youth and people with disabilities in the local community. These materials also construct a historical profile of this neighbourhood and its environment.

We used the online map resource, Open Street Map Ireland, to get a perspective of the changes in the landscape of East Wall, particularly concerning the rail line.

¹ The 3-Cities Project includes dedicated focus groups with service providers and residents in the area representing the relevant groups of children and youth, older people and people with disabilities. Other methods entailed discussion of themes in a collaborative forum and in-depth data collection using Experiential and Lifecourse interview methodologies.



What we found out

Project 1: How community is valued and experienced: a comparative intergenerational perspective

The findings highlight that there are commonalities in the way both generations of residents perceive community life in East Wall. Furthermore this comparative study also shows that there are a number of interesting contrasts in the way people from different generations perceive community.

1. Community Spaces



Figure 1. A focal point of community interaction in East Wall, St Mary's Road, East Wall. Dublin.

Our focus group discussion with the older generation and the younger generation shows that both groups identified the Sean O'Casey Community Centre as a main community space in East Wall. However, opinion and perceptions of this space differed.

The older generation communicated a great appreciation for the space and the range of services that it provides.

The younger generation was more critical of this space. The community centre was seen to be a place for either young children or older generations.



Figure 2 Youth based community services, Strangford Road, Dublin 3.

Sports and the theatre at the Centre were identified as two potential focal points for younger people; however, the general impression amongst the younger participants was that the Centre is not for them. They would very seldom use the facilities available.

Other spaces such as the Youth club were mentioned, but these were also seen to provide for a specific group of younger children (up to 13 years old).

Older people also demonstrated greater satisfaction with the range of community services provided.



Figure 4. One of the central areas of community life, Church Road Dublin 3.

Again it was noted by the younger group that while there is a rich variety of services, and some amenities, for young children and older people, there was little for people of their age group, apart from sports activities.

2. Community informal supports

We asked both groups whether they felt they could access help and support in case of an emergency or if they were looking for information about a local issue. Both groups felt very confident that they could avail of local support in case of need. Everyone felt they could call upon their neighbours and local friends for supports.

When speaking of community supports with regards to taking part in local initiatives, there were concerns raised by one older participant concerning lower attendance at local initiatives such as jumble sales and charity events.

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3. Daily Community interactions

Both groups consider the neighbourhood to be very friendly and acknowledge that there are good intergenerational relationships among neighbours. These include new families with young children, older people and teenagers. The term 'village' was used by many of the older participants to describe a close bond and strong sense of place attached to East Wall and the community.

A few people identified some barriers in terms of improving these relationships due to changing lifestyles which have made it more difficult for people to engage with neighbours and local initiatives.

Two older people also highlighted that community interactions are less spontaneous and are usually facilitated through more formalised activities, which might prevent new people from taking part. This means that people rely more often on community spaces and organised activities for their daily interactions in the community and engage less often with the community through unplanned interactions.

Both groups highlight the significance of social media and technology in the way young people take part and interact with each other and the community. It is seen as both an obstacle but also an opportunity to promote participation and inclusion of everyone in the community.

Project 2: East Wall: urban development and change and community participation

East Wall has a unique urban landscape. This area of Dublin, along with adjacent dockland neighbourhoods, form part of a stretch of land that was re-claimed from the sea in the eighteen hundreds. These land reclamation activities were prompted by the considerable growth of dock related industry. The layout of the area is also deeply affected by the construction of main roads and the railway system, which grew in parallel with the dockland industries.

Some locals in East Wall still recall how the area was popularly named 'mud island' and had a reputation at the time as a meeting point for smugglers. The physical characteristics of East Wall help explain why 'mud island' was used as a term to mark out this area of Dublin. Said to resemble 'island living' the area is relatively shut out from adjacent neighbourhoods. This inner city community is geographically bounded by the River Liffey, the Tolka River and the sea. Another significant feature is the rail line which completely surrounds the west and south part of the neighbourhood.

Figure 5 is a recent map of East Wall which shows how rail line is a prominent feature in the landscape. Main thoroughfares such as East Wall road also further enclose the area.

With increased population growth and development along the years, including the subsequent decline in port activities, the local community has experienced growing pressures. East wall was, and remains, an industrial neighbourhood which emerged from urban and economic growth in Dublin. Emerging industries in this area have led to increased redevelopment of disused dockland sites and the construction of high rise office buildings and apartments.



Fig 5. East Wall Map. Source: Open StreetMap Ireland.



For example, access in and out of the neighbourhood was limited by the railway line. Many local people up until the late 1970's used the rail line as a common and routine shortcut to access adjacent areas such as Fairview Park. The tragic rail accident that claimed the lives of three young teenagers in East wall is a poignant example of these difficulties. An inquest into this tragic accident led to recommendations to fence off this portion of the rail line.

The subsequent decline in port activities which started in the 1950's led to a series of redevelopment plans for the area in terms of promotion of new industries in the area and the development of new housing apartment complexes. All of these have further impacted the area which is traditionally made up of low rise, single and double storey houses. These developments had a great impact on the landscape and they are perceived by local people as a threat which further encloses this small community. As a case in point, there were development plans for high rise

buildings in the Spencer Dock area which got initial planning permission granted in February 2000. Only after challenges from local people in East Wall were these plans reconsidered due to the height of the buildings proposed and the impact it would have on locals living in the low rise traditional estates.

The unique urban landscape of East Wall has, therefore, always been a factor in how people live their lives in the community. And, in some cases, it has influenced how people get around their community and interact within the locality.

Conclusion and Recommendations

With this small piece of research we hoped to provide a few insights into the lives of young people and older people in the neighbourhood of East Wall. This was the main focus of our investigation but, it is our hope, that some of the findings and suggestions that we make also promote inclusion of other groups such as people with disabilities and indeed the wider community. The research findings accentuate the commonalities and differences between community perceptions among the older and younger generations of East Wall. We also include a profile of the area and highlight significant challenges in terms of future urban development in the area and surrounding environment.

In this section we put together a few recommendations which we hope not only promote continuity between generations in East Wall, but also respond to emerging needs particularly among the younger generation as these needs were found to be more pronounced in our findings. We considered some of the main themes from our focus group meetings with older and young residents of East Wall and we compiled a list of ideas which we think would not only improve existing community services and involvement of young people in the community, and also intergenerational interactions between the groups.

These suggestions are:

- Providing study areas for young people;
- Having a computer room and wifi access in a local community space;
- Providing PC literacy course to community members;
- Providing CV workshops locally for young people that have finished school.
- Using social media sites like Facebook to communicate events and advertise initiatives in the community.
- Inviting other youth groups and wider community initiatives from across the city into East Wall;
- Starting a Scouts group in East Wall;

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Research Team

Niamh Bowe,

Citizen Researcher,
East Wall, Dublin 3

Courtney Mitchell,

Citizen Researcher
East Wall, Dublin 3

James Rickard

Citizen Researcher
East Wall, Dublin 3

Joseph Foley

Citizen Researcher
East Wall, Dublin 3

Alexandra Revez

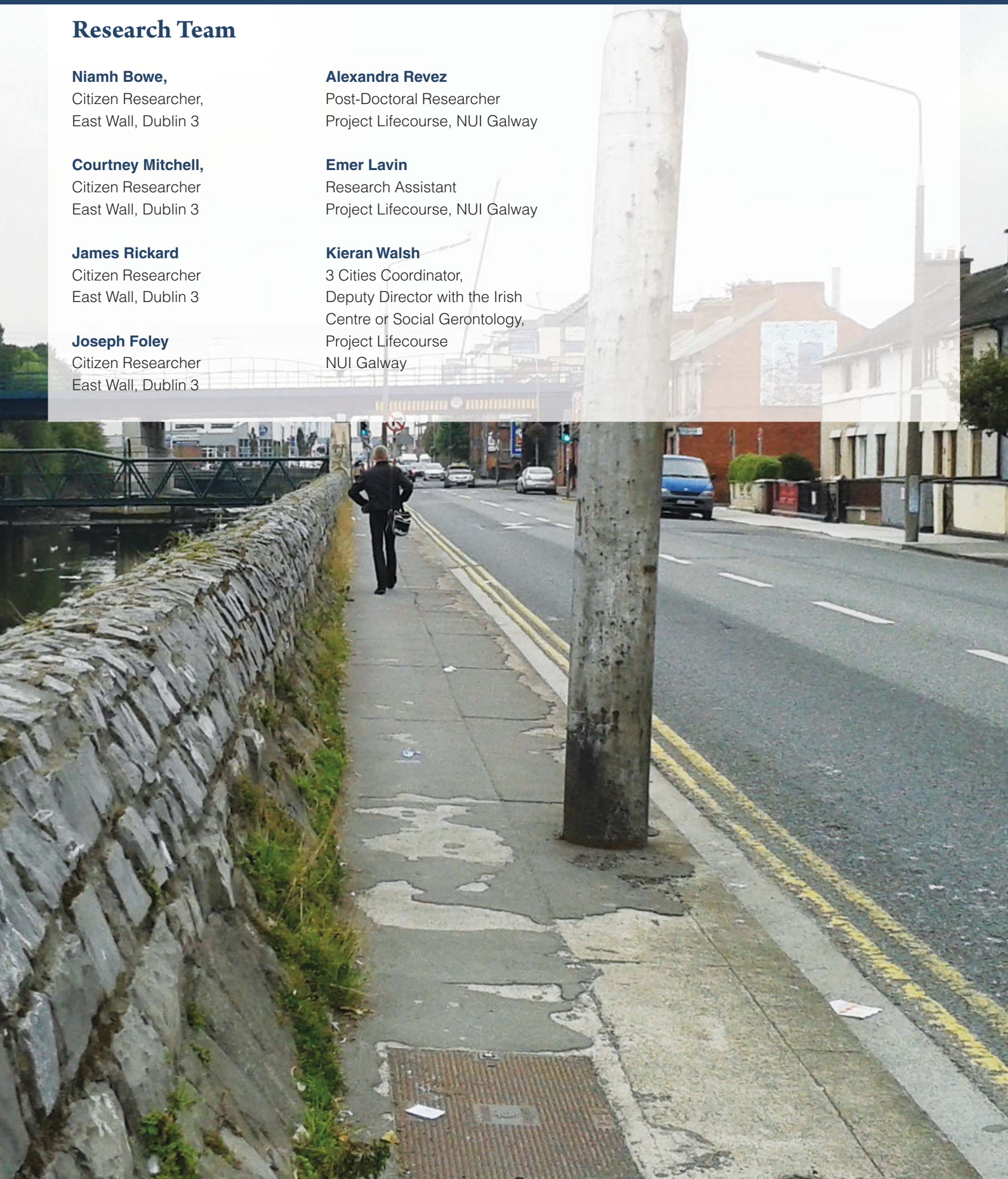
Post-Doctoral Researcher
Project Lifecourse, NUI Galway

Emer Lavin

Research Assistant
Project Lifecourse, NUI Galway

Kieran Walsh

3 Cities Coordinator,
Deputy Director with the Irish
Centre of Social Gerontology,
Project Lifecourse
NUI Galway



Project Lifecourse

Project Lifecourse is funded by The Atlantic Philanthropies and represents Ireland's most visible contribution to the growing international field of life course studies. This is achieved by combining and harnessing existing strengths and international networks from across the UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre (CFRC), the Irish Centre for Social Gerontology (ICSG), and the Centre for Disability Law and Policy (CDLP). The 3-Cities Project marks the first major programme of work undertaken by Project Lifecourse.

Institute for Lifecourse and Society

NUI Galway, Galway, Ireland

Telephone: +353(0)91492934

Website: www.nuigalway.ie/lifecourse/the_3_cities_project.html



NUI Galway
OÉ Gaillimh



Institute for
Lifecourse and Society