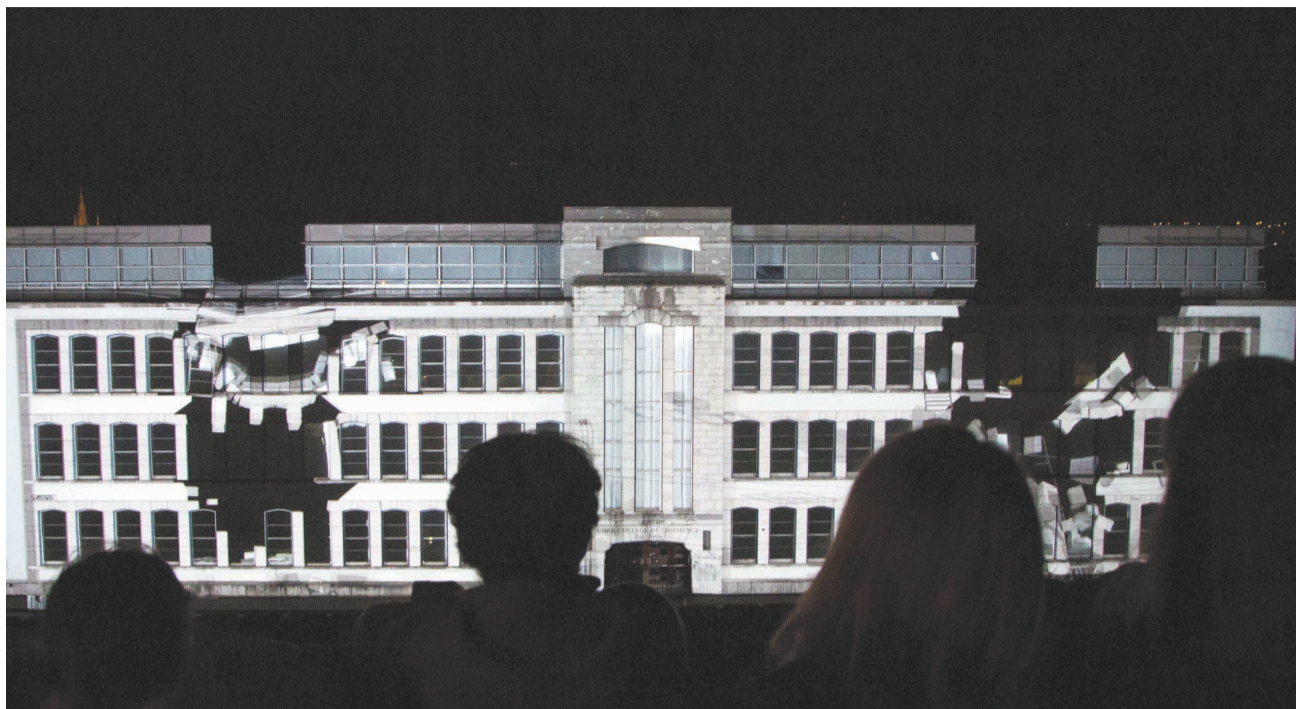


## PROFILE



Exterior image of Simon Mckeown's work for Cork Ignite

# The Wow Factor

SHEELAGH BRODERICK INTRODUCES THE CORK IGNITE PROJECT, WHICH CULMINATED IN A LARGE-SCALE PROJECTION BY ARTIST SIMON MCKEOWN FOR CORK CULTURE NIGHT 2015.

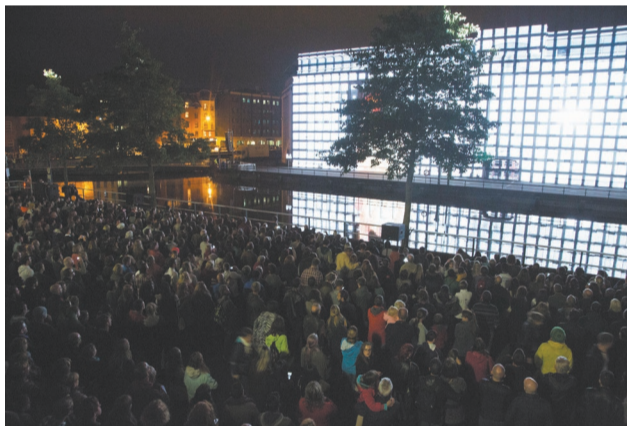
CORK Ignite, which formed the centrepiece of the city's Culture Night 2015 events, was the final commission of the Ignite initiative, a platform developed to showcase high-quality work by people with disabilities across Ireland. British artist Simon Mckeown was commissioned to deliver an outdoor digital projection with manifestly ambitious artistic and technical objectives, comprising soundscape and animation that was projected onto the entire façade of Cork College of Commerce (measuring 60 metres in length and 18 metres in height).

Mckeown is an award-winning, internationally exhibiting artist renowned for his interest in the cultural presentation of disability. His recent work includes *Ghosts* (2014) commissioned for the WW1 Cultural Programme (14 – 18 November), *Motion Disabled: Unlimited* (2012) and *Prometheus Awakes* (2010), which were both London 2012 Festival events. He foregrounds disability issues through a practice that not only engages with disabled people but also with representations of disability through technologically mediated imagery. With over 25 years experience, Mckeown is an expert in animation and motion capture, and a Reader in Animation and Post Production at Teesside University, where he is completing a PhD.

Mckeown's project was one of the highlights of Cork Culture Night. The realisation of this spectacle was the result of over two years of planning in complex partnerships formed to commission and produce the work. Ignite was established at the end of 2012 by the Arts Council of Ireland following the roll out of the capacity building model Arts and Disability Networking (ADN) with Arts and Disability Ireland and local authorities in Mayo, Galway and Cork. The objectives of Ignite are to support: "national and international collaboration between artists with disabilities; the making of new ambitious work by artists with disabilities; the presentation and marketing of commissioned work at local venues and festivals; and access to a more diverse range of work for more diverse local audiences".

Three commissions were created with a brief to celebrate arts and disability led by internationally-recognised artists with disabilities. Orlaith McBride, Director of the Arts Council, described how the commissions, each representing an investment of up to €60,000, were made with the expectation that they would "raise the bar on work being produced and presented by local venues and festivals, and provide the opportunity for both new and existing audiences to experience some of the best arts and disability work being created internationally today".

Cork Ignite was commissioned by Cork City Council with partners, the Arts Council and Arts and Disability Ireland, led by the Na-



Exterior image of Simon Mckeown's work for Cork Ignite

tional Sculpture Factory and Create in association with SoundOUT and Suisha Inclusive Arts at COPE Foundation. Evidently this was going to be a complex project to manage and independent arts producer Kath Gorman was charged with this task.

During the spring of 2014 Mckeown spent a week with a group of participants from COPE Foundation and other disability organisations to create a collaborative work based around stop-frame animation, shadow puppetry, art work and video. These visual art workshops took place in the Theatre Development Centre at Triskel Arts Centre with participants whose ages ranged from 18 to over 80 years old and whose disabilities were diverse. Then, unexpectedly, Mckeown had to take time out from the project himself due to health difficulties associated with his own disability. Reluctantly the decision was made by the project team to defer the project originally scheduled for Culture Night 2014.

However, some good news was extracted from this very bad news. Due to the extended timeframe an opportunity arose to develop locally-originated musical themes. A successful funding award from Cork City Council enabled local partners SoundOUT and Suisha Inclusive Arts at COPE Foundation to deliver music workshops using assistive technologies during the extended project lead-in time. Guest musician Cian Walsh led these, with facilitation support from Grainne McHale, Graham McCarthy of SoundOUT and Eoin Nash of Suisha Inclusive Arts at COPE Foundation. Needless to say the project deferral also brought additional project costs and further support was awarded from the Ignite partners of the Arts Council, Arts and Disability Ireland and Cork City Council. Teesside University also provided additional support in the second year.

By the time the project was back on track, the two other Ignite projects in Mayo and Galway had been completed and the Ignite Touring Award made to visual artist Aileen Barry for *Silent Movie*. All

eyes now turned to Cork Ignite and expectations were running high for this last element. During Spring and Summer of 2015 Mckeown worked extensively with his creative team, in particular Craig McMullen, sound specialist Nigel Crooks and concept artist Kameliya Minkova, to create the final projected work. Mckeown also includes Phillip Wray and David Archibold as part of his team. In order to realise the ambition required to deliver a commission of this scale and the complex organisational matrix, the partnership now extended to: Teesside University: School of Computing; Cork Arts and Health Programme, HSE South; Cork Education and Training Board; XL Video, London; the River Lee Hotel: the official accommodation and hospitality sponsor for Cork Ignite; 3FM: University College Cork's official student radio station; CIT Cork School of Music; the Theatre Development Centre, Cork: towards residency support; and Focus Surveys for production support.

It was an extraordinary spectacle on a night when all the elements combined to provide perfect conditions. Calm weather and a cloudy night enhanced both the brightness of the projection on the façade of Cork College of Commerce and its reflections on a rippleless river and the glass walls of the School of Music opposite. A warm evening and extensive media and social media coverage brought an audience of almost 10,000 to the event.

For those who converged on Union Quay, Cork Ignite was a spectacular visual feast, which focused in part on the history and landscape of Cork, intertwined with imagery, to evoke perceptions of disability. The outdoor spectacle was a hugely detailed and complex visual manipulation of the College of Commerce façade that had been 3D scanned for use as a projection screen. As the soundtrack played, the audience watched as the building was rotated and collapsed in smoke, decked in flowers and ivy and then collapsed again.

The process of making this work involved the use of cutting edge technology. Each second is made of 25 frames, 1500 frames in a minute or 45,000 individual images over the duration of the 30-minute projection. Imagery was projected with such precision that the contours of the facade were animated with fidelity. Virtual window blinds could be individually opened and closed in window frames to reveal figures apparently occupying the space within. Computer games such as *Pong* were played across the surface of the façade and many of the fabulously coloured buildings of Cork made appearances linked to Mckeown's favourite 1970s disability vehicle. The building became a recalcitrant cuckoo clock before morphing into a virtual map of Cork city from 1660 accompanied by a score from the blind Irish composer Turlough O'Carolan.

Workshop participants were pleased when they recognised the particular sequences of imagery and sound to which they had contributed. Disability themes were apparent throughout from the iconography of the opening sequence to intermittent and sometimes-subliminal references interspersed through episodic animated tableaux using Braille, text and imagery. It was always playful, sometimes confounding and succeeded in captivating the diverse audience of families, students and tourists, as well as the ever-present culture vultures. The intense attention over 30 minutes directed towards the projections as they appeared on the façade of the College of Commerce or in reflections on the river and on the School of Music demonstrated the success of this work. Mckeown had been looking for what he called the 'wow factor' and indeed it was so well received that commentators subsequently conjectured on whether it would have been possible to repeat the work again later that night for a different audience.

While it will never be possible to repeat the work as it was first seen, there are plans afoot to tour the work. An exhibition is already planned for FACT Liverpool early next year that will involve a whole new layer of partnerships. For Mckeown this project has extended his practice as an artist. He described it as "by far the most ambitious piece of work" he has ever created, "technically demanding and creatively difficult." The work, he added, "puts art which has a connection with disability on the map out there on a huge scale". The legacy of this work for Irish commissioners, festivals and artists with disabilities will be to continue to "dream big" as Pádraig Naughton, Executive Director of Arts and Disability Ireland, put it. Such ambition will be as much dependent on the supporting infrastructure as on the artists' talents.

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