

Where It Greens by Default: Reflections from a Winter City Drift with Simon Whitehead

By Nia Davies

What happens when we slow down and experience the city with new eyes and ears?

Following Project REPAIR's Biophilic City Drift workshop in December 2025, researcher and poet Nia Davies reflects on the experience of wandering through Swansea at movement artist Simon Whitehead's invitation. In this walking workshop, a group of drifters set off in pairs in the December sunshine, noticing the city's overlooked and forgotten lifeforms: the people, plants, animals, water, sounds and overlooked spaces that shape our everyday environments.

Drawing on observations from participant drifters, this article explores how creative methods can help us rethink our relationships with nature, discover a living city that already exists around us, and imagine more biophilic futures.

Read Nia's reflections from the Biophilic City Drift below.



A wintertime drift

How do we 'repair' human-nature relationships? How do we bring more 'nature' into our city, or rather, bring humans into closer connection to the rest of nature? There is already much that is alive and growing here in Swansea, hidden in the cracks, the neglected corners and unforeseen vistas. How can we sense the plants, animals, land and fungi in our vicinity, and not, as we so often do, walk right past anything with leaves, soil or anyone or anything outside our usual frame of reference? Can we become less 'plant blind' and get to know more of the animate city and its inhabitants?

In December 2025, the REPAIR project held a Biophilic City Drift workshop with the movement artist Simon Whitehead. People were invited to take a wintertime 'drift' – to have a wander around the city and seek out the rest of nature. In the spirit of avant garde dance improvisation and psychogeography, Simon offered us a 'score' as a prompt: turn your attention to sensory encounters with life forms in the city, and find 'where it greens by default'.

Drifters drifting...

In the first year of REPAIR, we have been testing out methodologies from different disciplines and practices. Climate change and biodiversity loss require us to work together in new ways and to better understand how to collaborate. When trying to bring more nature into the city, how do we begin? How do we sense that more-than-human world in the first place? How do we discover and express living entanglements? Sensing how nature is already changing the city might suggest ways in which change can be brought in in tune with people and the other beings who already live here. Understanding how we grow and what already grows in the city might suggest what and how we might grow and adapt to climate change and co-create the Swansea/Abertawe of the future. Noticing the forms living things take in

the urban environment might help inform future imaginaries and actualities of a 'biophilic' city.

So we invited Simon Whitehead to take us on a Biophilic city drift with us. We invited Simon because of his experience in creating situations, such as walks and workshops, where people open up their senses to the more-than-human environment. Simon Whitehead is a movement artist based in Pembrokeshire. His practice is improvisatory and moves in correspondence with land, materials and beings. He 'begins with, and re-turns to', he [writes](#), 'the motile materiality of the body and its agency amongst an assemblage of other forces, flows and matter'. For this solstice-time drift, we asked Simon to re-turn his attention to the city of Swansea, which he first encountered in his ambulatory deep mapping work '[Walking between craters](#)' (2012). Influenced partly by the Situationist 'derive' and improvisational scores from the post-modern dance movement of 1960s New York City, the drift method we played with here embraces indeterminism, whilst being led by prompts from the 'more than human' inhabitants of the urban space.

We began in the Idris room at Urban HQ on a chilly but sunny midwinter afternoon, with tea, biscuits and an invitation to drift throughout the city. First attuning to the sensory with some brief embodied exercises, Simon then invited us to respond to a score: to set off in pairs, moving through the city in silence, being open to surprise and led by other forms of life present around us. What might we find that is already 'biophilic', find where it 'greens by default'.

After drifting for around an hour we returned to the space to 'harvest' what we had found, making a large collective chalk and charcoal drawing on the floor and sharing some of our impressions and surprises from the walk. The drifters gestured to a little of what they had discovered and realised whilst walking in silence, sometimes as strangers to one another. Here's a few of our impressions and realisations.

Pretty rainy city

What first became apparent was water, everywhere: how it collects, flows, dampens, nourishes. But why, some asked, are there no water features in Swansea? Despite being a very rainy 'Aber', a town on the mouth of a river as it meets the sea,

Abertawe's city centre seems mostly cut off from watercourses. Probably one reason for this, some suggested, is that a fountain has to be maintained regularly, and people tend to jump in.

But it rains so much, we may as well do something with it! Several pairs spent time observing accidental water features – where water flows, mosses and moulds grow. One pair contemplated a leaky gutter which had created a small waterfall down a wall, allowing tiny plants to grow. This slow leakage was 'Swansea's answer [to] Frank Lloyd Wright' maybe!

On my own drift we wandered up the steep hill of Mount Pleasant which ascends right next to the city centre. We traced numerous old banks and walls of stone where rainwater was leaking through. In the cracks between stones and masonry, we found tiny creatures and plants growing. A small pool of rainwater had attracted some red-brown crawling insects, and with the backdrop of the city, it looked like a minibeast watering hole.

Hidden corners, new perspectives

So many hidden and neglected corners like this turned out to be teeming with life and even birdsong despite many of these patches also being strewn with a deep humus of litter. Everywhere there are cordoned off spaces and verges, some of which are ambiguous as to ownership and responsibility for maintenance. Many of these spots are either alive and home to birds and insects, or paved over and disused and thus presenting the possibility of future tiny gardens. There is already a buzz about transforming some of these verges and neglected spaces and strips into wildlife-friendly patches, with our colleagues in the council, NRW and [grassroots volunteer groups](#), such as community gardens, often leading the way. But there are still so many possible nooks and crannies that could be restored for nature.

Climbing up the hill, we noticed how the view changes as you ascend. In fact, many of the pairs noticed Kilvey Hill – a forested hill reclaimed from industrial pollution which is always present in the cityscape. From a particularly panoramic but neglected viewing spot, one resident standing in front of her house told us how 'lovely it is at

night, all lit up'. From this angle the city centre looks totally different, and from this angle... and this angle.

Are you lost?

As drifters wandering with a different purpose than the usual activity of shopping or commuting, we might have looked a little unusual. When you're walking slowly, poking around in holes and bushes, ambling in circles and looking up and around, other people encounter you anew. Some asked the drifters 'are you lost?' The drifters often spoke about the slowing effect of the walk and how, without a job, hobby or a shop to march towards, a new way of being opened up. Slowing down allows whole



new views and encounters to emerge. Several people appreciated how this kind of invitation gives space to linger and thus think.

Simon asked the pairs to walk in silence, and this was not easy for some! But with ears and eyes opened many noticed new sounds and followed them. Birdsongs and whirring fans and engines became apparent. Some of the sounds and bright lights were unpleasant, with 'angry ugly noises' suddenly shouting to newly sensitised drifters. Others were drawn towards the birdsong as something soothing or pleasurable to their ears. Some noticed just how many security cameras watched their every move.

But there are always people moving through the city who are not on the usual shop or commute. Some have time to talk to strangers. Swansea centre contains numerous residential neighbourhoods of terrace houses and blocks of flats, there's pride here in small gardens and front doors, people grow herbs and flowers. Other people hang out and drink or socialise in the street in the city centre. Some catch a nap in a bush. Often it was these city dwellers who were open to talking to the drifters.

As we drift through these different encounters, we noticed different states and conditions – were we fearful or relaxed here, curious or on guard there? In talking afterwards, we noted how we all experience cities and public spaces differently. Humans are complicated and various, we sense or are sensed or treated by others differently. All of this becomes more apparent when slowing down. So we became aware, not only of other faces of the city but also of ourselves and other beings in the city and how we relate to one another.

Light and colour

'We went further and further up, we felt the wind.' The drifters were wandering through a wintry but sunny landscape. It was coming up to the solstice, and many noticed how the light and long shadows fell sharply on streets and buildings and how plants and animals reacted to this light and shadow. At this time many plants are in retreat, hidden in the soil between paving slabs and in abandoned doorways. The colour palette of the city at this time is more silver, grey, brown and green.

Some drifters were sometimes fearful or hesitant to go down alleys, but 'we were brave' and ended up walking where they might not usually go. Wandering and looking, touching and listening in a new way for some felt childlike; in this surreal, messy and jumbled up environment there was a chance to play.

In seeking out the green, many of the drifters noticed how much of that green is disappointing: fake foliage, plastic grass and faded flowers. Several of the workshop participants noticed the trend for plastic greenery in shops, homes and outdoor seating areas. 'There was rubbish strewn over the natural green areas and the real plants were struggling'. And yet, as one of the drifters pointed out, this desire for natural forms is not new – carved floral or vegetal forms can be seen in old stonework and facades. There are images of plants and animals everywhere – ornamentation in the architecture so often draws on botanical forms. But now, the aesthetic of "'nature" has been imported' said one of us. And yet real plants still grow through the plastic lawn, and water, sun and wind have eroded or faded the plastic turf. 'Nature had destroyed the edifice of nature'. Beyond the plastic, 'it was a relief to find more plants growing'. The drifters happily followed living things, as if on a treasure hunt: 'my eyes were looking for greenery and light, the sun. I noticed flowers.'



New but tired eyes

I myself discovered new glittering fine details about a Swansea/Abertawe I had never previously noticed in the many years I have lived here. As I walk through the city now, I see more and more how the living world and its forms are everywhere and constantly

changing the fabric of the city and its inhabitants. On the drift, I encountered new smells of water on stone and saw insects I'd never met before living in crevices up close. My eyes were tired later from moving from a micro to macro lens in the sharp winter sun. But with this open aperture I was able to take more details in. And Kilvey Hill made its presence known in my all my views of the city. Our drift involved a kind of gleaning for living treasures and, as if to illustrate the city as a treasure hunt, we came across an abandoned vanity dresser with mirrors reflecting Kilvey hill and sticky plastic treasures in the draws.

Where is wild?

Much of nature grows where something is neglected and plants are allowed to run wild, where there are porous surfaces and the possibility of soil and nutrients. Birds move in and make nests. Bats migrate across the city and pollinators find the flowers of 'weeds' such as valerian or buddleia. There is an interesting tension between the human interest in fake foliage and plastic grass, which blocks water run off and shuts out biodiversity, as opposed to other spots where plants and animals have reclaimed a forgotten but somewhat messy spot. Elsewhere there are recent interventions of 'greening' with low maintenance plantings which don't require paying someone to look after them. Much of the plantings, such as yucca, birch and mown turf grass, are, as the artist and drift participant [Penny Hallas](#) pointed out, 'ecologically dead'. Or, as the gardener and REPAIR friend John Little puts it, 'low maintenance=joyless places'. So how can sustainable urban green spaces be co-created with communities which are actively and creatively cared for into the future?

The aesthetic of tidy manicured lawns is something the REPAIR project is trying to find ways of deconstructing - what is mess and what is beauty? How is the city already a garden and how is it already wild? How can we, or should we, 'manage' nature in the city or do we let it run wild? What does maintenance, design and beauty mean?



Night life

Some of the drifters were excited about the possibility of a nighttime walk. People and animals would move differently through the city at night. And what about the in-between times of dawn and dusk? How does the city change before and after dark? Biophilia might change according to seasonal, diurnal, nocturnal or crepuscular phases. At night how might our human fears change how we sense the city? How does our sense of risk and safety alter how we accommodate nature? Many photosensitive creatures need darkness, but many human inhabitants crave light to feel safe. And yet sometimes the light can be altered to make it friendlier for wildlife and safer for humans. Simon Whitehead's workshops, which often involve night walks and long wanders across wild landscapes, place trust in people to discover and be in a place safely for themselves. Embodied art practice methods such as the drift allows us to become aware of how we encounter the city and its life forms and how we relate to what we perceive. The drifters were researchers touching the rough and the smooth, following forms and colour. An invitation to drift, gives a little space for us to space to perceive, think the world around us differently, becoming aware of ourselves reflexively in the process.

So what is biophilia? Does it name an innate love of nature in humans, which is what we're often told, or is it something more like a process of becoming, an ongoing, ever shifting relationship with the rest of nature and our own human nature?

Take a (building for a) wander: scores and prompts for drifting

Simon Whitehead's drift asks us to perceive the living world just out of our cognitive and visually dominant lenses. Slowing down and on the mad rush to the next appointment, we might notice whole other life systems right here. What other Swansea/Abertawe might there be?

Simon Whitehead's Biophilic City score, December 2025

Take a 'drift' through the city. Be led by prompts from the 'more than human' inhabitants. Begin by preparing to drift, attuning to a sensory field, to each other, to other beings. Then in pairs, move through the city, notice and be open to surprise. The drift score encourages attention to sensory encounters with life forms in the city, 'where it greens by default'. What might be biophilic already? When you return talk, draw or write what you have witnessed.

Scores and prompts

How would you re-design the city for plants, for bats, for birds?

What botanical forms can you find you hadn't noticed before?

Score: walk the routes the water takes from mountain to sea

Score: seek out other beings: insects, plant life, mammals, humans who inhabit differently

Score: design a speculative rainscape in your street

Score: be led by casual encounters with strangers, be open to conversation and see where this leads you

Score: follow the sound of water on foot, if safe, immerse feet in the water and feel how it affects the body and senses. Later draw or write.

Move or draw the forms of a future city or your dream city, or your dreamt-of city.

Links and further reading

Fancy a drift? Get in touch if you want to talk about this drift or others in the future. Or do get in touch if you have something to add - we want to hear your Biophilic encounters and dreams of Swansea. repair@swansea.ac.uk.

Simon Whitehead's website: [Maynard - Simon Whitehead](#)

Rainy City Zine - a zine on water and green infrastructure in Swansea/Abertawe, by Nia Davies - [What Catches On, What Flows: A Rainy City Assemblage - a zine by Nia Davies](#)

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