

Agency through Co-Design: How Live Projects Equip Architecture Students for Climate Action and Real-World Impact

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Built environment professions play a critical role in climate mitigation and adaptation. This paper investigates how future practitioners are being prepared for this challenge, focusing on the potential of co-design experiences, or live projects, to equip students for socially engaged climate action. It argues that student-stakeholder co-design processes foster innovative, sustainable solutions, while benefiting the learning outcomes. Transformative pedagogies adopting co-design and experiential learning have been gaining traction, but initiatives remain dispersed. This paper reports on a case study that examines two iterations (2025 and 2026) of a design/build module in Ireland. Each involves master's in architecture and final-year structural engineering students collaborating with clients (users and decision makers) to develop temporary, small-scale interventions, which they subsequently build on the university campus. The projects prioritise the reuse of locally sourced materials to creatively address heritage adaptation, circularity, and universal design. Adopting a qualitative approach and a case study strategy, the research employs observations, questionnaires, participatory evaluations with students and teachers, and interviews with stakeholders. The findings reveal that student and client collaboration offers valuable reflections on the roles of architects and engineers. Tutors highlight pedagogical gains and motivation from meaningful contributions, despite setup challenges. Stakeholders value students' creative problem-solving for complex, divergent client needs and welcome continued partnerships.

Despite the inherent constraints of live projects and client demands, the students embraced their increased agency with enthusiasm. The process deepened their understanding of user needs and universal design, championing a "low-tech, high thinking" approach to local resource reuse. By engaging with existing structures, these co-design initiatives and physical interventions serve as replicable models for campus-wide adaptive reuse. Ultimately, these experiences deliver tangible results while sharpening students' focus on circularity, heritage adaptation, and the evolving social responsibilities of their professions.