

Involving UCD Architecture students in a live project. The Dundrum by Design Case Study

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In an era of accelerating climate emergency, the built environment requires a paradigm shift from top-down expert-led solutions toward inclusive, democratic transformations. This paper explores Dundrum by Design (DbD), a “live project” partnership between UCD, Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council (DLRCoCo), and the local community. By immersing Year 2 architecture students in a real-world urban transformation, the initiative tests how innovative pedagogies equip future architects with social and technical skills to navigate a just climate transition. The project argues that HEI act as vital drivers of change, bridging the gap between high-level policy and grassroots well-being. Structurally, DbD was built upon a year of intentional co-planning between UCD and DLRCoCo to align timelines and expectations, ensuring community engagement was a foundational component of the studio’s design logic rather than an external addition.

The curriculum was delivered through two cycles of research and design. In the first cycle, students utilised GIS mapping, systems thinking, and heritage walks to conduct a deep analysis of the site’s systemic layers and uncover “unseen narratives”. Through the “Under the Bridge” street takeover during Open House Dublin, student-led tactical design interventions transformed an underused space with live installations, allowing students to gather community values directly from citizens – a shift from abstract studio work to real-world social impact.

The second cycle required students to develop the “Dundrum Activator”, temporary timber pavilions designed using circular economy principles. These structures served as urban armatures responding directly to local needs identified during the initial engagement phase. The semester culminated in the production of Metabolic Sections, mapping the territory’s invisible socio-economic and environmental flows. This project demonstrates that involving students in participatory design not only enhances design skills but also provides a neutral platform for facilitating complex community discussions, positioning architecture as an active agent in territorial systemic change.