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FUTURE (From Urban to hUman Regeneration): Systemic co-design in four European cities

Fiona Descoteaux, Donagh Horgan, and Stephen Wall

Contemporary urban regeneration practices remain limited in their capacity to effectively incorporate multiple stakeholder inputs and provide equitable solutions to urban problems. The European Union Erasmus+ funded FUTURE (From Urban to hUman REgeneration) project provides knowledge and capacity to students and professionals in government, business, and community to underscore human-centred system design in our communities. Target groups come from diverse disciplines across the regeneration sector, united in their need for better ways to engage citizens in their work and process. The FUTURE programme responded to a lack of community-based engagement mechanisms, cognisant of the need for human-centric system design approaches across the built environment sector.

The project piloted practice-based training, creating a curriculum to equip participants with knowledge in the co-production of frameworks and approaches as well as the skills to deliver solutions with and for communities. In the Dublin pilot, students learned how to frame societal challenges from the perspective of the community in Ballymun, once the location for Europe's largest urban renewal project. Following a qualitative research approach, students practised community engagement techniques to centre the lives of residents in the process. Making clear the significance of evidence-based planning, learners identified specific spatial challenges that might be addressed in Integrated Action Plans (IAPs) toward shared outcomes for the community. FUTURE has succeeded in developing a curriculum capable of adapting to local conditions and being suitable for a range of participants, including master's level students, civil servants, design practitioners, and community and business leaders. The living

lab component generated valuable experience in delivering this curriculum in a real-world setting. The work of FUTURE is available as a playbook for scaling this impactful systemic co-design programme.

KEYWORDS: co-design, urban rehabilitation, engagement

RSD TOPICS: Architecture & Planning, Learning & Education

Introduction

When we do not properly address systemic complexity when conceiving, designing and implementing solutions, we increase the chance that projects will fail and limit their ability to tackle underlying structural problems. The FUTURE project recognises a knowledge and skills gap in current urban regeneration models and practice regarding the capacity to deliver community problem-solving for urban change and the delivery of effective stakeholder engagement to yield positive and systemic social change (Horgan & Dimitrijevic, 2021).

When defining urban problems, we can be driven by oversimplified understanding and linear thinking (Voulvoulis, 2016). In our experience, groups can be quick to adopt a linear approach to social change, using fundamental tools for problem-solving, which can result in failure to generate satisfying progress regarding the root causes of problems. Therefore, leaders have turned to design as a discipline that may be able to turn the tide in complex problem-solving. However, when addressing wicked problems (Rittel & Webber, 1973), theories of change are too reductive and linear to properly account for the systemic phenomena, structures, and dynamics that perpetuate the issues we are trying to address (Conway et al., 2017; Murphy & Jones, 2021), resulting in a need for a more human-centred approach to systems thinking and design (Cermarinaro, 2023)

Furthermore, without the cross-sector collective action of stakeholders to mitigate the shared problem, system change is far from reach (Brady & Splansky Juster, 2016). Typically, a disconnect exists between design professionals, planners, governmental administrations, private developers, and the communities impacted by regeneration and rehabilitation schemes (Horgan & Dimitrijevic, 2021), and models of power,

authority, and perceived expertise that affect the ability to bring the right and different people to the table and therefore shapes the process and the outcomes before the change process has even begun. The problem stems from a knowledge and skills gap among actors in effective and coherent community-led innovation models and tools, particularly in areas of design, system thinking and change, and effective stakeholder collective action (Horgan & Dimitrijevic, 2019).

Application

FUTURE sought to counteract these problems by co-producing a curriculum to mitigate the knowledge gap and a living lab model to mitigate the skill gap and to yield collaborative planning (Radelescu et al., 2022) and collective action by better understanding the actual world around them. The ambition was that through the curriculum, participants of the FUTURE programme built a knowledge of holistic models and tools in design, system thinking and change. The research initially identified the need for a new type of professional figure who could manage the complexity of urban regeneration and social innovation projects while understanding the importance, strategies, and nuances of effective place-based stakeholder engagement for societal change. This resulted in producing a hypothetical profile of candidates, as well as the competencies and skill sets required to facilitate and deliver this type of systemic change in communities, and we needed to strive to deliver this person. To develop the capacity, knowledge base and skills of this profile, the four country partners co-produced a 96-hour curriculum to advance knowledge, commencing with classroom learning. Once the curriculum was designed, it was the role of each partner to localise the framework, targeting a minimum of 15 participants from university students and interested professionals to test the curriculum. Critically, this was followed by a 40-hour living lab practical both designed to achieve the aims of the project in a pedagogical framework and to co-produce live and applicable Integrated Action Plans (IAPs) with their local stakeholders on a shared problem or challenge (with challenges identified as part of the curriculum delivery).

The programme was co-designed and tested by university and civil society partners in four European cities: Dublin, Klaipeda, Bologna, and Cartagena—according to their local circumstances. The project involved a three-stage methodology. Stage 1, “Delivering the

Curriculum”, involved the co-design of a 140-hour curriculum framework for each country at level 7 in the European Quality Framework, an equivalent of a master’s degree. Classroom learning and training were co-designed to build knowledge capacity among participants with an introduction to the local community. Each partner localised the framework, targeting a minimum of 15 participants, and devised an agenda, attendance registers, didactic materials, and training delivery. Stage 2, “Community Immersion”, involved the development of a local community experimentation framework, inducting participants into their chosen community to co-produce Integrated Action Plans (IAPs) using systemic co-design with their local beneficiaries on a shared problem or challenge (this challenge would be identified as part of the curriculum delivery). Stage 3 (optional) involved the co-production of outputs encompassing the outcomes and impacts of the projects with community stakeholders.

In the partner city of Dublin, students participated in University College Dublin’s M.Sc. Architecture, Urbanism and Climate Action. In the Dublin test, Stage 1 was refined into a 10-week curriculum, meeting the needs of the School of Architecture. This was followed by Stage 2, an intensive immersion (a temporary living lab) on location among the community in Ballymun, where students were given the opportunity to interview stakeholders and gain first-hand knowledge of local issues and challenges. Students co-designed IAPs to identify problems and tailored their collective solutions to the specific needs and concerns of the stakeholders. Stage 3 progressed to implementation, engaging critical influencers in the community system; however, funding was a key blockage to delivering social change.

In Dublin, Innovate Communities teamed up with University College Dublin to carry out a pilot test of the FUTURE training programme with students from multidisciplinary backgrounds. The initial lecture series covered themes including spatial equity, problem framing, design and system thinking for social innovation, stakeholder mapping, framing the context for research, designing for community engagement and co-design, and reframing spatial challenges. The lecture series was delivered in a hybrid in-person/online format, with academic and community leaders delivering the programme. The lecture series was followed by the living lab on location in the community of Ballymun, where students were given the opportunity to interview stakeholders from meetings to “speed interviewing” to gain first-hand knowledge of local issues and challenges based

on lived experience. The stakeholder engagement was an invaluable opportunity for the students to test the skills gained from the lecture series and to refine ideas with affected groups in real time. Students refined and developed their proposals over a four-day deep immersion period, at the conclusion of which the ideas were presented to an audience of community and public representatives. The project coordinators were impressed with the quality of the student ideas, and a selection of ideas has been the subject of discussions with the local authority to examine the feasibility of real-world implementation.

Conclusion

“Urban development is such a complex, wicked issue that if the challenges and crises of our time are to be addressed, new approaches that combine stakeholder knowledge, experience, and interests are key to enabling urban transformations” (Riegler et al., 2021). We need initiatives and activities to activate systemic change, building capacity, collaboration, and continuity for change in our communities globally. The FUTURE project has only begun its work in this realm and sees the solution in this space as two-pronged: The requirement for knowledge acquisition methods and tools in design and system thinking and change, paired with the development of the capacity of changemakers to act and deliver real societal change and impact in practice. From the Innovate Communities experience, it is only through practice in a living lab or real-time scenario that knowledge learnt by changemakers can be challenged, reframed, and realigned to the situation faced to begin to mitigate our communities’ systemic challenges. Thus, Innovate Communities is driven to collaborate and work with other interested parties together to refine learning, process and test FUTURE in wider geographical spheres to prepare the next generation of changemakers in systemic co-design and, most critically, to begin to change the systems holding our most complex of societal problems in place.

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