

## Designing Dublin

### Solving Citywide Problems by Engaging the Citizens of Dublin

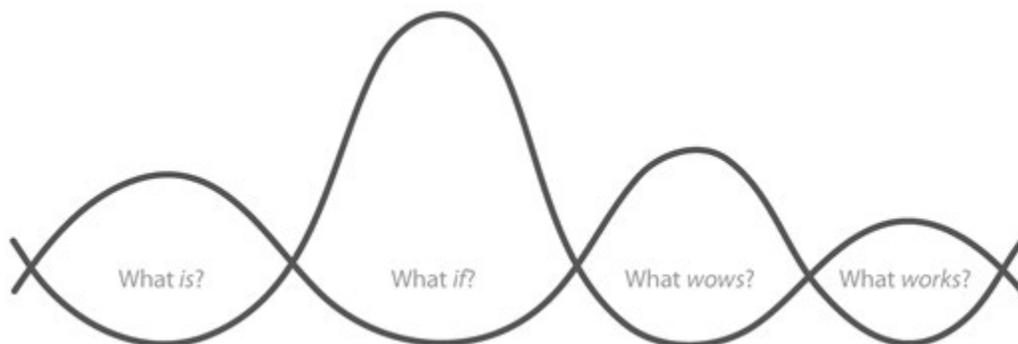
*This case will introduce us to design thinking principles and how they can help bureaucratic governments implement innovative solutions. The city council in Dublin, Ireland, knew that to prosper in the next century it had to engage its citizens in new ways. The need for change was palpable as the booming economy lost momentum, but efforts to change lacked direction and energy. In the end, solutions emerged from the community itself. The journey toward engaging citizens in this rejuvenation began with two professionals who knew a thing or two about design—and how to use it to motivate organizations prone to inaction.*

This story begins with Jean Byrne, a bright entrepreneur with enough savvy to start a fashion company at age 26 and then sell it at 36 to pursue her passion for community education and development. She soon met Jim Dunne, who came from a graphic design background and also felt a need for rejuvenating Dublin.

The year was 2006, and Jean and Jim shared a concern that Ireland's economic boom would fade and a belief that they could do something more to move the country forward. So they combined their resources to found Design TwentyFirst Century (Design21C) and began working to help Ireland grow through the power of design thinking.

The new colleagues spent the better part of a year talking with Ireland's elite business leaders, politicians, and cultural figures about their vision for improving the country's potential. While impressed with Design21C's noble aspirations, no one seemed particularly interested in joining a movement with such a nebulous target.

So they shifted their focus to the local level. Jean approached the manager of Dublin's city council about participating in a project with Design21C. Jean explained to the councilors that design thinking's framework of four questions would uncover hidden knowledge and lead to solutions while managing risks. Design thinking's four questions are:



### **“What is” going on in Dublin?**

The first project was based on Jean’s and Jim’s simple concept: “to connect Dublin’s challenges with the capacity and willingness of its citizens to improve their city.” The “what is” phase of the project, they enlisted graduate students to spend two weeks doing “on the spot” open interviews throughout the city with Dubliners of all ages and observe how people used the city. Jean explained that “we didn’t begin with a clear brief.” The initial goal was to solicit citizens’ wishes for their city and get a sense of citizens’ views and actions.

The hundreds of wishes for city and observations that they collected at first seemed random, but themes emerged as the team continued examine their data more deeply. The team synthesized all of these into three themes: water, waste, and community in the city.

### **“What if” they could focus on the right project**

The “what if” stage of the design process investigates all opportunities. The Design21C discussions with many citizens around the issue of waste went in unexpected directions. Instead of sticking to the topic of litter on the city’s streets, the conversation shifted to the idea of waste in a more general sense—in particular, to the notion of *wasted space*, places that were not being used, and how to reclaim it. Underdeveloped parts of the city, people commented, were wasted opportunities.

One such place with hidden potential was Clongriffin, a development on the outskirts of Dublin close to the sea. Local planners had carved new housing tracts from farm fields as the region’s population surged in the late 1990s, but the economic boom didn’t last long enough to fill the tracts with all the homes and shops that the original plan envisioned. After ten years, the area had filled to only a third of the expected capacity. While the residents weren’t suffering from overcrowding, they were lacking a vibrant neighborhood with shops, camaraderie, and other necessary services familiar in most European cities. Clongriffin was well-known as a ghost town and as a poster child for the consequences of lack of suitable planning.

The local council had already tried an obvious solution: building a park. It was lovely, but it failed to become the catalyst for neighborhood rejuvenation that the council had hoped for. The park emerged from a small committee that didn’t put much effort into incorporating residents’ ideas or marketing the park’s attributes. Fortunately for the residents, the council was willing to see this less-than-stellar planning success as grounds for introducing more creativity into the regional development process.

The Dublin city council, beginning to sense design thinking’s power after hearing their citizens’ relatively aligned views for an improved future, was eager to let the residents of Clongriffin figure out what they needed on their own.

### **“What wows” the locals enough to engage them**

From its outset, the project to improve Clongriffin had two major aspirations. The obvious one was to revitalize this development. The less-obvious one, but just as crucial, was to create a prototype of a process for implementing effective public-private partnerships. As Jean described it, “We were trying to see if, in fact, this idea of bringing together people with very different perspectives of the city would work.” The first step was to form an interdisciplinary team. During a rigorous four-day interview process that tested creative problem-solving and teamwork abilities, Design21C narrowed a pool of 80 applicants down to 17. Half of these new team members were from the local or city councils. The other half were volunteers, including engineers, architects, librarians, artists, historians, and accountants.

The intention was to run the project using an open design process that did not make assumptions about Clongriffin’s needs but instead defined them as the project developed. So instead of starting with a brief that spelled out the expected outcome of the project and a road map for getting there, team members were given themes around waste.

“The idea is that as we go through the process we actually discover the brief along with the team,” Jean explained. “There’s a transformation that happens in the team members’ thinking about how they approach the question, how they get the answer, and how they apply those ideas. And then we’ll keep hopping between discovery and iteration.”

### **“What works” are the projects that maintain momentum**

The team’s carried out 12 weeks of investigation, iteration, and prototyping and developed a handful of possible initiatives. Each initiative’s viability was contingent on its ability to attract volunteers interested in carrying the project through to fruition. Three projects found self-selected champions – the litmus test for continued viability. “At the end of the day, it’s not about our team owning the ideas,” Jean noted. “It’s about the ideas being owned by the people who have been involved and shown interest. That way, once Design21C finishes its work on this initiative, these projects will continue to live.”

The Path was engaging because residents could easily walk the prototype path during the Prototype Extravaganza. Residents figured out that they could complete the project in stages, and it would not require intensive maintenance once it was in place. The Hothouse inspired locals because Clongriffin had no bars or coffee shops where people could gather. Residents collaborated with the city council to build a beta space to test the idea for a year. After that period, plans were put in place to establish a permanent space.

This initiative shows the design thinking process working toward two distinct yet related goals: rejuvenating Clongriffin and generating a group of design thinkers who can use what they’ve

learned to fix other parts of their city—or even their own lives. Jean was enthusiastic about how well the residents embraced their new roles and capabilities:

We believe that if you listen to people's needs, you can come up with new models and leapfrog into new things for the city, making people on the team and in the city feel empowered to contribute in ways that they hadn't thought about. This process is about awakening people, building their confidence, and making them believe that they really have the power to affect change in their city, that they have the power to generate excitement and diversity in different areas.