

Clonakilty 400 Urban Design Master Plan

Background

- The Clonakilty 400 Urban Design Masterplan began in 2013 as a response to severe flooding and the need for essential drainage works but evolved into a wider regeneration of the town’s core streets: Pearse, Ashe and adjoining areas. Led by Cork County Council’s Architects Department and marking the 400th anniversary of the town’s charter, the project aimed to revive the town centre.
- Historically dominated by car traffic, parking, and underused public spaces, the town’s central areas were reimagined through a heritage-led, design-focused approach. Phased over several years (Phase 1: Emmet and Asna Squares, 2013; Phase 2: Pearse Street, 2016), the project successfully delivered widened footpaths, raised crossings, shared surfaces, integrated street furniture, and green infrastructure, despite limited funding. Public squares like Asna and Emmet were reconfigured as civic ‘living rooms’ for events and social interaction, while shopfront preservation and heritage-informed materials (like Irish limestone and coloured glass tiles) reinforced local character.
- **Key Stakeholders:** Cork County Council, Cork County Council Architects Department with contributions by the CCC’s Heritage, Planning and Traffic Departments and with the Road Design Office of Transport Infrastructure Ireland in Cork.

Key Activities

- Extensive public consultation involved ‘expert citizens’ and local ambassadors who co-developed the brief and championed the project.
- Streets and squares were redesigned for walkability and safety, with narrower carriageways, wider footpaths, tighter corners, kerb build-outs, and reduced parking.
- Shared surfaces and ‘pocket squares’, especially at Ashe and Asna Squares, used raised crossings, pinch points, and landscaping to calm traffic and promote social use.
- Visual clutter was cut by removing double yellow lines and excessive markings, with simplified signage and high-quality materials like Irish limestone and recycled tiles.
- Accessibility was prioritised through tactile paving, extended footpaths, and clearly marked pedestrian zones for all users, including those with visual impairments.
- New seating, trees, and outdoor spaces were added. Asna Square’s elliptical design nods to Neolithic forms, while Emmet Square features landscaping, a water feature, sculpture, and the Michael Collins House Museum.



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Impact

- Stakeholder feedback has been highly positive. Cork County Council views the new public realm as a success, attracting visitors, investment, higher property values, and reoccupied vacant buildings.
- Locals have taken ownership of public space maintenance, easing the burden on the council. The revamped streets now host regular events like the Street Carnival, Old Costume Fair, and seasonal celebrations.
- The scheme has significantly improved accessibility, mobility, and safety. Shared spaces and traffic-calming measures have reduced vehicle speeds.
- The initiative has received multiple awards, including the Royal Institute of Architects Best public choice award (2014), Best Place of the Year (2017), and the Gubbio Prize (2018). It is widely recognised as a national exemplar for town centre renewal, placemaking, and the practical implementation of the Design Manual for Urban Roads and Streets (DMURS).

Challenges & Solutions

- A key challenge was working within a constrained, historic streetscape while meeting diverse user needs. Coordinating infrastructure upgrades with public realm improvements required careful planning.
- Instead of reinstating old layouts, the project reimagined the streets through a collaborative, multidisciplinary team guided by urban design principles.
- Using the DMURS approach enabled creative, context-sensitive solutions that prioritised pedestrians while maintaining vehicle access.



Tips for Similar Projects

- Use infrastructure upgrades as a chance to enhance streets and public spaces.
- Engage the community early and keep communication open.
- Build a multidisciplinary team to balance technical, design, heritage, and community priorities.
- Celebrate milestones with public events to reinforce civic pride and support.

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Identified Limitations/Weaknesses

- **Potential limitation:** Pedestrian-priority areas may pose challenges for people with limited mobility or who rely on vehicle access.



Resources

- Department of Transport, [Ireland - Case Study](#).
- [IDI 2024 Awards](#).
- Creating Places for People: [The RIAI Town and Village Toolkit](#).

Partners



Video

Watch this [video lecture](#) with Giulia Vallone

Video Description

This video features architect Giulia Vallone discussing the Clonakilty 400 Urban Design Master Plan. Blending Italian design sensibility with community-led placemaking, she shows how thoughtful urban design, supported by the Heritage Council, created inclusive, multifunctional public spaces.

