

Collaboration and Creativity: A case study of how design thinking created a cultural cluster in Dublin

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Tourism is a rapidly expanding industry with a wide range of economic benefits. Expenditure by tourists visiting Ireland was estimated to be €4bn in 2012, a 4.4% increase on 2011, adding to tourism expenditure by Irish residents of €1.4bn. Tourism accounts for 4% of national GDP and 6% of all employment in Ireland. Following the economic collapse in Ireland post 2007, the national tourism agency (Fáilte Ireland) has had to dramatically alter its role from being a funder for tourism infrastructure to being a catalyst for and facilitator of collaborative R&D and innovation .

This paper explores a case study of one such innovation initiative: a collaborative innovation experiment that brought together over 30 of Ireland's most significant cultural institutions (including the National Gallery of Ireland, National Library of Ireland, Museum of Natural History) and commercial bodies to use a design thinking process to develop Merrion Square as a new, more integrated cultural tourism destination.

Merrion Square is a 'cluster' or geographic concentration of cultural organisations that, in this case, cooperated to focus on delivering new and better cultural experiences for visitors. The group drew on ethnographic research; involved customers, tour operators, historians, local community activists and artists, and used them to develop a portfolio of novel ideas for individual and joint implementation.

The outcome has been the launch of a series of successful new visitor experiences and the development of a far higher level of cooperation between the institutions. 85% of the institutions involved report increased visitor numbers as a consequence of the project – with some specific events reporting an attendance rate up over 42% on the prior year. Such events are now synchronised through a management company comprised of the member institutions. This paper makes a valuable contribution by outlining the role of design-thinking in collaborative, multi-sectoral tourism service design and by spotlighting the role of trends research.

1. Introduction

1.1 Prologue

Merrion Square: Behind Closed Doors

Merrion Square is a majestic, classical Georgian Square dating from 1762 and situated just a kilometre from the very centre of Dublin. Merrion Square has a distinct competitive advantage over other tourist destinations in Dublin. It is one of the world's most intact Georgian Squares, surrounded on three sides by Georgian redbrick houses, with the fourth side Government Buildings, Natural History Museum, Leinster House and the National Gallery of Ireland.



Figure 1. An aerial view of Merrion Square

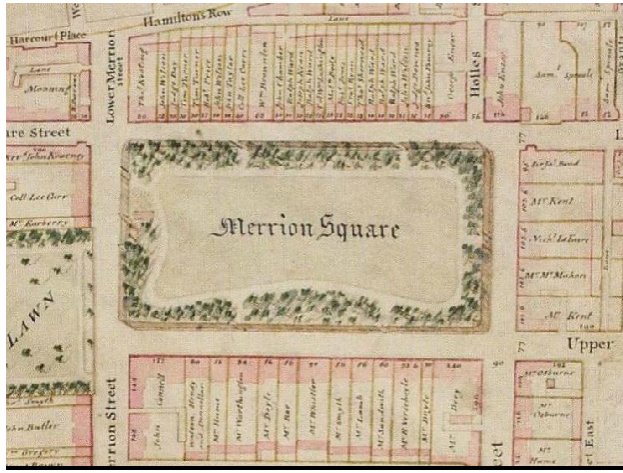


Figure 2. A map of Merrion Square from 1762

Merrion Square and its surrounding area is home to a series of national cultural institutions, including, the Archaeological and Natural History sections of the National Museum of Ireland, the Irish Traditional Music Archive, the Irish Architectural Archive, the Arts Council and many smaller cultural organisations and creative businesses located in buildings which were once the grandest townhouses and homes in the city. It is also home to 5 star hotels such as the Merrion Hotel, with the Shelbourne Hotel close by, and National Maternity Hospital and the Irish Red Cross all within its domain. It also has many associations with significant figures in Ireland's political and cultural history and among the many famous residents who have lived on Merrion Square are Daniel O'Connell, Oscar Wilde and William Butler Yeats. The centre of the square is a public park, owned by Dublin City Council – a wonderful resource that has the potential to connect more with its surroundings.

However, while Merrion Square had all the elements of a significant cultural tourism destination in a capital city and some of its institutions already had a substantial number of visitors (some over one million per year), in the past the Square as a whole had been entirely overlooked as an integrated experience destination. Despite its multiple attractions, it had not previously figured prominently in Dublin's tourism offer. Each of the institutions located in the square had been independently promoted; their marketing and promotional activities were entirely stand alone. Not only had there been no coordination of complimentary events across the cultural institutions, there had not even been any marketing cooperation between them. The square was renowned for beautiful, classical architecture, especially Georgian doorways. But the splendid doors were often closed and less hospitable than they should be.

Gráinne Millar had a background in cultural cluster development in Temple Bar and was also responsible for the development of Culture Night in Ireland, successfully introducing it in Dublin and ultimately building it into a nationwide cultural experience with over 1000 separate events involved. Mary King was leading Fáilte Ireland's Innovation and Policy Unit. They met studying a post-graduate course on strategy and innovation in 2011 and both believed that the innovation and strategic frameworks that they had encountered through the management programme, especially the design-thinking



Figure 3. No. 71 Merrion Square

process, could help enhance the potential for cultural tourism in Dublin. Over a short cup of coffee in Temple Bar in May 2011, they identified a gap in Dublin's cultural tourism offering and the idea for the Merrion Square Innovation Network was born.

1.2 Background

While the service sector has been an engine of innovation, many see tourism as lagging behind with much that is badged as innovation being purely cosmetic changes in product offering or pricing (Weiemair, 2004). Fáilte Ireland is Ireland's National Tourism Development Authority. Its role is to support the tourism industry and work to sustain Ireland as a high-quality and competitive tourism destination. Fáilte Ireland provides a range of practical business supports to help tourism businesses better develop, manage and market their products and services.

Within tourism, it is suggested that Ireland has a three-pronged offering; the built (architectural) heritage, the natural heritage and the cultural heritage. The remit of the cultural heritage organisations is, in the main, the safe preservation and conservation of the artefacts and collections over which they have charge. An educational element is often associated with this mandate. Insights around the wants and needs of the tourist as a consumer are scarce. During the period from 2010 to 2012 the Irish tourism industry was experiencing a difficult time. The inbound tourism market had been in decline since 2007.

Visitor numbers from key overseas markets, most notably from Britain and the US had plummeted. With pressure on discretionary disposal income in the main markets together with adverse exchange rates Irish tourism was operating in a tough trading environment. With so many destinations for visitors to choose from, rapidly changing consumer preferences and ever decreasing product life cycles, continuous improvement was critical and tourism needed to innovate to keep ahead of competition. In the context of the new plan, Fáilte Ireland identified innovation as one of its strategic targets in its 2010-2012 strategy. Fáilte Ireland's research shows that in 2011, an estimated 3.4m overseas visitors engaged in cultural activities while in Ireland and spent an estimated €2.8b while in the country.

The Merrion Square Innovation Network (MSIN) which is the subject of this paper, is a group of 36 stakeholders from the cultural and hospitality sector who were brought together by the good offices of Mary King and Gráinne Millar to begin to develop the Merrion Square area in Dublin as an attractive, more integrated and vibrant cultural tourism destination for Dublin. The funding for the initiative was generously provided by Fáilte Ireland.

This project specifically set out to find a creative and collaborative way of working, with the aim of developing Merrion Square as a new, dynamic and appealing centre for cultural tourism in Dublin. An essential part of realising this ambition required that the various stakeholders in Merrion Square be brought together and engaged in developing a palette of new, customer-centred ideas to connect the various cultural offerings around the square. Ultimately, they intended the whole offering could be far more than merely the sum of the parts. They approached the corresponding author of this paper to facilitate four participative and creative workshops as part of managing the process of realising the potential of the area and making effective use of its considerable and distinctive cultural assets. The chosen methodology was the design thinking process as it is a method proven to encourage both creativity and close collaboration among multiple stakeholders.

2.0 Regional Systems of Innovation

Since the economic downturn post 2007, Fáilte Ireland had been given a significantly more pro-active role to actively stimulate innovation in the tourism sector. In this new role, Fáilte Ireland was effectively acting in a way that is the subject of much recent research and reporting in literature around 'innovation systems'. The concept of an innovation system has become a favoured framework to analyse the driving forces and mechanisms that mediate the extent and the outcomes of innovative behaviour in regional tourism clusters (Hjalager, 2010). An innovation system is an ecosystem in which multiple actors, institutions and the state interact to share knowledge and learning that leads to innovation. (Edquist 2006; World Bank 2006). The roles of innovation intermediary or, the more narrow, innovation (knowledge) broker are increasingly recognised to be pivotal, especially where spontaneous or market-driven motivations fail to bring about innovation. Innovation brokers do not directly engage in innovation activity but

support innovation from an independent third party position (Klerkx and Leeuwis 2009; Winch and Courtney 2007). The broker role is often left to the state to fulfil. In this case, we suggest the hitherto failure to exploit Merrion Square's full commercial potential may be regarded from the perspective of a problem-focused innovation system, with the state agency, Fáilte Ireland in partnership with a cultural expert, fulfilling the role of



Figure 4: Merrion Square West



Figure 5: Government Buildings on Merrion Square

innovation broker among the Square's various actors. Cooke (2001) coined the term 'regional system of innovation' to describe the systems of innovation which are localised to a specific region. This is one level below the national system of innovation and usually refers to a locality, like Merrion Square, where cultural or historical homogeneity provide an opportunity for economic development (Tiffin and Kunc, 2011). However, some prior research has shown that there are considerable difficulties in coordinating activities, effort and priorities between multiple stakeholders. Carson et al (2014) in their study of South Australia studied a similar opportunity in 'Clare Valley' but found that the stakeholders were unable to overcome some key barriers. The principle ones were: a culture of operating in isolation; an embedded reliance on the public sector for leadership in such initiatives and a limited ambition for real change.

2.1 Design Thinking innovation methodology

Lockwood (2010) asserts that design thinking is a human-centred innovation process that emphasizes observation,

collaboration, fast learning, visualization of ideas, rapid concept prototyping, and concurrent business analysis which ultimately contributes to business strategy and especially innovation. Organisations are increasingly using design-thinking because it is an integrative process that involves customers, designers and business people and applies their insights for product, service and sometimes even business design.

Lafley et al (p59) suggest that ‘constructing strategic possibilities, especially ones that are genuinely new, is the ultimate creative act in business.’ Design thinking helps this process by searching for a deeper understanding of customer needs and combining that understanding with creative ideas, leading to a better outcome and financial performance for the organisation in the future (Wattanasupachoke, 2012). Martin (2012) writes that businesses need design thinking; a productive mix of analytical thinking and intuitive thinking if they want to design a future that is more than simply an extrapolation of the past. He argues that large organisations place an overreliance on analytical tools without realizing that “you cannot use them (analytical tools) to demonstrate any new idea in advance. So if you’re using them, you’re using them to reinforce *existing* ideas. They have an embedded assumption that the future is going to look a lot like the past.” (p11). He does not argue that organisations ignore their analytical tools and data but that they add a little intuitive thinking and artistry to develop a design thinking approach.

Innovation is often analysed as being either ‘technology-push’ or ‘market-pull’ (Rothwell, 1983) but in more recent literature, a third approach to innovation has been developed which reflects the design-led practices adopted by successful Italian manufacturers (Verganti, 2008, 2009) as well as leading technology companies like IBM and SAP. Design thinking as an approach to innovation argues that not all innovation can be classified as either technology-push or market-pull. This newer perspective on the innovation process that is gaining popularity is based on design-thinking (Martin, 2009). Unlike the user-centered design approach, where innovations are dictated and driven by user needs, design-driven innovations are mainly derived from ‘firms’ visions about possible new product languages and meanings that could diffuse in society.’ (Dell’Era and Verganti, 2009)

Norman and Verganti (2014) elaborate on the two dimensions of radical innovation, namely technology and meaning. Innovating along the ‘meaning’ dimension is particularly well served by a design thinking methodology that is collaborative and human-centred.

Design-thinking innovation is an approach to innovation that elevates the intrinsic socio-cultural meaning within the products and services. Design thinking is primarily an innovation process - an approach to resolving the “fuzzy front end” and a superior method with which to discover unmet needs and create new product and service offerings, not to mention transforming businesses through solving “wicked” problems (Lockwood, 2009).

Nominally, based upon the original Latin origin of the word design; ‘designare’ to give meaning to or to assign meaning; the principle is that the qualities of the new product or service extend considerably beyond

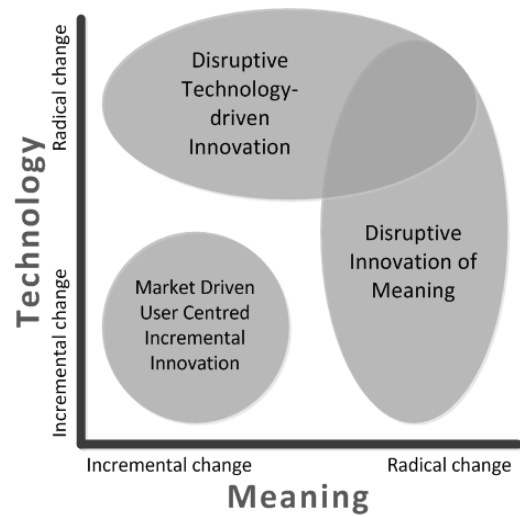


Figure 6: Innovations of technology and meaning (Norman & Verganti, 2014)

merely functional characteristics to also provide enhanced design cues that reinforce their socio-cultural meaning. Dell’era and Verganti (2009) argue that the principles of design thinking are not merely considerations around physical product design and styling. They comment that “a product can bring messages to the market in several ways and styling is just one of them; while the functionalities of a product aim to satisfy the operative needs of the customer, its product meanings aim to satisfy the emotional and socio-cultural needs of the customer. (p 39).

Dell’era and Verganti (2009) cite examples like Alessi and Archimedes (well known Italian lifestyle brands) who use design thinking to add attractive additional dimensions to their innovation ideas and outputs. This approach is also favoured by innovation consultancies such as IDEO (Brown, 2008). Implicit in the design thinking approach to innovation is a reliance on ethnographic research to ensure the ideas are authentically user-centred. Rapid prototyping and customer immersion and involvement in the co-creation of the product or service is also a feature of this approach.

Brown (2008) defines design thinking as a discipline that uses the designer’s sensibility and practices to match people’s needs with what is technologically feasible and what, through a viable business strategy, can be converted into a valuable market opportunity. Brown (2008) notes that, historically, designers would have played merely a supporting, ‘downstream’ role in the innovation process; ‘merely to put a beautiful wrapper on the idea’ (p. 86). Now, however, the role, the thinking

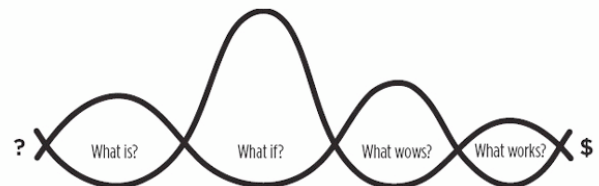


Figure 7: Solving Problems with Design Thinking (Liedtka et al, 2013)

and the methods of designers are being elevated from the merely tactical to be strategic and central to the innovation process. Neumeier (2010: p18) agrees that ‘design has been waiting patiently in the wings for nearly a century, having been relegated to supporting roles and

stand-in parts.’ He suggests that the time has now come for it to step forward and create rule-bending innovation across the board and not simply be seen as a ‘beauty-salon for brands’.

Design thinking is both a philosophy and a process. In 2011, a number of researchers at the University of Virginia’s Darden Business School and the Design Management Institute published *Designing for Growth: A Design Thinking Tool Kit for Managers*, proposed a four step model of the design-thinking process:

Each of the four questions – What is?; What if?; What wows?; What works? – explores a different stage of the design thinking process. “What is?” examines current reality. ‘What if’ uses the learning from that first stage to envision multiple options for creating a new future. ‘What wows’ helps managers make some choices about where to focus first and “What works” takes them into the real world to interact with actual users through small experiments. (Liedtka, 2014: p40)

This four stage model was then further developed to suggest 10 practices which were associated with the various stages across the process.

Visualisation

Using Imagery to envision possibilities and bring them to life

Concept Development

Assembling innovative elements into a coherent alternative solution that can be explored and evaluated.

Journey Mapping

Assessing the existing experience through the customers’ eyes.

Assumption Testing

Locating and testing the key assumptions that will drive the success or failure of a concept.

Value Chain Analysis

Assessing the current value chain that supports the customer’s journey.

Rapid Prototyping

Expressing a new concept in a tangible form for exploration, testing and refinement.

Mind Mapping

Generating insights from exploration activities and using those to create design criteria.

Brainstorming

Generating new possibilities and new alternative business models.

Customer Co-Creation

Enrolling customers to participate in creating the solution that best meets their needs.

Learning Launch

Creating an affordable experiment that lets customers experience the new solution over an extended period to test key assumptions and market data.

Denning (2013: p30) suggests that design thinking can speed up innovation in one important way, viz. if the ideation stage has been ‘blocked by lack of ideas.’

Dunne and Martin (2006) proposes a model of design thinking that describes how to deal with such a deficit of ideas. Martin suggests that design thinking combines the generation of new ideas with their analysis

and an evaluation of how they are likely to perform in the market when (or if) implemented. A design thinker uses abduction to generate the novel ideas, deduction to follow the ideas to their logical consequence and to help predict the likely outcomes that will materialise from them. Design thinking then relies on inductive logic to be able to generate theory or insight from the results.

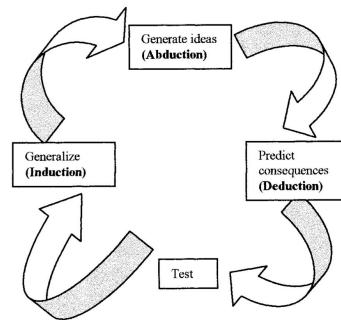


Figure 8. Design Thinking

In the case of Merrion Square; the design thinking process was followed in order, inter alia, to create some new ideas in the innovation pipeline for the various stakeholders. Hence, it operated in the fuzzy-front-end of the innovation process. The process followed in this case was the Stanford D-School model.

Brown and Wyatt (2010) observe that design thinking taps into abilities most people have but that are overlooked by more conventional problem-solving approaches. Design thinking focuses on creating products and services that are human centred; the process is itself inherently human because it draws on our ability to be intuitive, to recognise patterns, to construct ideas that have emotional resonance as well as having a functional rationale and to be able to express ideas in non verbal ways.

They contend that the design thinking process is best thought of as a series of overlapping spaces of which the D-School in Stanford have developed a model.

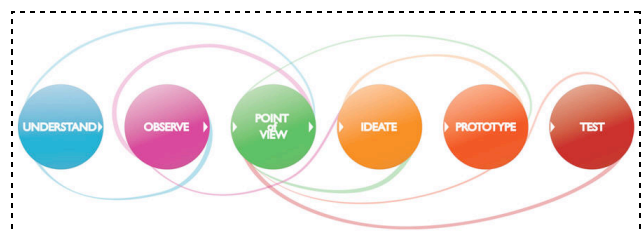


Figure 9. The D-School Model

This is a six-step model that begins with a deep understanding of the prevailing status quo or operating context in which the project is being brought to life. It then switches focus, away from the industry, towards the customer and requires that the consumer is at the heart of the process. In this phase, deep customer insight is required which is often acquired through ethnographic research. The model then moves from divergent thinking and converges around a specific *point of view* which is a mechanism to articulate the consumers’ real wants from the category. From this stage, ideas are generated to fulfil this point of view and once a palette of ideas has been generated, the most promising ones are worked into testable concepts (prototypes) and these are then tested with consumers, often in what is called ‘heartbeat research’ to establish whether the ideas have much or any

traction with the target audience for whom they have been developed.

3. Methodology

By definition, innovation requires ‘a shift from the norms of average behaviour’ (Stevenson and Jarillo, 1990, p. 20). Hence, it is a topic that not merely invites but requires an in-depth evaluation of the people, processes, situations, events and contexts in which it happens (Savage and Black, 1995). Sundstrom and Zika-Viktorsson (2009) acknowledge that although innovation is being studied with ever increasing frequency and intensity, there is still very limited knowledge of how internal (organisational) factors and external factors affect how innovation actually takes place within projects. Van de Ven and Poole (1990; p.311) hold that ‘an appreciation of the temporal sequence of activities in developing and implementing new ideas is fundamental to the management of innovation.’

This paper is based on a single, revelatory case-study surrounding the development of an innovation network of engaged collaborators, coming together to build an innovation pipeline for Merrion Square, using design thinking. The approach is inductive. The study was constructed in a series of three consecutive phases to provide increasing focus to the investigation.

The first step in the process required face-to-face meetings with all the key stakeholders (40 meetings) to recruit them into the initiative, by inviting them to join a new innovation network. These stakeholders were the cultural and hospitality organisations headquartered on Merrion Square. The majority of these are public sector (i.e. National Gallery) or not-for-profit (i.e. Architectural Archive) organisations. However, the project also included a number of commercial interests including some of Dublin’s most upmarket and successful hotels including the Merrion Hotel and the Shelbourne Hotel. The meetings had all to be prearranged with a phone call and, without exception, they took place in the organisations’ premises on Merrion Square. These meetings were all organised and attended by the authors.

Step Two: At the heart of the initiative was a series of design thinking workshops in which the participants would be asked to work in teams to do customer insight work; journey mapping; brainstorming and concept and prototype development as well as consumer research to validate and improve the concepts. There were four workshops of which two were full day sessions with the other two being half day workshops. These workshops followed precisely the themes of the D-School Design Thinking process.

The third element of the case is the final presentation of the ideas to some key decision makers in the management of Dublin city’s affairs. Invitations for this presentation were issued to the national Minister for Tourism; the city Architect; the Lord Mayor and various functional heads of office of public works; parks department etc. Also in attendance were key stakeholders from Merrion Square and a number of business leaders.

4. The Case

From the beginning, the Merrion Square project adopted an open innovation strategy, to engage a wide group of local stakeholders (both cultural and hospitality) and other potentially interested organisations and to encourage new thinking and ideas about the opportunities for collective tourism development that might be available by coordinating the rich heritage of the institutions and organisations located in the Merrion Square area. The challenge was to develop a model for clustering cultural organisations in Merrion Square to build and strengthen the sense of place, identity and community, to capture what is unique and distinctive about this part of the city and to release (and enhance) the potential of the Network’s constituent organisations.

Once phase one was complete, the stakeholders were engaged and had committed to join the (newly formed) Merrion Square Innovation Network although many were unsure what might lie ahead in the process. Nevertheless, they were persuaded that some advantages were likely to materialise from partnership and collaboration with their neighbouring organisations. There was an extraordinarily high uptake with only one organisation declining to become involved.

In all, Mary and Gráinne met with over 40 institutions. Their invitation was straightforward. They asked the institutions to join a new innovation network where they would get to meet the other businesses and cultural institutions on the square. Through the network Fáilte Ireland were going to provide some expert innovation training. Members of the network would be invited to attend four separate day-long workshops where they would learn how to enhance their individual and collective innovation capability. The workshops would teach them the design-thinking approach to innovation and would help them generate new ideas to bring new vibrancy into the square and, of course, to their own businesses. Customers would be invited to the innovation workshops and ideas would be developed, illustrated, prototyped (where possible) and road-tested with consumers in a rapid-prototyping way.

The group who took part represented a large and diverse collection of private and public sector organisations. Within the group were some large prestigious hotels, a church, a library, a gallery, a concert hall, an architectural practice and various other interested parties. Subscribers to the Merrion Square Innovation Network can be found on the group’s website (www.merriionsquare.ie). Such wide diversity brought a welcome depth of expertise and also a high level of creativity to the process.

4.1 Designing the Programme

The four day programme would be designed to generate customer-centred (user-centred) ideas for Merrion Square and following on from the fourth meeting a final meeting was to be arranged in Ireland’s National Concert Hall where the ideas would be pitched to Ireland’s Minister for Tourism, the city Mayor and the heads of the civil service

responsible for planning, public works, public spaces along with the city architect.

Understand

The programme was created to mirror the design-thinking process and relied on elements from the d.school model as well as referring to the Darden Model. The first session was devoted to the ‘Understand’ or “What is?” element of the process where the delegates started to define precisely what was the nature of the ‘problem’ to be solved or the opportunity being addressed. This session produced a set of documents framing the challenge; a vision for the group, some objectives and short and long term metrics to measure future performance and success. Part of this element required sharing information and experiences between members of the network; many of whom had never even met before despite having been neighbours on the square for many decades. In effect, even after the first session, part of the Fáilte Ireland objective and brokering role had been achieved by virtue of creating new relationships between stakeholders who each shared a common objective. Quite quickly, the team began to work efficiently to produce some artifacts for the group – such as a vision, mission and purpose. The group also shared various pockets of data they had; visitor numbers and some tourist research. Many are funded by the state and had been mandated by their department to ‘do more with less’ and hence they could quickly see advantages to the type of collaboration inherent in membership in this coalition of innovation practice.

Observe

For stage two, the second workshop, the group, were divided into four teams, and were asked to ‘get under the skin of a typical customer’. The themes for each of the four teams were deliberate with each one representing a key customer segment. They were given examples of ‘personas’ and shown customer segmentation maps. Each team was asked to do a little ethnographic research and to observe and photograph visitors to the square.. They were to return to the next workshop with some photographs; some observations and during the workshop, these observations would be converted to meaningful insights. Each team then developed a very vivid portrait of a customer segment, complete with an ethnography board showing examples of this type of customer.

A guest presenter was also invited to this workshop – the head of a large tour operator whose business it is to sell Dublin tours in the US and has made a successful career from understanding and providing what tourists want when they visit Dublin. The speaker made it very clear that the Merrion Square experience is far from best-in-class; she noted that Americans were looking for bespoke experiences which she referred to as ‘behind the rope’ tours where they would get access to behind the scenes in various tourist attractions. Merrion Square with its closed doors was not aligned to the wants and needs of the modern tourist. This workshop was centred on putting the customer first; on forcing the institutions to think ‘outside-in’ rather than the other way round. Thinking from the users’ point of view was

definitely a new lens for many of the delegates and this day had a significant impact on the rest of the process.

The Dublin Civic Trust also spoke to the group that day and they made explicit the need to balance the ideas for future development with the need not to compromise the distinct and valuable heritage attached to Merrion Square. This speaker put the square into an historical context and emphasised that while it may be imperfect as a tourist experience; it was almost perfect enough to earn a place on the tentative list of world heritage sites because of its intact Georgian architecture.

Ideate & Prototype (What-if?)

Workshop three followed two weeks later and it kept the participants in their teams; each team had an archetypal customer representing a significant market segment. The purpose of the session was to use various techniques to elicit ideas for each segment. To start the day, a Futurologist was brought in to address the issue of consumer trends and to articulate which ones were likely to impact most on tourist wants, needs and behaviours in the medium term. This provided an interesting springboard from which to break into generating new, high potential ideas. A key feature of this workshop was the presence of a professional graphic artist who attended the session to record in illustration all of the key ideas. The graphic artist captured all the ideas on A2 art-board and created colourful graphic interpretations of each of the ideas. These illustrations acted as vivid visual prototypes of the ideas.



Figure 10: ‘What if’ idea generation

Prototype & Test (What works?)

Two weeks later, the fourth and final workshop took place and this was where the teams worked to convert their ideas into testable concepts. They were schooled in some professional techniques; learning how to convert raw, early stage ideas into testable, fully-finished, development-ready concepts. Once again, an illustrator was present. The group also received a presentation from an international academic on the topic of ‘Blue Ocean Strategy’. Each team developed a palette of new ideas and each team focussed their ideas on the needs of the customer target segment that they had been working on. In this session, too, idea-screeners were developed to assist the teams in ranking their ideas. Working with the illustrator and with help from a professional copywriter, the teams ended up with a roadmap of innovative ideas for



Figure 11: Graphic artist capturing teams' ideas

Merrion Square. Each set of ideas was developed with a specific customer segment in mind. Insofar as they could, the teams had privately tested the ideas with individuals or groups they were able to access who matched their target segment characteristics.

Test: Getting Support for the Ideas

The final part of this section of the design-thinking project involved assembling all the key stakeholders in the public service who have responsibility for urban, tourism or business development. By now, the organisations on Merrion Square had been working together for a couple of months and their relationships and ways of working were well established. They now had a portfolio of novel ideas with which they were justifiably pleased. But, one of the dangers that awaits new ideas is that they fail to attract a champion or a sponsor and they can often perish before they find support.

Consequently, the first thing Fáilte Ireland scheduled was this final group presentation to senior figures in government and public service. It took place in an appropriate venue, the National Concert Hall and there was a large and influential audience; including representatives from the private sector who were interested in pursuing some of the ideas as part of their own CSR agenda.

Each team had roughly an hour to present their ideas and to show their rough prototypes. As you'd expect from such a creative group, some of the ideas were spectacular. Some involved redesigning the square and putting a glass restaurant in the middle of it, designed along the lines of the Apple store in 5th Avenue. Many suggested making the square a free-wifi area to encourage people to spend more time there. One idea involved building a techno-glass wall in the centre of the Square which would act as a video or skype link with similar techno walls in other parks like Union Square in San Francisco or Central Park in Manhattan. The wall would be linked periodically to the other parks and people with friends and relations abroad could schedule to come and meet virtually and see and talk one another. Another suggestion was to restore the Square to an Elizabethan garden divided into nine sections. Each section would have a theme; a children's playground in one corner; a boules court in another; a lavender, fragrance garden in another; a giant chess board in another and so on. The ideas were subdivided into short, medium and long term proposals with short term reserved for those which might be achieved within 12-18 months; Medium – 2-3 years and Long Term indicating anything over 3 years.

Many of the short-term ideas revolved around the concept of 'animation'; bringing new life, new activities



Figure 13: Newly developed collective logo for Merrion Square

to the square- walking tours, roof-top tours, costume tours or events on the square: Hallowe'en in the Square; Christmas in the Square (aka Tivoli gardens). At the core of some of the proposals was the simple, elementary idea of joining up the exhibitions and activities of the cultural institutions on the Square and cross promoting one another's events and exhibitions.

Following the big presentation, which was close to Christmas in 2011, the group were called together for one final meeting to close out this element of the design-thinking project. At this meeting, a steering team was put in place that is led by Fáilte Ireland but includes key

Short Term	Medium Term	Long Term
Merrion Square App & Website	Major Garden refurbishment including a running track on the perimeter of Square	Restaurant – a glass restaurant built inside the Square
'Speakers Corner' type events	Daytime Tours of Cultural Highlights	Digital Wall
Summer Prom Concerts	Night time and roof-top tours	Designated 'Art Square'
Coordinated schedule of events	Free Wi-fi	Underground car-park
New brand to communicate the desired look and feel of the square	Performance Space for big events	Digital Wall
Designate some buildings 'open' to tourists	Christmas Market (like Tivoli)	Restored Elizabethan garden

Figure 12: Ideas roadmaps from teams

players from the original, larger group. The team began the work of making some of the ideas take shape in the square. At this point, in order to bring some of the promising ideas to fruition with a degree of urgency, a project management company was appointed and funding for this resource was made available by Failte Ireland.

Working alongside the core group, they developed a collective logo for Merrion Square. They developed a new website and app to showcase the various activities available on the Square so that they would be available in one central point for visitors. In another lucky coincidence for them, a search in the land registry revealed that the very first house on the square was built in 1762 – which made 2012 an auspicious date and gave the team an anniversary to work towards.

In 2012, the activities around Merrion Square have been constant. The MSIN have worked with many other stakeholders either to actively organise or merely to facilitate some events and activities, including a new partnership with Dublin City Council who have taken renewed interest in the park. The Spring saw thousands of people converge in Merrion Square for the World Street Performing Championships; the national day in March, St Patrick’s Day, brought a new and bigger-than-ever festival. Culture Night came to Merrion Square with thousands more visitors visiting cultural buildings. The MSIN directly manage and promote some major events for Christmas and Halloween and the park has been designated by the City Council as a free wi-fi zone. A new group called ‘Supper on the Square’ has been formed and there are monthly dinners hosted and catered in some of the great houses on the Square. In 2013, in response to the work of the MSIN and increased activity in Merrion Square, Dublin City Council launched a Conservation and Development Plan which they unveiled in May 2014. The success of the Merrion Square Innovation Network has been a catalyst resulting in a snowball effect of a number of other, separate initiatives also being developed on Merrion Square. Among these in the summer of 2014, Merrion Square park became a giant outdoor cinema for a series of evening events called the *Happenings*. Thousands of people queued to get into the square to see a giant screen for showings of *Dead Poet’s Society* and *Casablanca*.



Figure 15: Dead Poets Society Screening in Merrion Square August 2014

Also in 2014, Merrion Square started to host a weekly food market on Thursdays. The idea is to showcase Ireland’s best Irish food producers and traders: the Merrion Square Lunchtime weekly Market will offer local residents and surrounding office staff a healthy alternative for their lunch time break. Freshly cooked gourmet foods from the Mediterranean, Asia, South America & Europe are on offer.

Another development, aimed this time at the corporate market is ‘Meetings on the Square’ which is a service through which organisations can book meeting



Figure 14: A themed activity gathering in Merrion Square in 2012

rooms and facilities on Merrion Square, using some of the great rooms belonging to the houses in the Merrion Square Innovation Network.

All of these activities are bringing new people and ideas into Merrion Square in a way that had never been thought of before. This case illustrates the power of design-thinking in an innovation context. It has accomplished a great deal in a very short time. Within the Square two things have been developed; first, a new capability to innovate and second a suite of new ideas to add value to the stakeholders collectively and individually.

5. Discussion

5.1 Generalisable Approaches

Although definitive tourism numbers are hard to access, 85% of the organisations involved in this design-thinking experiment are reporting increased visitor numbers which they consider to be at least partially attributable to the initiative. These organisations never had an organising nucleus before ; they had operated independently – in a silo’ed way – and now most of them have chosen to continue the connection by forming an umbrella holding company which raises funds to develop activities and events for the square. A number of the ideas, generated through the programme, have now been acted upon including the website and app; the provision of free wi-fi in the Square and a series of coordinated events to coincide with Easter, Halloween and Christmas. There are however, constraints emerging relating to the ongoing management of events and promotion due to the voluntary nature of the MSIN.

5.2 Learning from the Programme

There were a number of insights to emerge from the programme. First, is that Design Thinking is not only a process but also a way of working. To do it well demands close collaboration and this had enormous benefits for a group of independent organisations with disparate missions, who shared only a prestige location and an appetite for development. Once on this programme, the participants worked well together, learning new skills like customer insight, ideation, prototype development.

This is the first time this strategic innovation and Design Thinking approach has been used in the context of cultural tourism development in Ireland. This is important as many of Ireland's cultural and heritage resources remain hidden from both citizens and visitors. Many languish in the mistaken belief that it takes significant resources to develop into appealing visitor attractions. This project demonstrates how with a modest budget and through a user-centred approach to innovation, stakeholders can be brought together, ideas can be developed which in turn can lead to a common vision that is directly linked to the needs and opportunities in the marketplace. The process enabled people to come together as a community and with a clear vision work towards implementation.

That the group shared a common goal was immensely important. At the first meeting, the teams explored precisely what was the problem they wanted to solve and by doing that in a facilitated way; they had a clear, unambiguous target or North star to aim for.

Having a diverse set of stakeholders, which included niche, not-for-profit cultural organisations alongside major hotel groups who are highly commercial, added a level of mission, business model and perspective diversity and business insight that blended well to generate highly creative, novel and appropriate ideas.

Running the programme over a tight period (8 weeks) gave people focus to develop ideas in a concentrated timeframe. Moreover, having a major presentation in front of an influential audience as the end-point made people raise their game and develop their proposals to a very high level for the finale. Having such a big presentation for the finish adds a layer of tangible excitement and drama.

Running the meetings in the premises of Merrion Square institutions rooted the ideas and the process in the right context. Nondescript meeting rooms in hotels off-site would have diluted the sense of place and purpose.

Use of an independent professional design-thinking expert as mediator to facilitate the meetings helped to keep the programme on track. It also eliminated any necessity for individual members to take a leadership role in the process. In short, it obviated any prospect of 'politics' infecting the process. As well as a facilitator, there was a professional graphic artist involved to help render the ideas into visual prototypes and this accelerated the process from raw idea to testable concept.

The ideas were intended, insofar as is possible, to be future-proofed. To help accomplish this, the team brought in a futurologist and received some insight on the likely future trends in the experience and cultural tourism. Having such insights gave the team confidence in the validity of their ideas.

A caveat for the process is that this element lies squarely in the fuzzy-front-end; in the idea generation phase of the innovation chain.

5.3 Is the model transferable?

A number of moons aligned in this instance and these undoubtedly contributed to the project's success. One was the involvement of Fáilte Ireland. The national tourist agency has, since the recession, been seeking a new business model; a new way of operating as it can no

longer be a funder for hotels and other infrastructure; its contribution has now to be more knowledge based. The Merrion Square project has been a pilot for a new network innovation brokering concept for Fáilte Ireland. Fáilte Ireland was the funder for this project, although the funding requirement was very limited. Moreover, organisations like to work with Fáilte Ireland as it connects them formally with possible sources of future funding or revenue through such collaboration. In terms of transferability, having a sponsor for such a project seems important.

Another positive influence was the involvement of Gráinne Millar who had a strong track record in creative cluster development and had been responsible for a major cultural collaborations project before. Gráinne had brought Culture Night successfully into Dublin and beyond. She had wide and valuable experience in getting cultural institutions to collaborate in an overarching project.

The process itself, though, and the collaboration it demands are transferable to many contexts. This group were involved in the development of new ideas and services for a cultural tourism cluster. The approach could have been used in almost any context.

Following a structure like the Darden or d.school model provides just enough direction to be helpful without imposing an overbearing process which can cauterize the creativity required.

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