

# Hidden Dublin: An Essay on a Student Centred Cultural Map

## Introduction

This project explores how students interact with cultural life in Dublin and how their experiences can be translated into a coherent visual overview. The intention was to understand the cultural landscape from a student perspective rather than through tourist oriented narratives, and to create a conceptual map that reflects real patterns of participation. The process followed the structure of This Is Service Design Doing, beginning with research, continuing through synthesis, and resulting in an early conceptual representation rather than a complete prototype. The final outcome serves as a visual framework that organises the city's cultural possibilities into a form that is eye-catching, student focused, and grounded in evidence.

### 1. Context and Theoretical Foundation

Cultural participation is shaped by values, emotions and personal associations rather than by information alone. Early journal entries examined Daniel Pink's argument on abundance, Asia and automation, where material goods and basic access are no longer the primary differentiators. In such contexts, people seek belonging, meaning and emotional resonance. This idea supports the notion that students do not merely attend cultural events for content, but for the atmosphere, the feeling of discovery and the sense of place that accompanies them.

Emotional design theories emphasise similar themes. Successful cultural experiences are often those that offer a combination of familiarity and novelty, or a sense of intimacy within the city. This aligns with Norman's discussion of visceral and reflective experience, where design influences how an environment is interpreted and remembered.

Service design frameworks provide structure for exploring these ideas. This Is Service Design Doing describes design thinking as a sequence of opening and narrowing, where research first expands the understanding of a situation and synthesis later distils insight into direction. The project relied heavily on this logic, especially in the Discover and Define phases, where the aim was to gather lived experiences rather than confirm assumptions. The conceptual map that resulted is an example of an early artefact, where structure and insight take priority over graphical detail.

## 2. Research Methods

The primary method used for collecting insights was a student centred survey created through Typeform. Before designing the survey, earlier journal entries focused on clarifying the purpose of data collection, following the guidance in This Is Service Design Doing, which stresses that early research must represent the real conditions of users as closely as possible.

The survey explored several areas:

- cultural attendance frequency
- preferred event types
- discovery channels
- barriers to participation
- attitudes toward authenticity, affordability and atmosphere
- preferences for future cultural guides

The design of the questions reflected a balance between quantitative structure and open responses, allowing thematic interpretation. Logic branching was included to capture additional context when needed. The survey was distributed to a sample of students across different backgrounds, including Irish, Erasmus and international participants.

A screenshot of the survey interface shows the clean, minimal layout that supported the focus of the research.

The image shows three survey questions from a Typeform interface, each with a clean, minimalist design. The questions are:

- 2- Where do you live during the semester?\***  
Description (optional)  
Options: A On-campus, B Dublin city centre (Dublin 1-8), C Greater Dublin area (Dublin 9-24), D Outside Dublin but commute in, E Prefer not to say
- 3- How interested are you in cultural activities overall?\***  
Description (optional)  
Scale: 1 Not interested, 5 Highly interested  
Options: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5
- 5- Which types of cultural events do you usually attend?\***  
Description (optional)  
Options: A Art exhibitions, B Music gigs, C Theatre, D Film, E Heritage sites, F Community or student events, G Other

The analysis process involved grouping responses into categories and examining commonalities across them. This approach follows what TISDD describes as ‘building

the research wall,' where information is arranged visually to reveal patterns that might not be visible through isolated reading.

### **3. Research Findings**

The survey revealed several meaningful insights. One of the most unexpected was that students did not perceive cultural information in Dublin as being specifically tailored to tourists. Most respondents chose "No" or "Not sure" when asked if they felt events were directed more toward tourists than students. This contradicted the project's early assumption, but also aligned with TISDD's idea that users often describe symptoms rather than the underlying structure. Students did not frame their difficulty in terms of exclusion, but rather in terms of fragmentation and inconsistency.

The strongest findings emerged in the areas of discovery and value. Cultural information is primarily found through:

- friends and peer networks
- Instagram or TikTok
- university societies
- occasional posters or Google searches

This demonstrates that cultural participation is socially mediated and algorithm driven. Students rely on trusted channels rather than institutional or official sources.

Another consistent insight concerned barriers, where respondents often highlighted:

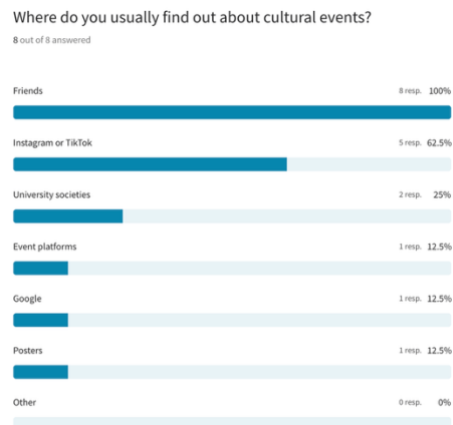
- high cost
- time constraints
- transport or unfamiliar neighbourhoods
- simply not knowing what is happening

Affordability was described as important or extremely important by a large majority of participants.

Preferences for cultural experiences were also clear. Students valued authenticity, but defined it through feelings of locality, discovery and connection to the city rather than through a direct opposition to tourism. Majority of the responses suggested that

authentic experiences were those that felt informal, community based or creatively independent.

A screenshot of the survey results illustrates the distribution of discovery channels and barriers.



These findings shaped the problem definition:

students are surrounded by cultural opportunities, but they lack a simple and trustworthy structure that helps them navigate these opportunities with intention.

#### 4. Insight Synthesis and Problem Definition

Synthesis involved clustering the findings into themes such as discovery, trust, barriers, emotional value and accessibility. The process made it clear that the central issue was not that information was inaccessible, but that it was diffused and scattered. Students navigate much of the cultural environment through chance rather than through a clear overview.

This led to the final How Might We statement, developed in the Define stage:

How might we create a student centred cultural guide that organises Dublin's dispersed cultural information into a clear and approachable overview?

This statement provided direction for the design phase and ensured that the conceptual map would reflect the values and needs expressed by students rather than assumptions made at the beginning of the project.

## 5. Concept Development

The development phase focused on transforming insights into a visual conceptual structure. The map began with an exploration of visual elements. The chosen palette was based on moss greens and bright yellow, inspired by the colours of Dublin city buses, as well as the muted tones associated with the city's climate and urban character. This palette created a visual link to Dublin while maintaining a sense of warmth and clarity.

A screenshot of the gradient layout shows how the colour transitions anchor the map composition.



Typography was unified through the use of Arial Rounded MT Bold. This typeface has a friendly and contemporary appearance, which echoed the approachable tone intended for the project. Rounded letters also complemented the circular forms used in the icons and in the conceptual bubble examples.

A custom logo was created for Hidden Dublin, placed at the upper left corner of the page. The logo combines rounded type with a simple symbol that suggests discovery and access.



The next stage involved designing the legend. Categories were chosen based on frequency in the survey:

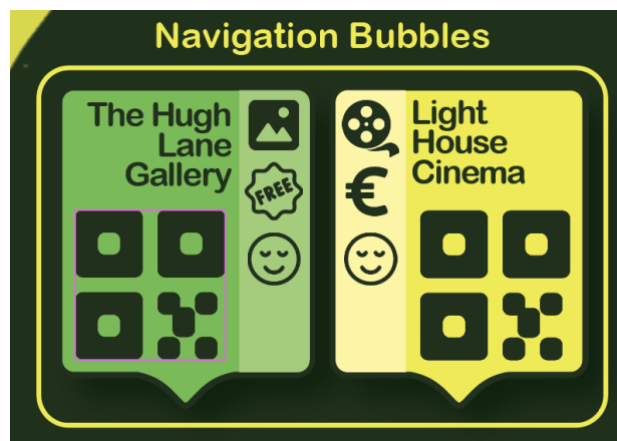
- art and exhibitions
- music and small gigs
- film and screenings

- community events
- heritage sites

Value indicators such as price, atmosphere and accessibility were incorporated based on the concerns expressed by participants. The legend was placed in the lower left corner for visual balance.



A challenge emerged when attempting to integrate bubble pointers for each location. Because the map is static, placing bubbles for every venue caused overlapping and visual congestion. This feature is more suited to a digital map, where users can zoom and pan. To resolve this, a dedicated panel on the right side of the map was created to show two example navigation bubbles. These act as representative samples to communicate how the system would function in a digital, interactive version.



The final layout arranged all components within a structured frame, balancing the map, the legend and the conceptual bubble panel.

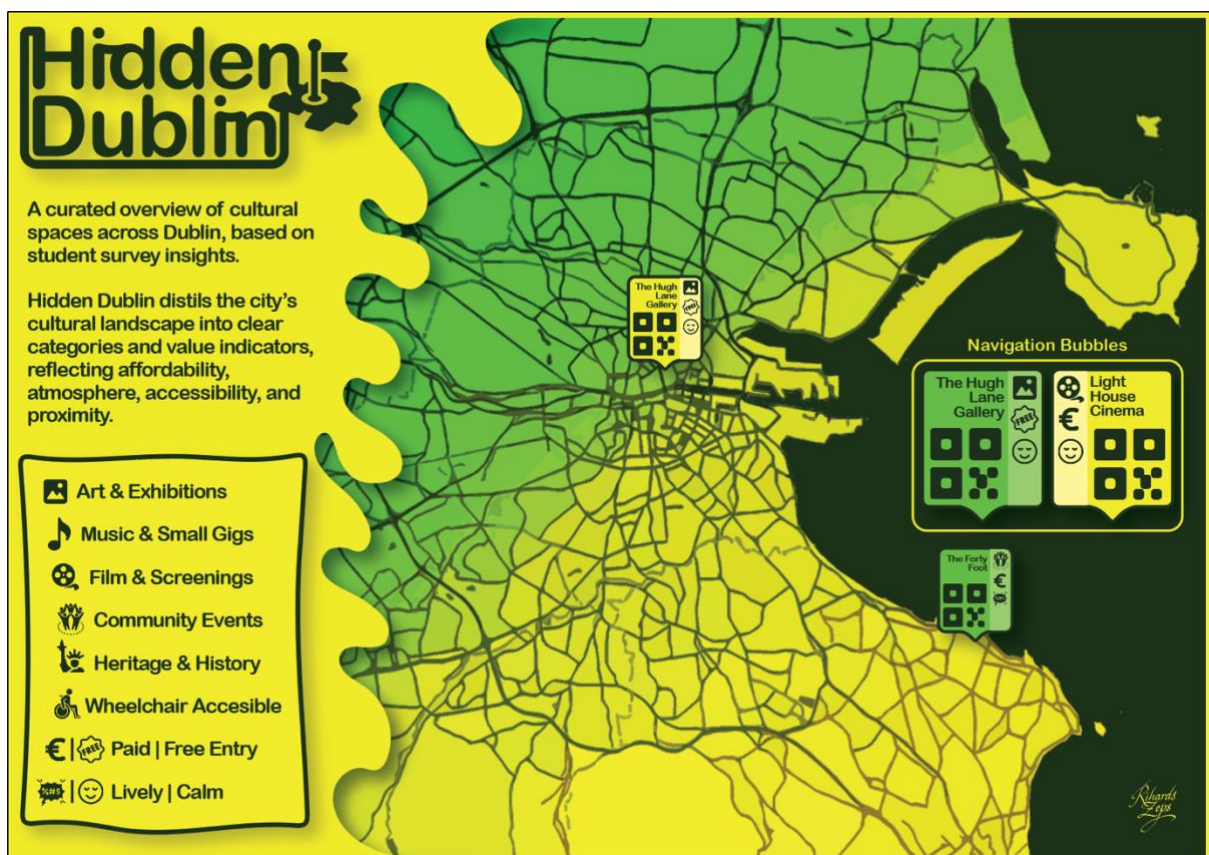
The map itself was constructed using a simplified road layout of Dublin, adjusted for clarity through colour and opacity changes. Cultural locations were placed according to real geography but selected to ensure that the map would remain readable. Locations were spaced across Dublin to avoid clustering.



## 6. Final Conceptual Map

The final conceptual map presents a curated set of cultural locations distributed across Dublin. The selection reflects the primary categories identified by students as well as the value indicators they prioritised. Each location is represented on the map by its approximate position, with two detailed bubble examples shown separately to demonstrate the future potential of an interactive version.

The map does not attempt to be comprehensive. It is intentionally conceptual, focusing on structure and clarity rather than completeness. Its purpose is to demonstrate how student insights can be organised visually to offer an accessible entry point into Dublin's cultural landscape.



## 7. Reflection and Conclusion

This project provided insight into how cultural participation is shaped by perception, trust and experience rather than by the availability of information alone. The design thinking process helped guide the progression from research to conceptualisation, ensuring that decisions remained tied to real student needs. The survey proved essential in clarifying assumptions and revealing the importance of curation over quantity.

The final conceptual map represents an early iteration, but it offers a structured overview that students can easily interpret. The next steps would involve testing an interactive version and expanding the cultural dataset. The project ultimately shifted my perspective on how cultural information functions in a city and emphasised the importance of clarity and meaningful orientation for students navigating unfamiliar environments.

## **References**

### **Books**

Stickdorn, M., Hormess, M. E., Lawrence, A. and Schneider, J. (2018) *This Is Service Design Doing: Applying Service Design Thinking in the Real World*. Sebastopol: O'Reilly Media.

Pink, D. (2006) *A Whole New Mind: Why Right-Brainers Will Rule the Future*. New York: Riverhead Books.

Norman, D. A. (2004) *Emotional Design: Why We Love (or Hate) Everyday Things*. New York: Basic Books.

### **Articles and Online Sources**

Medium (2021) 'Why emotional design creates more successful products that customers love'. Design Bootcamp. Available at: <https://medium.com/design-bootcamp/why-emotional-design-creates-more-successful-products-that-customers-love-d4def7296f5a> (Accessed: November 20).

### **Service Design / Methodology Sources**

Design Council (2005) *The Double Diamond: A universally accepted depiction of the design process*. Available at: <https://www.designcouncil.org.uk/our-resources/the-double-diamond/> (Accessed: November 20).

### **Cultural Locations Used in the Map**

The Hugh Lane Gallery (n.d.) *Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane*. Available at: <https://hughlane.ie> (Accessed: November 20).

Light House Cinema (n.d.) Light House Cinema Dublin. Available at:  
<https://lighthousecinema.ie> (Accessed: November 20).

J. D. Wetherspoon (2023) The Forty Foot (Dun Laoghaire). Available at:  
<https://www.jdwetherspoon.com/pubs/all-pubs/ireland/dublin/the-forty-foot-dun-laoghaire> (Accessed: November 20).