



Architecture students help Dungog through flood recovery

1233 ABC Newcastle By Robert Virtue

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PHOTO: University of Newcastle architecture and design students with Archicamp organiser Jiri Loew (right, standing) are working to design infrastructure for flood-ravaged Dungog. (1233 ABC Newcastle: Robert Virtue)

It has been six months since an intense east coast low pressure system rolled in across the New South Wales Hunter Valley, bringing torrential rain and cyclonic winds to large swathes of the region.

Dungog was one of the hardest hit areas, with a flood rushing through the town.

It inundated homes and claimed the lives of three people — Colin Webb, Robin MacDonald and Brian Wilson.

While the scars from the disaster still remain, architecture students from the University of Newcastle are working to heal the wounds.

The students have designed infrastructure projects for Dungog in a bid to help the town recover.

A project with a vision

Architecture student Jiri Loew has organised an annual weekend retreat for design students called Archicamp, where they gather to conceive projects that could feasibly be built in communities.

He had previously held the camp at his farm in Mudgee, but wanted to hold the event closer to Newcastle this year.

When the storm hit Dungog in April, the spark of an idea was conceived — the focus of the camp could be on helping the flood-ravaged town.

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MAP: Dungog 2420

"It became more and more obvious that this was the place where this should happen. It was just coincidental, like most good things," Mr Loew said.

"I started visiting Dungog talking to people, and inevitably a few people mentioned a few different things that we could do.

"After discussions with the local community and representatives from local groups, we identified three projects that are feasible, are realistic and that could really benefit the town and the community."

The three projects do not necessarily replace infrastructure that was significantly damaged in the flood, but rather are projects which will benefit the town and give it a boost.



PHOTO: The artificial turf at these Dungog tennis courts was ripped up during wild weather in April 2015. (1233 ABC Newcastle: Robert Virtue)

Projects focus on public land

The three projects students were working on focus on the Dungog Common, the showground master plan, and shade around the showground.

Dungog Common is a nature reserve featuring bushland and mountain bike trails.

Mr Loew said the students were working to improve cycling and camping facilities at the site.

"It's a piece of beautiful, pristine, unspoilt public land. It's just a beautiful place to work on — very inspiring in terms of design," he said.

"It can bring very tangible, very realistic benefits to the town economically and socially."

The Dungog showground master plan project involves students looking at a range of infrastructure options which could be developed at the site.

The third project involved students designing structures to boost shade at the showground.

Mr Loew said the students would design the projects up to development application stage, where it was hoped Dungog Shire Council would then fund the projects to make them a reality.

"All of these things are things that are needed and wanted by the clients," Mr Loew said.

"They need that first input, and it's very hard for these communities to get really good quality pro-bono work done before anything can start.

"It's sort of like free labour, but nothing is free — everyone is learning and everyone is getting something out of it."

It's exciting that it may actually happen and actually make a difference, compared to having this utopia in our head and it never really coming to life.

Hannah Millen, architecture student

Valuable experience for students

The University of Newcastle students involved in the architecture project said the experience was a valuable one.

"We're looking at a way to provide a long-term plan, as well as short-term devices that will help out the community," said third year architecture student Erica Johnson, who was working on the showground master plan.

"It's very sensitive to the buildings and the site that is already there.

"It's already got a good structure, so I don't think we're planning huge changes, but changes that will be able to be put into place relatively easily and with good effects."

Another third year architecture student, Hannah Millen, said it was rewarding to help Dungog after it had gone through so much heartbreak this year.

"It's more about creating more availability for social and cultural events to actually happen, rather than putting in certain structures," she said.

"It's a bit more rewarding than the projects that we do in our studio.

"It's exciting that it may actually happen and actually make a difference, compared to having this utopia in our head and it never really coming to life."

Topics: architecture, university-and-further-education, storm-disaster, community-and-society, dungog-2420, newcastle-2300

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