

**Campus development as civic interface: bridging rhetoric, practice, buildings and civic capital**

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## **Title Page**

**Title:** Campus Development as Civic Interface: Bridging Rhetoric, Practice, Buildings and Civic Capital

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## **Abstract**

Through two case studies of UK civic universities, this article examines the gap between universities' civic engagement rhetoric and the realities of campus development practice. Revealing approaches that were either tokenistic or non-participatory, it argues that such practices can erode trust and undermine civic responsibility, particularly when development sites are not actively treated as visible civic interfaces. The study introduces the Civic Interface model, offering a diagnostic framework for identifying when construction activities affect localities and how institutions can maximise positive impacts through targeted, context-sensitive engagement. The model demonstrates how everyday project decisions can either accumulate or deplete civic capital.

## **Keywords**

Civic Universities; Civic Engagement; Campus Development Sites; Civic Capital; Arnstein's Ladder; Civic Interface.

## **1.0. INTRODUCTION**

Since 2000, UK universities have experienced a boom in campus redevelopment. However, this momentum now sits uneasily alongside intensifying financial pressures facing the sector caused by capped undergraduate tuition fees, rising cost of operation, and, since 2024, immigration controls that have reduced access to international student income (Office for Students [OfS], 2025). This shifting financial landscape places civic university campus placemaking at a crossroads. As the building boom declines, recent projects have highlighted the gap between universities' civic engagement rhetoric and their actual civic responsibility during campus development (Iddrisu, 2025).

Viewing this as an end-of-era transition, this article examines how civic engagement and social responsibility were demonstrated—or overlooked—during the construction phase of two recent campus development projects at two UK universities. Although UK universities increasingly reframe campus (re)development as acts of civic placemaking and sustainability realisation (Benneworth et al., 2010; Dobson & Ferrari, 2023), the realities of construction site activities often undermine these claims. The mismatch between rhetoric and practice,

therefore, raises important questions about how civic universities enact their civic missions at precisely the moment when their presence is most materially felt.

Through comparative case studies of two UK civic universities, this article examines the central research question: How did the universities bridge—or widen—the gap between their rhetoric of civic engagement and the realities of construction-phase practice? To answer this, we introduce the concept of the Civic Interface: a diagnostic framework that identifies the visible spaces or places—influenced by a campus project’s civic visibility, externalities and community proximity—where universities’ civic capital and social responsibilities are enacted, negotiated or undermined, and how deliberate context-driven engagement can strengthen institutional legitimacy and civic responsibility.

By foregrounding the campus construction phase as a critical yet underexamined site within universities’ campus placemaking scholarship (Dobson & Ferrari, 2021; Edwards, 2000), the article provides a practical framework for civic institutions seeking to align their civic engagement rhetoric with demonstrable community benefit, and to sustain civic capital at a moment when it is threatened not only by financial uncertainty but also by risks of declining trust, legitimacy and goodwill among local communities (Dobson & Owolade, 2025).

## **2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1. The UK Civic University Agenda and The Campus Development Boom**

The civic role of universities in the United Kingdom has been recognised since the 19th century (Jones, 1988). This was notably re-emphasised in the Dearing Report, which encouraged universities to engage proactively with their communities and highlighted the mutual interests between them and society (National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997). This notion of mutual benefit between universities and their localities was revitalised by the University Partnership Programme (UPP) Foundation’s Civic University Commission (2019), which argued that becoming ‘truly civic’ requires a formal Civic University Agreement (CUA) co-developed with local partners, and the authenticity of civicness is to be judged against four criteria: the public test (public recognition), the place test (geographic focus), the strategic test (embedding within strategy), and the impact test (demonstrable influence).

Despite growing attention, the term “civic” remains fluid and varies across academic and practice discourse, with multiple interpretations (Adler & Goggin, 2005; Dobson, 2024; UPP Foundation, 2019). This study, like many others, refrains from offering a strict definition. However, according to Dobson (2024), universities’ civiness can be understood through their civic mission to support collaborative civic activities, their civic engagement in ongoing, mutually beneficial relationships, and the tangible civic impacts these relationships produce for communities. Dobson and Ferrari (2021, 2023) argue that, in fulfilling their civic agendas, universities promote a range of activities, including fostering local leadership, supporting the economy, protecting the environment, enriching culture, enhancing social well-being, and engaging in placemaking. These civic initiatives, formalised through CUAs, require integrating tangible, place-based impacts into institutional strategies.

Over the past decade, there has been a campus development boom, with UK universities investing in campus expansion and placemaking to accommodate growing student populations, demonstrate civic commitment, modernise and decarbonise their estates (Association of University Directors of Estates [AUDE], 2023; Whyte, 2023). These projects—highly visible and capital-intensive—are often promoted as flagship efforts to showcase civic and sustainability goals (Benneworth et al., 2010; Dobson & Ferrari, 2021).

Following the Browne Review, universities intensified competition for students and became increasingly dependent on tuition-fee income (Browne, 2010). Although these reforms expanded participation, they have been widely criticised for exacerbating social and gender inequalities (David, 2011) and for entrenching uneven regional benefits across the sector (Millward, 2023). More recently, post-Brexit immigration policy has contributed to declining international student recruitment (Highman et al., 2023)—limiting income stream, in turn, causing, among others, the slowdown in the campus building boom (OfS, 2025). Against this backdrop, Millward (2023) argues that UK universities’ renewed civic ambitions to generate mutual benefits with its local region, including their placemaking initiatives, can only be sustained when collaboration is incentivised over competition.

While the above-mentioned scholarship in this journal illuminates the broader policy dynamics shaping UK universities, it leaves underexplored how universities' civic claims are materially enacted—or undermined—through the everyday realities of campus placemaking. In particular, no study has empirically examined how construction-phase redevelopment of some civic university campuses functions as a lived, visible, and often contentious arena in which civic rhetoric is tested. This omission constitutes a significant gap that the present article addresses by analysing how civic engagement commitments are realised—or not—within the materially felt processes of campus construction.

## **2.2. Social Responsibility and (Campus) Construction Management**

Construction activities, whether on university or private development sites, inevitably generate negative externalities, including noise, dust, congestion, and visual intrusion (World Green Building Council [WGBC], 2023). Industry initiatives such as the Considerate Constructors Scheme (CCS) aim to mitigate these impacts and foster social responsibility (CCS, 2024). Introduced in 1997, the CCS is a voluntary code of practice that promotes social responsibility in construction. However, in practice, engagement often remains superficial, primarily involving informing or consulting rather than meaningful participation (Town and Country Planning Association [TCPA], 2020), which can lead to community protests against disruptive or exclusionary projects (Teo & Loosemore, 2011).

A significant shortcoming in social responsibility often arises from how developers and contractors perceive engagement. Many believe that dialogue ends with preconstruction consultation or that responsibility exclusively rests with planners (Teo & Loosemore, 2011). On-site teams frequently see impacts as temporary, which discourages meaningful interaction (Moodley, 1999). Others worry about delays or feel they lack the necessary expertise (Bull & Azenoud, 2016; Close & Loosemore, 2014). However, as emphasised by the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) et al. (2024), intentional stakeholder engagement is essential for project success, promoting inclusivity, transparency, and fairness throughout the project lifecycle.

Sustainable construction requires integrating economic, environmental, and social dimensions. However, social responsibility is often overlooked, with emphasis skewed toward

environmental compliance and economic efficiency (WGBC, 2023). Loosemore and Lim (2017) argue that environmental initiatives are frequently pursued for regulatory compliance rather than strategic vision. Meanwhile, research shows that corporate social responsibility (CSR) enhances organisational performance, underscoring its role in advancing sustainability holistically (Xia et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2023). Effective stakeholder engagement is therefore essential for developers, including universities and their contractors, to fulfil CSR commitments and gain legitimacy (Johnson et al., 2018). Thus, genuine CSR requires embedding social, environmental, and economic priorities into organisational strategy (Porter & Kramer, 2007).

While engagement and social responsibility are extensively examined in mainstream construction management scholarship (see e.g., Chow & Leiringer, 2020; Xue et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2023), there is limited research on how UK universities implement these commitments during campus development. Yet universities play a unique civic role in promoting sustainability, making meaningful engagement with internal and external stakeholders crucial to achieving their sustainability goals (Leal Filho et al., 2025). As Watson (2008) noted, community engagement is vital for addressing local concerns during campus development, and stakeholder involvement is fundamental to universities' social sustainability (Leal Filho et al., 2025).

### **2.3. Universities, Stakeholder Engagement, and Social Sustainability in Campus Development**

Campus placemaking is shaped by multiple institutional logics—academic necessity, market competitiveness, financial security, environmental responsibility, and civic contribution (Iddrisu, 2025). Yet campus construction externalities such as noise, dust, congestion, and visual intrusion affect neighbouring communities as much as private developments do. What distinguishes university projects is their status as learning institutions and their declared civic commitments (Dobson & Ferrari, 2021; Edwards, 2000). Engagement during construction thus directly tests whether universities embody or compromise their civic claims.

University stakeholders include government, regulators, leadership, faculty, students, partners, suppliers, donors, local communities, and financial institutions (Leal Filho et al.,

2025). Over time, varied terms—civic engagement, public engagement, community outreach, local partnership—have emerged, each reflecting distinct motivations and contexts (Furco, 2010). The National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement describes public engagement as diverse institutional involvement with the public. Peterson (2014) defines community engagement as reciprocal relationships yielding mutual benefits. Dobson (2024) defines civic engagement as a continual enhancement of mutually beneficial relationships. Despite these conceptions, Mazhar et al. (2017) reported a limited effectiveness of UK universities' engagement practices. Most of the time, university engagement tends to focus on service learning, outreach, knowledge exchange, and other forms of engagement (Mycock et al., 2024).

Recent studies have linked stakeholder engagement to achieving sustainable development outcomes on campus (Syed et al., 2024; Wilson et al., 2024). For stakeholder engagement to be effective, Leal Filho et al. (2025) suggest inclusivity, transparency, and strategic organisation should serve as foundational elements. However, existing research primarily concentrates on internal stakeholder engagement, such as with students, alumni, and faculty, rather than external stakeholders (Mazhar et al., 2017). For example, Press et al. (2010) have examined how student and faculty civic engagement can increase sustainability awareness. Additionally, involving students in campus (re)developments has been shown to enhance awareness of sustainable development practices (Bigg et al., 2018).

For stakeholder engagement to advance sustainability, integrated communication and trust-building are essential (Ozaki & Shaw, 2022). However, some universities often focus on economic and environmental sustainability, neglecting social aspects (Raji & Hassan, 2021). When successfully implemented, community engagement enhances social justice and environmental responsibility (Málovics et al., 2022). Universities, therefore, have a responsibility to act as agents of change, fostering sustainability across economic, environmental, social, and cultural spheres. Without proper implementation, these strategies risk being symbolic rather than transformative (Leal Filho et al., 2023).

Strikingly, despite the prominence of CUAs and related agendas in the UK, the construction phase of campus development is rarely explicitly addressed. CUAs often emphasise universities' roles in promoting social inclusion, economic growth, and environmental

sustainability (Dobson & Ferrari, 2021), yet they often overlook the construction process itself—a stage that delivers some of the most immediate and tangible civic impacts, both positive (such as local employment and infrastructure improvement) and negative (including noise, disruption, and displacement) (Iddrisu, 2025). This oversight is significant, considering that construction sites are among the most visible interfaces between universities and communities (Iddrisu, 2025).

By neglecting construction sites as a civic interface, some universities will miss opportunities to align rhetoric with lived community experience, overlooking a major dimension of their civic footprint. This study, through the concept of the civic interface, argues that meaningful stakeholder engagement is not optional but essential to sustainability and civic responsibility. This study does not argue that all campus developments require the same level of engagement; rather, it highlights that where, campus developments create (particularly at the construction phase of city campuses) tangible negative externalities or civic visibility due to their proximity to neighbouring residents and businesses like in this study's two case study, the sites should be reimaged and curated as civic interfaces requiring proportionate engagement as a means of building trust, fostering positive civic capital and civic footprint with their neighbouring communities. Thus, some future campus development sites will need to be reimagined as civic interfaces—crossroads where universities either demonstrate inclusive engagement or risk undermining their legitimacy as learning institutions committed to securing civic capital.

#### **2.4. Civic Capital and Civic Engagement**

The concept of civic capital has been defined in diverse ways. Dobson and Owolade (2025) frame it within universities as a constellation of resources—economic, social, cultural, symbolic, and emotional—that collectively either enable or constrain civic work. They identify five essential conditions for thriving civic universities: trust, legitimacy, networks, respect, and funding. This article adopts the framing of Potapchuk and Crocker Jr. (1999) and the National Civic League (2019), which emphasises stakeholder relationships and collaboration.

Potapchuk and Crocker Jr. (1999, p. 175) define civic capital as the “collective civic capacities of a community, the currency supporting collaborative strategies that pursue innovative

programs and forge new relationships among stakeholders.” The National Civic League (2019) further elaborates on this, defining civic capital as the maintenance of lasting relationships within both formal and informal networks and identifies seven components of civic capital—engaged residents, inclusive leadership, collaborative institutions, diversity and equity, authentic communication, a culture of engagement, and shared vision—as capacities for long-term relationships. Civic capital, in this view, is embedded in everyday community life.

Empirical studies highlight the relational effects of civic capital. Nelles and Wolfe (2024) examined civic capital in urban economic development, stressing geographic specificity and civic entrepreneurs. Ott and Linkhart (2019) similarly emphasise its role in mobilising communities to respond to complex crises. Across these strands, civic capital emerges as the engine of collaboration, trust, resilience, and shared vision.

According to the National Civic League (2019), inclusive civic engagement is essential for maintaining strong civic capital. Dobson (2024) defines civic engagement as the process of developing ongoing, mutually beneficial relationships between civic universities and their stakeholders. It therefore involves inclusive participation and collaborative decision-making. Potapchuk and Crocker Jr. (1999) stress that to achieve strong civic capital, engagement must be supported by organisational infrastructure—spaces for dialogue and consensus-building.

Whilst the existing literature shows that civic engagement fosters civic capital, the dynamics between them during campus development remain largely unexplored. This article introduces the concept of the civic interface as the essential link: lived spaces such as community projects (and, we argue, construction sites) — where universities visibly exemplify civic responsibility. Civic interfaces serve as mediators between institutional rhetoric and community experience, determining whether engagement enhances or diminishes civic capital.

In this framing, universities do not merely mobilise engagement or accumulate civic capital; they inhabit and cultivate interfaces that render civic responsibility tangible and sustainable. Conceptualising campus development sites as civic interfaces advances scholarship and practice by bridging the gap between engagement intentions and civic capital outcomes, positioning projects as arenas where universities negotiate legitimacy, trust, and lasting civic impact.

### **3.0. Methods and Materials**

#### **3.1. Research Design**

Our study employed a qualitative case study methodology grounded in a social constructionist paradigm, enabling exploration of how two UK civic universities constructed and enacted civic responsibility in their campus development (Crotty, 1999; Stake, 1995). Case studies investigate contemporary phenomena in real-life settings through multiple sources to capture complexity (Creswell, 2013). Stake (1995) distinguishes three designs: intrinsic (focused on uniqueness), instrumental (using cases to explore broader issues), and collective (employing multiple cases to illuminate broader issues).

We adopted a comparative instrumental design, analysing two universities that had recently completed major campus (re)developments. These developments served as lenses for examining civic responsibility and stakeholder engagement during construction. While interviews captured individual perspectives, the institutional response was the primary unit of analysis, consistent with the social constructionist emphasis on socially mediated practices. Concerns about generalisation are addressed through Yin's (2018) assertion of the robustness of analytical generalisation and Stake's (1995) distinction between researcher-led assertions and reader-led naturalistic generalisations. Together, these principles support the study's implications for evaluating civic engagement across both university and non-university contexts.

#### **3.2. Case Selection and Scope**

Our case selection evolved iteratively, guided by pragmatic considerations and the distinctiveness of the universities and their campus (re)development. We initially identified eight UK universities and three construction firms to study. Selection criteria were: (i) active campus construction in 2023–2024; (ii) projects explicitly framed as civic responsibility; and (iii) alignment with institutional net-zero ambitions. However, our pilot study engagement with two city-based civic universities—University A and University B—yielded particularly rich insights, prompting a refined focus on these cases.

Both universities signed the 2021 Civic University Agreement and are members of the Civic University Network, with public commitments to sustainability and civic responsibility. Their construction timelines aligned with the data collection period (i.e., 2023-2024), and their shared place-based context enabled comparative analysis across distinct institutional cultures.

- **University A:** Originating in the mid-19th century and achieving university status in the late 20th century, this large teaching-focused post-1992 institution reaffirmed its civic ethos in its 2021 Civic University Agreement. The City Centre Campus Masterplan's Phase 1 (completed 2025) delivered three Zero Carbon Ready<sup>i</sup> buildings at a cost of £65 million, consolidating operations and enhancing civic visibility adjacent to transport links and businesses.
- **University B:** Founded in the early 19th century and gaining university status in the early 20th century, this research-intensive Russell Group institution combined global prestige with civic identity. A £93 million net-zero operational carbon<sup>ii</sup> building (completed 2023) centralised its faculty of social sciences. Rebuilt (following a 2020 construction error in the first attempt), the project's proximity to residential areas amplified tensions over noise and traffic.

Cases A and B were selected not for their representativeness, but because they illuminate the consequences of engagement that was inadequate (Case B)—or, at best, merely 'good' (Case A). Given the two construction sites' proximity to local businesses (Case A) and neighbouring communities (Case B), their civic visibility, and the externalities they generated, we argue that these sites operated as interfaces—communicative devices—for civicness. Whether intentionally curated or not, they produced tangible effects. For universities to be genuinely civic in such contexts in the future, they will need to engage proactively at these interfaces to cultivate a positive civic footprint and civic capital.

### **3.3. Data Collection**

Consistent with the case study design, we employed semi-structured interviews, direct observation, and document analysis.

#### **A. Semi-Structured Interviews**

Interviews formed the core method (Kvale, 1996). Fourteen were conducted with diverse stakeholders:

- **University A:** vice-chancellor, sustainability director, deputy estate director, senior project manager, senior construction project manager, and marketing head.
- **University B:** deputy vice-chancellor, deputy estate director, senior project manager, and sustainability manager.
- **External stakeholders:** two neighbouring residents affected by University B's construction and two city council representatives (a former regeneration director and a senior planner).

Interview sessions lasted 30–60 minutes and were conducted either in person (n=5) or online (n=9). The interview guide was iteratively refined to reflect emerging themes. In-person sessions were conducted using a university-approved device, while online interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams or Zoom. Reflections were recorded immediately after each session. All interviews were transcribed, cleaned, verified, and uploaded to NVivo 12 for inductive thematic coding. Confidentiality was maintained through pseudonyms, secure storage, institutional consent protocols, and VPN-based transfer to secure drive.

## **B. Direct Observation**

Observation complemented other methods, adopting an unstructured approach to capture contextual insights into construction engagement and the impacts of each development (Simons, 2009). At University A, weekly site visits during active construction documented spatial and communicative cues, tapering as projects progressed. At University B, observation was more limited due to the completion of its major construction. This method was instrumental in triangulation, helping to verify or challenge interview claims and to ground the study in lived institutional practices (Yin, 2018).

## **C. Document Review**

Document analysis was central to the study. We examined sustainability strategies, masterplans, civic agreements, annual reports, and selected web content. The dataset comprised approximately 20 curated documents, two-thirds publicly available and the

remainder accessed via University A's intranet with permissions. Each document was assessed for authenticity, credibility, representation, and meaning (Flick, 2018), then coded in NVivo 12.

Together, these methods offered a multi-perspectival view of how the two universities enacted civic and social responsibilities during campus development. Triangulation enhanced contextual richness and interpretive depth.

### **3.4. Data Analysis**

We conducted inductive thematic analysis, drawing on Creswell and Poth (2017) and Stake (1995), as a tailored approach to case study analysis. The process unfolded across five phases:

1. *Managing and organising*: All data were uploaded to NVivo 12 Pro, arranged in institution-specific folders with pseudonyms. Manual inductive coding preserved interpretive depth.
2. *Reading and memoing*: Transcripts and documents were reviewed in detail, with memos linked to research questions. Document sources were assessed using Flick's criteria.
3. *Describing and classifying*: An initial set of 70 codes was distilled to 30 categories through recursive refinement, employing descriptive, in vivo, process, and conceptual coding techniques.
4. *Developing interpretations*: Codes were aggregated into patterns and themes through categorical aggregation (Stake, 1995).
5. *Representing and visualising*: NVivo matrices and concept maps refined 20 patterns into 16 within-case subthemes and four cross-case themes, preserving case particularity while enabling analytical generalisation (Yin, 2018).

This multi-phase strategy ensured rigour, triangulation, and interpretive depth, capturing how universities enacted civic and sustainability responsibility through their campus development.

#### **3.4.1. Applying Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation**

Arnstein's (1969) Ladder of Citizen Participation remains a seminal heuristic for assessing the depth of engagement, particularly when power asymmetries shape participatory dynamics. Its eight rungs, as shown in Figure 1—from manipulation and therapy (non-participation) to citizen control (empowerment)—provide a normative scale for evaluating the distribution of influence between institutions and communities. The model's emphasis on empowerment, especially delegated power and citizen control, provides a compelling ethical argument for shifting authority toward marginalised groups.

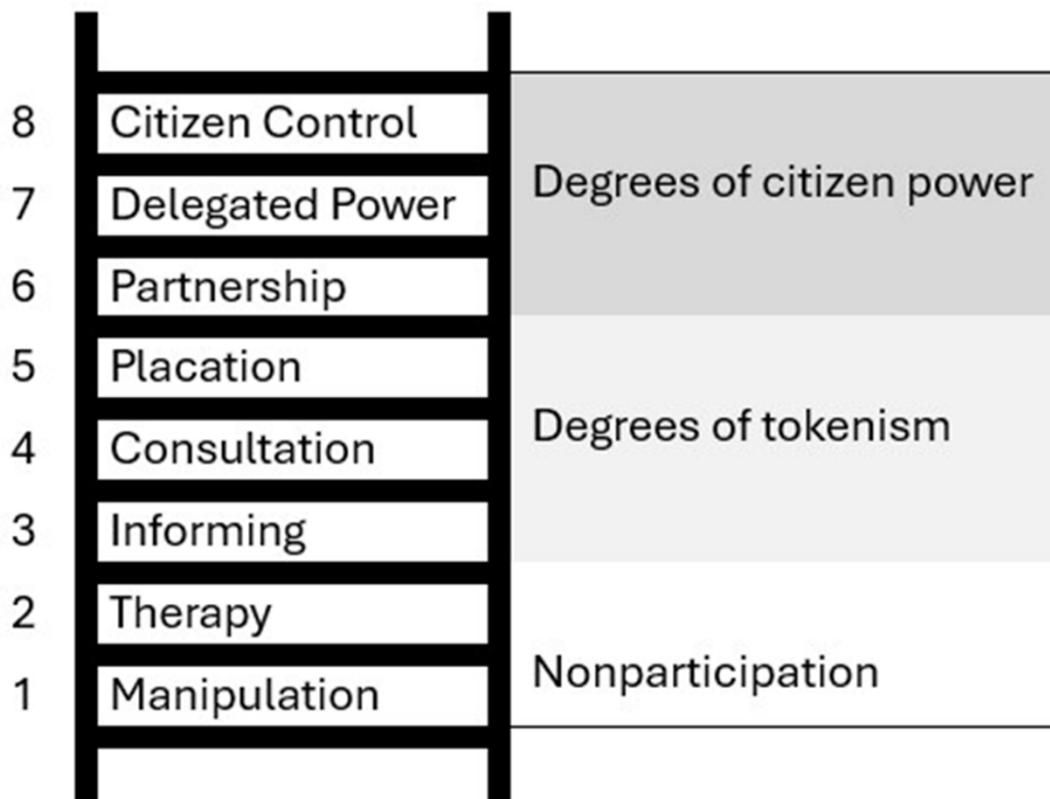


Figure 1 Eight Rungs on the Ladder of Citizen Participation. Source: Authors (after Arnstein, 1969)

At the lower levels, manipulation and therapy indicate non-participation, where those in power 'educate' or 'cure' rather than engage meaningfully. Mid-level stages—informing, consulting, and placating—constitute tokenism: participants may be heard but lack decision-making authority. Informing is one-way, consulting allows feedback without influence, and placating provides advisory roles while institutions maintain control. The top levels—partnership, delegated power, and citizen control—represent genuine empowerment, where stakeholders collaboratively make decisions or hold significant authority (Arnstein, 1969).

The ladder has been extensively utilised in studies across various fields, including district heating (Bull & Eadson, 2023) and higher education (Varwell, 2022), attesting to its broad relevance. In this study, it serves to map universities' claims of civic engagement in campus construction, highlighting discrepancies between their rhetorical commitments and practical participatory efforts.

Critics argue that the model oversimplifies participation (Carpentier, 2016), neglecting contextual constraints, information asymmetries, and evolving stakeholder roles (Ianniello et al., 2019). Zakhour (2020) contends that participation that does not culminate in empowerment is too readily dismissed as tokenistic. Arnstein herself has acknowledged limitations, noting that real-world engagement rarely fits neatly into discrete rungs and often involves overlapping motives and contested roles (Arnstein, 1969). Some contemporary scholars have called for reframing participation as dynamic social learning, relational negotiation, and iterative feedback rather than a linear redistribution of power (Tippett & How, 2020).

In the cases of University A and B, where community engagement was not central to construction objectives, the ladder's linear progression risks misrepresenting the diverse forms of engagement. Nonetheless, its diagnostic capacity to highlight gaps between institutional narratives and lived practices remains analytically valuable. Despite limitations, the ladder's enduring strength lies in prompting critical reflection on who participates, how, and to what end. In this study, it serves as a foundational tool for mapping engagement modalities during campus development.

## **4.0. RESULTS**

### **4.1. Mapping Campus Development Engagement Against Arnstein's Ladder**

Applying Arnstein's (1969) Ladder of Citizen Participation provided a critical lens for assessing engagement in both cases. As summarised in Table 1, University A demonstrated tokenism—primarily informing and consulting—while University B reflected non-participation, characterised by PR tactics, reactive responses, and reputational protection. The comparison exposes a clear gap between civic responsibility rhetoric and actual campus practices.

Table 1: Compares University A and B's Campus Development Engagement Against Arnstein's Framework

| <b>Participation Level</b>   | <b>University A</b>  | <b>University B</b>   |
|------------------------------|--|---|
| <b>Citizen Control</b>       | <i>None reported</i>   | <i>None reported</i>  |
| <b>Delegated Power</b>       | <i>None reported</i>   | <i>None reported</i>  |
| <b>Partnership</b>           | <i>None reported</i>   | <i>None reported</i>  |
| <b>Consultation</b>          | University–contractor-led forums; mitigation measures responsive to feedback | None reported   |
| <b>Informing</b>             | Regular email updates, hoarding messages, social media posts                 | Limited pre-construction forums; newsletters; hoarding messages; unclear communication channels; website/social media updates     |
| <b>Therapy/ Manipulation</b> | <i>None reported</i>   | Neighbours' concerns framed as Not in my backyard (NIMBY) /emotional; PR apologies; unmet compensation promises; reactive letters |

Source: Authors

This mapping highlighted the absence of empowerment across both institutions. University A's approach was responsive but tokenistic, while University B's was reactive and exclusionary. Neither demonstrated effective stakeholder engagement nor inclusive civic engagement. The disparity underscores the need for a new conceptual framework—the civic interface—as a space where universities can translate civic engagement rhetoric into tangible practice and cultivate civic capital.

#### **4.1.1. University A: Responsive but Tokenistic Participation**

University A's campus development project primarily reflected forms of engagement through limited communication and consultation. Joint forums hosted by university and contractor representatives, along with mitigation measures, portrayed their engagement as responsive but remained at the lower levels of Arnstein's ladder—mere informing and consulting (see

Table 1)—failing to achieve genuine participation and exemplifying tokenism rather than true civic responsibility (Arnstein, 1969; TCPA, 2020).

During construction, the university employed monthly forums, email updates, and technical mitigation such as vibration and noise monitoring, dust suppression, and loading protocols. While consistent with UK considerate construction standards (CCS, 2024; RIBA et al., 2024), these measures functioned more as procedural demonstrations of responsiveness than collaborative engagement.

Operationally, the institution adopted a proactive communication strategy, particularly with neighbouring businesses. A senior project manager described direct engagement through letters, monthly forums, and updates: “Since we started... I have been directly engaging with the neighbours near the site... We sent them letters, hold monthly forums, and I send monthly updates to inform them of our progress and upcoming activities.” This approach enabled neighbours to raise concerns—such as rubbish, dust, or dropped screws—and to receive remedial action. Yet, while responsive, these practices remained bounded within informing and consulting, offering limited influence over decision-making (Bull & Azennoud, 2016).

Critically assessed against Arnstein’s ladder, University A’s participation was procedurally anticipatory but substantively limited (Arnstein, 1969). Informing was largely one-way communication, while consultation through forums risked becoming ‘window-dressing’ unless stakeholders genuinely shaped outcomes (Arnstein, 1969). Although more anticipatory than University B, University A’s approach still aligned with critiques of tokenism.

Overall, University A demonstrated responsiveness without collaboration. Its practices reflected social responsibility (Almahmoud & Doloi, 2020; Zhang et al., 2023) but lacked transformative engagement. Arnstein’s framework highlights this limitation, though its rigid categorisation of informing and consulting as tokenistic has been criticised (Zakhour, 2020). Nonetheless, the evidence shows University A’s stakeholder engagement was bounded, anticipatory, and procedurally ‘good’, but genuine collaborative engagement was not a primary institutional goal.

#### **4.1.2. University B: Reactive and Non-Participatory Practices**

Unlike University A, University B's stakeholder participation during campus construction was reactive and symbolic, aimed more at protecting reputation than fostering dialogue. Concerns raised by residents were often dismissed as emotional resistance, revealing a pattern of non-participation that concealed limited institutional accountability (Arnstein, 1969).

Interaction occurred only after crises—specifically, a community protest and negative media coverage. Despite repeated petitions, the university remained unresponsive until public pressure forced low-tier gestures. One resident recalled: “The noise was completely unbearable...We received no response...It was only after I led the protest and gained significant publicity that things changed” (University B Affected Neighbour 1). This aligns with Teo and Loosemore's (2011) observation that poor engagement often triggers community resistance.

Project teams justified neglecting ongoing consultation by citing pre-construction engagement: “There was public engagement during the construction phase, mainly at the beginning...primarily around the planning application process...” (University B Senior Project Manager). University B held only one planning-related forum, followed by three additional meetings—two crisis-driven—indicating participation was reputation-driven rather than strategic.

Placed within Arnstein's ladder, University B's practices occupy the lowest rungs—manipulation and therapy (refer to Table 1)—where symbolic acts replace genuine engagement (Arnstein, 1969). Post-crisis mitigation measures, such as dust suppression or window cleaning, were not offered proactively but were requested by residents. One resident remarked: “We asked them to have the windows cleaned...We also requested screens, but they said they could not provide them” (University B Affected Neighbour 2). Residents characterised these gestures as “PR exercises,” echoing Arnstein's critique of participation reduced to public relations (Arnstein, 1969).

Environmental objections, including removal of mature trees and habitat destruction, were dismissed as NIMBYism complaints by University B's Sustainability and Communication Manager. Such labelling oversimplifies opposition and ignores residents' legitimate environmental ties (Devine-Wright, 2009; McKinlay et al., 2025). Arnstein (1969, p. 27) warns

that dismissiveness renders powerholders “dishonest and arrogant,” thereby undermining civic legitimacy. University B’s practices also failed to meet industry standards for considerate construction and social responsibility (CCS, 2024; RIBA et al., 2024). By treating participation as a procedural formality, the university weakened its social licence to operate (Bull & Azenoud, 2016; Close & Loosemore, 2014).

Ultimately, University B prioritised project completion and architectural prestige over responsiveness and stakeholder engagement. Measured against Arnstein’s framework, its approach reflected non-participation—reactive, reputation-driven, and crisis-focused. While critiques of Arnstein’s model note its rigidity (Carpentier, 2016; Ianniello et al., 2019), the framework demonstrates that collaborative engagement was not a primary goal for the university. Participation was reduced to PR strategies, undermining trust and legitimacy among residents and representing a missed opportunity for civic universities to demonstrate social responsibility (Dobson & Owolade, 2025; Loosemore & Lim, 2017).

#### **4.2. Embedding or Delegating Responsibility? Procurement Cultures at University A and B**

Procurement determined whether stakeholder participation was embedded as an institutional duty or delegated to contractors, thereby influencing how Universities A and B enacted their civic responsibilities.

##### **University A: Collaborative Responsibilities**

University A adopted the New Engineering Contract (NEC4) Alliance<sup>iii</sup> Contract, fostering shared risk and reward between the university and its Tier 1 main contractor. Engagement was not outsourced; instead, both parties worked collaboratively, making the university directly accountable to local stakeholders. A senior project manager explained: “It is my responsibility to engage with the neighbours, meet face-to-face, and go through their concerns. If it requires engaging with the contractor, I will speak to them and share neighbours’ worries; then we will work through it.”

The contractor’s senior manager reinforced this collaborative ethos: “No matter who conveys the messages, we always hold monthly meetings with key stakeholders...” (University A Contractor Construction Project Manager). These practices reflected deliberate institutional

work (Benneworth et al., 2017), where informing and consulting were treated as shared responsibilities. The alliance model fostered a culture of collective stewardship, enabling proactive management of construction impacts and stakeholder concerns (Dolan, 2024).

### **University B: Delegated Responsibility and Institutional Retreat**

In contrast, University B adopted a Novated Design-and-Build<sup>iv</sup> Contract, transferring responsibility for communication and risk management to the same Tier 1 main contractor, though with different project teams. This reduced the university B's involvement and encouraged withdrawal. A sustainability and communication manager admitted: "The reality is that it was not our problem...We genuinely handled a significant portion of the communication. We should have held our hands up and said we were not dealing with it. The contractor really ought to have managed that."

This remark reveals a logic of university withdrawal and blame-shifting, putting pressure on the contractor to appoint a communications representative while the university reluctantly handles some tasks itself. Engagement was framed as "not the university's responsibility," confined to crisis management driven by reputational concerns rather than collaborative practice (Arnstein, 1969).

Strikingly, despite each appointing the same Tier 1 contractor organisation, albeit with different project teams at the respective university, outcomes diverged sharply. University A's alliance model enabled responsive participation, while University B's novated model led to institutional retreat and fragmented accountability. This contrast supports Bull et al.'s (2010) argument that institutional context critically shapes public engagement effectiveness.

Procurement thus functions as more than a technical process meeting metrics such as time, cost, and quality (Mwakolo et al., 2024). Instead, it establishes institutional responsibility and accountability for stakeholder engagement and social value creation. Depending on the model, procurement can either facilitate or hinder sustainability, civic responsibility, and social value through stakeholder involvement (Procurement Hub, 2025; Social Value Portal, 2025).

## **5.0. Discussion**

### 5.1. Limits of Current Campus Development Engagement Practices

Mapped against Arnstein's Ladder, University A's forums, email updates, and mitigation measures positioned it as procedurally responsive but substantively limited. Neighbours could voice concerns but lacked influence over outcomes, confirming Arnstein's critique that consultation often becomes a "window-dressing ritual" (1969). Thus, University A exemplified responsive tokenism—anticipatory in procedure but weak in substance (Arnstein, 1969)

University B, by contrast, demonstrated reactive non-participation, engaging only during reputational crises. Petitions were ignored, compensation was unmet, and concerns were dismissed as NIMBYism, thereby disregarding legitimate environmental identities and affective bonds (Devine-Wright, 2009; McKinlay et al., 2025). Engagement was reduced to PR gestures—charity donations and apologies—rather than to meaningful dialogue, echoing critiques of traditional CSR as superficial reputation management (Close & Loosemore, 2014; Porter & Kramer, 2007)

While Arnstein's framework remains influential, critics highlight its rigidity and neglect of contextual constraints, stakeholder salience, and power asymmetries (Ianniello et al., 2019). Informing and consulting, though categorised as tokenistic, may in practice serve as necessary stages of engagement (Zakhour, 2020). Nonetheless, the ladder remains valuable for prompting reflection on who participates, how, and to what end (Bull & Eadson, 2023). In both cases, the absence of genuine external stakeholder commitment underscored missed opportunities to build civic capital, legitimacy, and trust, which – as shown above – are said to be key features of effective engagement by civic universities (Dobson & Owolade, 2025; Potapchuk & Crocker Jr., 1999).

Taken together, the comparative analysis of Universities A and B reveals an apparent disconnect between the rhetoric of civic engagement and the practices of stakeholder engagement during campus construction. Despite public commitments to social responsibility, both institutions failed to foster genuine participation. Although many implementation-phase decisions in campus development are necessarily non-negotiable, this does not absolve universities of civic responsibility. Residents may never have been able to halt or reverse the rebuild, but University B failed to meaningfully acknowledge their concerns or mitigate

disruption. As institutions with significant physical impacts on localities and a mission to educate wider publics, universities are obliged to communicate transparently and frame benefits as extending beyond their own interests (Edwards, 2000). Measured against these obligations, University B fell short of enacting civiness in its implementation. However, scholars emphasise that meaningful stakeholder engagement is essential to universities' sustainability agendas, given their distinct societal role (Leal Filho et al., 2025; Wilson et al., 2024). Further evidence from construction management shows strong links between engagement and CSR outcomes (Xia et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2023). Thus, civic universities often articulate engagement rhetorically—through knowledge exchange or outreach—but in these cases, implement it superficially or instrumentally during tangible campus development.

## **5.2. Institutional Responsibility through Procurement**

Beyond participation modalities, procurement reveals how institutional cultures shape stakeholder involvement during campus development. University A's use of the NEC4 Alliance contract fostered collective stewardship, with client and contractor sharing responsibility for neighbour relations. University B's reliance on a novated design-and-build contract led to an institutional retreat, delegating responsibility to the contractor and reducing engagement to reputation-driven crisis management. Despite working with the same Tier 1 contractor, outcomes diverged, underscoring how institutional context and procurement strategies influence accountability (Bull et al., 2010; Dolan, 2024).

Traditionally, procurement emphasised value for money—time, cost, and quality (Mwakolo et al., 2024). Recent frameworks, however, increasingly recognise procurement as a means to embed social value, including stakeholder engagement (Procurement Hub, 2025; Social Value Portal, 2025). In this study, procurement emerged as a mechanism for establishing shared responsibility between universities and contractors, which can either promote or hinder sustainability, civic duty, and social value (Leal Filho et al., 2025; Loosemore & Lim, 2017).

Taken together, procurement demonstrates how institutional choices shape civic responsibility in campus development. When responsibility was collaborative and integrated, stakeholder involvement was proactive; when delegated, it was fragmented, reactive, and

reputation-driven. This comparison highlights that inclusive civic engagement is not incidental to the construction of modern campuses but depends on institutional design, accountability mechanisms, and a genuine commitment to civic values throughout the development process.

### **5.3. Towards Civic Interface – a Conceptual Contribution**

Analysis of Universities A and B revealed a lack of stakeholder empowerment and reliance on symbolic gestures, consistent with Arnstein's (1969) critique of procedural participation. Neither institution translated civic engagement rhetoric into tangible practice nor cultivated enduring civic capital (National Civic League, 2019) during the construction phases of their campus development projects. The proximity of the two universities' construction sites to local businesses and residents, combined with their civic visibility and—in Case B—noticeable negative externalities, created conditions that required the sites to be actively curated as ongoing demonstrations of institutional civic responsibility.

As shown in Figure 2, a university construction site is a space or place where civic capital is either accumulated or diminished. Civic capital increases when universities engage civically, transparently, and inclusively; it decreases when disruption occurs without dialogue or accountability. The acting as an interface, a university's construction site mediates between civic engagement intent and civic capital outcomes, bridging rhetoric and practice.

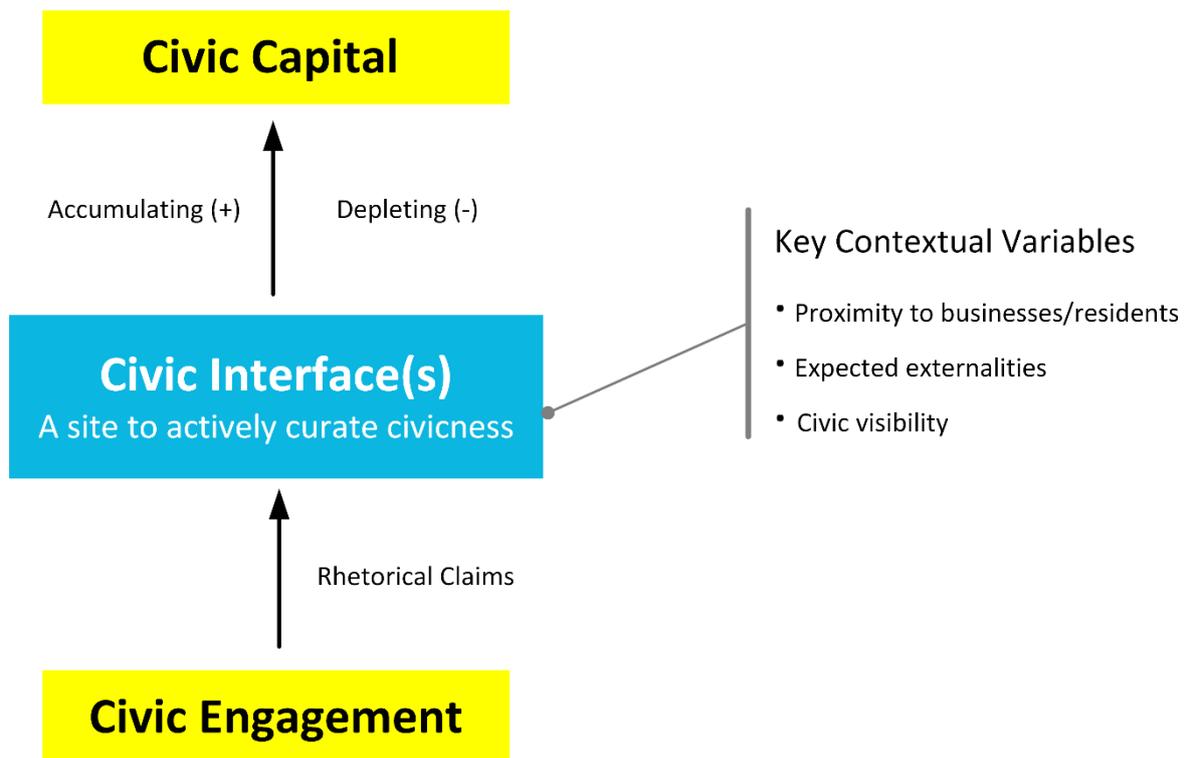


Figure 2 The Civic Interface Model – From Civic Engagement to Civic Capital. Source: Authors

The civic interface model is not a call for universal engagement of all university campus sites. Rather, it provides a framework for anticipating which construction sites are at risk of significant negative civic impacts and for identifying when engagement is necessary to prevent the depletion of civic capital and to create opportunities for its accumulation (Ott & Linkhart, 2019). The model positions construction sites and development activities as potential civic interfaces—spaces where institutional rhetoric and actions become visible, consequential, and open to public interpretation. Whether or not universities actively curate these interfaces, they communicate civic signals that can strengthen or erode civic capital.

The need for engagement is therefore contingent on contextual variables such as proximity to housing or businesses, the function of the proposed building, expected externalities, campus typology (city-centre versus edge-of-town), and the degree of civic visibility. When these variables indicate heightened civic exposure or risk, proactive and ongoing engagement at the interface becomes essential despite pre-design consultation (Dobson, 2024; Iddrisu, 2025).

Civic capital, thus, is not measured by formal metrics, but interpreted through the accumulation or depletion of goodwill, trust, and civic legitimacy that local publics extend to

the university (National Civic League, 2019; Potapchuk & Crocker Jr., 1999). The affected local stakeholders—such as residents and businesses—evaluate and interpret institutional civic rhetoric and actions at the civic interface through the lens of development proximity, visibility, and consequences. The purpose is not to quantify civicness, but to anticipate and mitigate reputational and relational risks in such high-exposure contexts.

In sum, civic universities whose future campus developments are shaped by the contextual variables of the civic interface, as demonstrated in these case studies, are at a crossroads. Their civic capital is threatened not only by unstable funding but also by the ongoing challenge of sustaining trust, legitimacy, and goodwill with communities and local partners (Dobson & Owolade, 2025). Treating development sites with high visibility, proximity, or consequence as routine projects risks depleting civic capital; only through active curation can such campus sites generate positive civic impacts and leave an enduring civic footprint.

#### **5.4. Implications for Policy and Practice**

This study shows that civic engagement during construction remains an under-developed dimension of wider civic place-making discourse. Networks such as the Civic University Network could play a stronger role by encouraging institutions to share effective examples of actively curating the civic interface to build trust, legitimacy, and a positive civic footprint. For estates and construction teams, the cases demonstrate that decisions made during procurement, site management, and communication carry civic consequences, even when technical delivery is the primary focus. The Civic Interface model offers practitioners a means of identifying development sites that risk depleting civic capital and highlights where additional engagement—beyond post-design consultation—is essential to mitigate disruption, maintain trust with neighbours, and generate goodwill and positive civic impact.

#### **5.5. Limitations**

This study's two cases are both city-centre civic universities, which may shape the extent to which the findings transfer to other campus contexts. The case study design prioritised depth over breadth; accordingly, the implications offered here are analytical and naturalistic rather than statistically generalisable (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). The Civic Interface model does not measure civicness in the abstract, nor does it advocate universal engagement for all development activity. Instead, it provides a diagnostic framework for identifying when

engagement becomes necessary—based on minimum thresholds such as civic visibility, proximity, and externalities—conditions under which institutional actions become publicly legible and potentially consequential. Its utility is therefore linked to the presence of these thresholds. As a conceptual model, it does not capture all organisational, technical, or contextual constraints shaping university construction projects. Future research could explore engagement dynamics across a broader range of institutions and development types. The model could also be used to examine how civic institutions enact civic responsibility in other live projects and initiatives beyond those involving construction activities.

## **6.0. Conclusion**

The experiences of University A and University B show how construction sites can either strengthen or erode civic capital depending on the proportionality and quality of engagement. In both cases, engagement was driven largely by project pragmatism rather than by a commitment to cultivating a positive civic footprint, leaving University B's development particularly vulnerable to perceptions of tokenism or neglect. Their contrasting approaches underscore the importance of treating such development sites as civic interfaces—spaces where institutional commitments are made visible. This highlights the need for context-sensitive engagement strategies that align civic rhetoric with lived community experience.

The Civic Interface model offers a practical means of identifying when campus (re)development sites are likely to affect their localities and therefore require more deliberate engagement. It suggests that civic universities should (i) recognise these impacts and (ii) seek to maximise positive civic outcomes and minimise negative ones through measures such as early communication, targeted ongoing dialogue, and structured engagement to maintain trust, legitimacy, goodwill, and a positive civic footprint. In doing so, institutions can move from aspirational civic rhetoric to tangible practice, supporting the accumulation of civic capital (Dobson & Owolade, 2025; Potapchuk & Crocker Jr., 1999).

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Sheffield Hallam University, UK: Social and Economic Research Institute Ethical Review Committee approved Ethics ID: ER53949845 on July 7, 2023. Written informed consent was given by all research participants.

**Data availability statement**

The anonymised interview transcripts and reviewed documents generated for this study have been deposited in the Sheffield Hallam University Research Data Archive and are available upon request.

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## **Author contributions**

**Corresponding Author:** Dr Lukeman Iddrisu contributed to the full writing (including original draft and final draft), idea and concept development, data collection, methodology, formal analysis, model development & visualisation.

**Co-author 1:** Dr Luke Bennett contributed to original project ideation and subsequent doctoral project supervision, conceptual input and refinement during fieldwork and write-up.

**Co-author 2:** Professor Peter Wells contributed to the idea and concept development, exploration of place-based aspects, final editing, and doctoral supervision.

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### **The Figure Caption Lists**

Figure 1. Eight Rungs on the Ladder of Citizen Participation. Source: Authors (after Arnstein, 1969)

Alt text for Figure 1: A vertical ladder diagram with eight labelled rungs illustrating levels of citizen participation, grouped into nonparticipation (manipulation, therapy), degrees of tokenism (informing, consultation, placation), and degrees of citizen power (partnership, delegated power, citizen control).

Figure 2. The Civic Interface Model – From Civic Engagement to Civic Capital. Source: Authors

Alt text for Figure 2: A conceptual diagram showing Civic Engagement feeding upward into a central Civic Interface box via rhetorical claims, with the interface then contributing to the accumulation or depletion of Civic Capital. A side panel lists key contextual variables: proximity to businesses or residents, expected externalities, and civic visibility.

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<sup>i</sup> Highly energy-efficient and either directly powered by renewables or reliant on energy sources that can be fully decarbonised

<sup>ii</sup> Highly energy-efficient and entirely powered by on-site renewable energy

<sup>iii</sup> Alliance is a delivery model under NEC4, in which the client and key members of the project supply chain are engaged under a single, multi-party contract with shared objectives, risks, and rewards.

<sup>iv</sup> Novated Design and Build is a process by which an employer/client initially appoints design consultants, which later transfer contractual rights and obligations to the principal contractor.