NEW CULTURES OF HOUSING

An Irish Initiative Toward Housing for Today
Nimble Spaces

Housing – having a home – is a central part of life for every one of us. The quality of our home; our comfort and security, our location and our neighbours are core elements of how we stand in life, our ability to become who we want to be.

Nimble Spaces is a creative and citizens-led approach to how society can develop new patterns of housing that:

– Promote an arts-led participatory design process
– Meet the needs of many different citizens
– Enable active citizenship and participation
– Encourage social inclusion and positive relationships
– Incorporate smart design that is good for people and the environment

Following the Irish financial collapse of 2008, a group of people in and around the Camphill community in Callan began to work towards a new model for ‘housing the social’. Could we imagine the best possible pattern for housing in a new era of rights and social inclusion? We discovered others committed to new approaches to housing that address many social challenges and issues of spatial justice. Focusing on how to offer privacy and self-determination for people with support needs in an inter-dependent social context, we worked on an Irish model that could contribute to progressive international trends.

This booklet aims to outline the Nimble Spaces initiative, ranging from its arts-led participatory and enabling design processes, citizens’ rights, and ‘housing the social’ in a global context, to a specific government-funded pilot project in Callan, Co. Kilkenny.

We aim to reach a wide readership that can adapt these ideas to many situations. Are you someone with particular housing needs – a friend, family member or supporter? A group of people tackling a particular local housing issue? An architect, designer or artist? A policy maker?

We hope that the Nimble Spaces will be useful for you, wherever you live.

The following three pages illustrate and explain the five Building Blocks of Nimble Spaces – key elements of the approach so far.

*The concept of ‘housing the social’ as developed through Andrea Phillips’ and Fulya Erdemci’s project with SKOR (Netherlands), Social Housing—Housing the Social: Art, Property and Spatial Justice has been pivotal in the emergence of the Nimble Spaces project.
Five Building Blocks

1. Enabling Design Process

Engaging the principle of self-determination at the earliest design stage, *Nimble Spaces* facilitates people to work with artists and architects toward designing “the home that I want to live in.” Through design collaborations and workshops involving movement and dance, drawing and design, spatial sculpture and play, the process empowers participants to feel creatively about their relationship to home and how we inhabit our living spaces, both private and shared. Shifting a top-down decision making process toward a collaborative effort, the process partners home-makers with design professionals who can progress personal wishes to effective designs that can get built. This process gives a strong creative agency to future residents and an expanded vision for accessibility and inclusion to architects and designers.
2. My Own Home

Through creative workshops, you can explore and communicate your housing needs and desires.

A recognition of the integrity of each individual in our wider society means that a sense of ‘my own space’ is an essential function of full citizenship. A home with one’s own front door establishes that each person, without regard to their ability to support oneself, has an own personal dwelling. Depending on how much support an individual needs, additional shared space provides scope for assistance and social interaction. Nimble Spaces moves away from a charitable offer of care towards inclusive, person-focused housing for all. There is an architectural challenge to do justice to the individual’s personal space placed in the context of shared facilities that are welcoming and inter-dependent.

3. Right to Housing

A tenancy agreement provides you with full housing rights and responsibilities.

Inspired by the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with a Disability, as well as the Irish government’s National Housing Strategy for People with a Disability 2011–2016, and the recent Capacity (Assisted Decision Making) legislation, we aim to set a marker for rights in the field of housing. Providing a good quality home that can meet the personal and social needs of the resident is a first step: to establish that position in a clear and equitable legal status is the next. Establishing a robust legal position that meets personal needs and also complies with regulated standards of support is a complex challenge. Nimble Spaces promotes a determined effort to establish the legal status of every occupant.
4. Inclusive Neighbourhoods

Design, Space, Rights and Tech are all fine, but real quality of life for most of us depends on people – family, partners, friends and neighbours who are good company, with a kind word, willing to help in an awkward moment. Can we create housing where neighbourly values are built in? Drawing on the principles of cohousing and community development Nimble Spaces is committed to a new culture of ‘housing the social’. In the context of an inclusive neighbourhood, mutual support is fostered to create a living environment that is beneficial and supportive for all neighbours. The design process goes beyond buildings and space and into social and community relationships and structures that can encourage social involvement, interdependence and the mutual benefits of active citizenship.

5. Smart Homes for you and the Environment

Technology can help with your day-to-day life.

Technology has changed all of our lives. The application of technology to the mobility and access issues of people with physical disabilities is now moving into empowering people with cognitive impairments, whether through older age or intellectual disability. Building smart homes for people with support needs can have a positive impact on our self-determination and quality of life. Whether it is a pre-existing app that can help with simple tasks such as finding one’s way or boiling a kettle, or security sensors that are still to be invented, these technologies can enable many people to gain greater control over our everyday lives. Utilising new energy technologies, Nimble Spaces is committed to buildings that are as sustainable as possible, as well as living arrangements and landscapes that are healthy for us and for our natural environment. Installing renewable energy sources such as solar, wind, biomass and hydro, we aim to deliver long-term quality power at low costs.
In 2015, following a three-year research project devised by Commonage, an innovative art and architecture collective, and funded by the Arts Council Ireland and philanthropic supporters, Camphill Callan secured €2.2m from the Irish government’s Department of the Environment’s Capital Assistance Scheme to develop sixteen homes in inclusive neighbourhoods at four locations in the town. Committing to make the project happen to the best standard possible, we have undertaken to raise co-funding of €500,000. To fulfil the neighbourhood pattern, a further ten homes will be integrated into the sites as part of a housing cooperative initiative, which is currently in formation. On a national level we are working alongside other co-operative housing projects including O Cualann Co-Housing Alliance, Co-operative Housing Ireland and many others.

Nimble Spaces has been informed by work and research happening nationally and internationally in the fields of participatory design, co-production, spatial justice, disability activism, active citizenship and co-operative housing. Our lived experience of the rich human relationships and friendships fostered and supported within a Camphill context is a constant inspiration.

Nimble Spaces brings together ground-breaking trends to deliver innovative housing and a new social model for people with support needs. Active citizenship also invites people with support needs to become contributors to, and drivers of, positive social change. These ideas and concepts are utilised in the creation of intentional, inclusive neighbourhoods that provide more than just dwelling spaces, but rather encourage the development of interdependent support networks.

While local implementation of these principles will need to engage with many limiting realities, the broad learning from international experience can be a great help in stimulating fresh thinking and innovative approaches.

Find out more about research and projects that have informed Nimble Spaces: nimblespaces.org/resources

With variations particular to our local situation the principles of the Nimble Spaces initiative are being piloted in the development, knitted into the existing fabric of this small rural town. Architects were appointed in early 2016 and innovative designs are approaching planning application stage. We’re aiming to complete all of the sites – and move in – during 2018.

The challenges of implementation strike on a number of important themes:

- How can public development standards integrate the differing objectives of private and social housing in blended developments?
- How can the standards governing the support of vulnerable people be balanced with individual rights, self-determination and social inclusion?
- How can the divergent cultures of housing and health provision be mediated?

Beyond getting the houses built and lived-in in Callan, there is an on-going challenge to collaborate with a range of Housing, Disability and Health government bodies, university researchers, activists and policy shapers to realise a truly innovative pilot that can provide leadership for national policy and housing development strategies.

1. Callan, Co. Kilkenny, Ireland. With the Abbey Meadow and KCAT Art & Study Centre in the foreground.
Nimble Spaces is a project developed by Camphill Callan in collaboration with a creative team of future residents, artists, architects and activists and led by the curatorial team at Callan Workhouse Union.

Over the past four years, Nimble Spaces has received support from The Arts Council of Ireland, Kilkenny Leader Partnership and Irish Design 2015. Kilkenny County Council and the Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government and Kilkenny County Council are key funding partners for the Callan pilot.

We have collaborated and networked with many others working and interested in similar fields. Ways to Live Together: New Cultures of Housing conference was a co-production between Nimble Spaces, Camphill Communities of Ireland, VISUAL Centre for Contemporary Art, Maynooth University Department of Geography and DIT, Dublin School of Architecture.

The pilot Enabling Design workshop and collaboration process (2013–15) was delivered by Paul Bokslag (visual artist), Rhona Byrne (visual artist), LiD Architecture, MEME Architecture, Jennie Moran (visual artist), Ríonach Ní Néill (choreographer) and Studio Weave (architects).

For further insight into all aspects of the project please watch a series of short-films by Éamon Little: nimblespaces.org/videos

If you are interested in contributing financially to the Callan pilot-project please visit: nimblespaces.org/fundraising

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5. Shaping My Space Game led by LiD Architecture with Camphill Callan as part of the Enabling Design process.