

URBACT - Good Practice Summary

The Problem - Growing Old; Dependency; Isolation & A Resource seeking a new Identity.

In January 2000, a group of people, all living in Naas, County Kildare, Ireland, came together with the purpose of future planning for their community and how they could be proactive in ensuring a quality of life while remaining independent as older citizens, living in Naas.

The Pathway & The Process - Innovation and Creativity

The members of the group committed themselves to developing an alternative model for living independently as opposed to the institutional residential care model. The group started as Naas Riogh Housing Association and rebranded as McAuley Place: a voluntary non-denominational, not for profit, housing association with charitable status. The “ Vision” of McAuley Place is ‘To Bring Older Persons to the Heart of a Vibrant Community’.

The approach, was to consult with Naas residents of all ages, to engage with the relevant stakeholders, in order to share their ideas with the purpose of creating an intergenerational amenity where the emphasis was on wellness, integration and independent living in their local and caring city of Naas. In this regard, McAuley Place geared its project planning and its work to incorporate the UN Principles for Older People (1991); The Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (2002) as well as responding to the Irish Government’s Positive Aging Strategy. The cited references promote policy interventions that support and enable people to live healthily and independently and to active participants in their communities as they grow older.

The Solution - McAuley Place

In 2008, thanks to the foresight of the Board of Directors, the dedication and commitment of the local community in the form of voluntary work and fundraising as well as invaluable statutory funding and support from a wide range of public and private stakeholders, - McAuley Place took its well deserved place of honour in the heart of Naas. In 2017 the project, still driven by a value-system based on human dignity, is dynamic and is continuously evolving in response to the needs of the people. McAuley Place promotes wellbeing in later life by addressing the requirements for healthy and active ageing, to include the older person’s participation in society, the ways in which programmes and services are organized and utilized, in addition there are the quality of life issues such as health & social care; housing; transport; education and access to information. Specifically, these goals are achieved through ensuring social inclusion and the integration of residents(tenants) and members of the wider (urban and local area) community.

McAuley Place is today the gathering space for the community - whether you are a resident enjoying an art or creative writing class, a shop assistant or public sector worker coming into the Convent Tearooms for your lunch or a community activist attending a meeting or a training session, the blending is seamless across the sectors and the generations. McAuley Place has hundreds of people coming through its doors and using its services on a daily and weekly basis. In a counterbalancing way, the residents of McAuley Place populate the streets of Naas, shop and do business locally (supermarkets, clothes shops, banks, hairdressers, doctors, dentists, solicitors etc) thus contributing to the vibrancy of the town centre.

The Milestones

The McAuley Place project embraced the renovation and refurbishment of a number of “listed” buildings (the former Convent of Mercy) and the construction of a new block of apartments. The campus now comprises of :-

Incorporated as a Company 2000

2003 Received Charitable Status

19th May 2003 planning permission received but Government funding not sanctioned.

19th May 2006 Second Planning Permission received

19th May 2006 Purchased Convent Building from Sisters of Mercy

2008 Community Centre opened.

19th May 2009 Government funding secured.

2011 First resident moves into McAuley Place.

2011 Arts and Culture Centre opened

2012 Convent Tea Rooms Opened

2014 Woodland Garden developed

2015 Work commenced on Phase 1 Health through Learning Centre

2016 Awarded All Ireland Pride of Place Award

The Stakeholders -

The Dept of the Environment

Local Community (Business & Individuals)

The National Lottery

Kildare County Council

County Kildare LEADER Partnership

The Ireland Funds

The Sisters of Mercy.

Naas Lions Club

Costs

Housing: National Development Plan Department of Environment €7.4m

Community Centre: Community fundraising, Naas Town Council, LEADER funding €1.2m

Arts & Culture Centre : LEADER funding, Naas Lions Club, bequest , community fundraising €130,000

The Evidence – McAuley Place is different and has made a difference

Today in 2017, McAuley Place with its dynamic community, its facilities and the associated programmes is a demonstration of best practice in sustainable and integrated urban living. McAuley Place has been endorsed by Ireland’s President Michael D. Higgins as follows *“the idea of having 53 Apartments, of having a community facility, of having a recreational space, of having Tea Rooms, and, that it is intergenerational in the middle of Naas - there is something just wonderful - it is exceptional!”*

McAuley Place continues to place huge emphasis on promoting opportunities for lifelong learning (through its creative arts initiatives), paralleled with ensuring social inclusion for residents and their participation in the wider community. Fifty three apartments provide a home to sixty individuals.

To complement the delivery of its services, McAuley Place has developed and currently implements its own bespoke Volunteer Programme. The volunteers contribute to inter-generational activities and shared learning for everyone involved.

McAuley Place relies on the ongoing generosity of the community and a core group of eighty volunteers to keep the “Vision” alive.

McAuley Place, as a Social Enterprise is a valued local employer with consequent benefits for the local economy - employing a full-time professional general manager who manages a team of employees comprising of the Restaurant Manager, the Financial Administrator, the Caretaker as well as the team of Volunteers and staff on community employment programmes.

The organisation through its housing, community centre, tea rooms, charity shop, the arts/culture centre and the volunteer hub delivers intergenerational and integrated activities to the residents and to the people of Naas and its catchment area. The Integrated Community Centre hosts over 30 different groups which meet weekly for a range of activities.

The principles of community development and the promotion of creative arts underpin and inform the development of McAuley Place as multi-functional, multi-sectoral amenity.

Transferability

In relation to the URBACT Good Practice Call, McAuley Place demonstrates multiple layers of relevance - in particular in the areas of infrastructure, institutional innovation and sectoral integration. McAuley Place spans the spectrum of social, cultural, environmental, health and economic spheres and the mixed character of its town-centre location & campus can be presented as a “showcase” to influence new thinking and policy development for urban renewal and revitalization. The project has contributed to the environmental, social and cultural richness of Naas and its catchment area. It has been the platform for creating new partnerships amongst voluntary groups, local businesses and committed individuals who want to contribute to the future of the town of Naas, their community and local area. The proposed Health through Learning Centre will conserve an old building dating back to the 1800's with a new purpose and life for future generations, thus enhancing the built environment and providing an additional resource on the County Kildare Heritage Trail.

The reality today - A visitor's perspective

Sometimes the place we live becomes invisible to us. Our human tendency to create repetitive daily patterns can narrow our perspective, and we fail to connect with those parallel worlds existing beyond our own particular comfort zones, and the change happening both positive and negative in the wider context. Life of course provides us with any number of opportunities to change our mind-sets and explore beyond what we think we know.

In my case I started to take long afternoon buggy walks with my two-year old grand-daughter round Naas, the Kildare town I have lived in for over three decades. Naas is an old market-town, and capital of County Kildare, though major population increase reflects its increasing role as a commuter town for Dublin. While I always had quite a positive view of Naas, attractive town-centre and an accessible hinterland, a landscape which I had enjoyed over the years as a cyclist, I was also aware that the city had faltered economically, and had somehow lost vitality when compared to towns like Newbridge or Kilkenny. Those early walks with the grand-daughter had multiple domestic objectives, though it had to be a win-win for both parties, a little exercise for me, a coffee maybe, a sleep for Seoirse Rue and some entertainment for her when she would wake up. I was drawn to the places I knew best at first, the neighbourhood routes close to the house and the couple of major town parks hugging the central area. These affirmed the positive aspects of Naas, the loop walks round the lakes at the Hospital had matured, were teeming with bird life, and managed to convey a sense of natural ecology. The large park

at Monread, the focus of a new urban quarter developed over recent decades, was well planted and managed, and had a fine playground, an important terminus for an energetic two-year old.

Soon we began to take longer walks and seek out less familiar connections. Frequently our objective was frustrated by a limited pedestrian network or by long established private land-holdings. In these instances we were forced to use extremely busy and often congested traffic routes. The awareness of less positive aspects of Naas led to reflection on how the town was shaping up to its current challenges. A feature of the town is a trend to locate economic activity to the periphery. In the last decade, major retail and office uses have located on the edge of town, nearly all dependent on car access. Smaller service retail uses have followed the anchor convenience stores. The cumulative impact of this trend has been a hollowing out of the town centre, and an apparent neglect of regeneration initiatives which might have sustained its role. This trend is evident in many Irish towns, where the intense urban mix has been weakened and buildings and infrastructures remain underused or fall into decay. The more decline, the less attractive the options are, and the more a culture of car-dependency prompts people to drive elsewhere to satisfy need or lifestyle. In mulling over how we are actually turning our back on the rich legacy of town infrastructure, I stumbled on a project right in the heart of Naas, which has within it perhaps, multiple answers to the challenges facing Irish towns.

I had noticed a few times a discreet café presence in the old convent buildings beside the main Catholic Church of Naas, Our Lady and St David's. Caught by an April rain-shower one day, Seoirse Rue and myself decided we needed shelter and a treat. One approaches the café on a walking route, flanked by the Church on one side, and by a town lawn on the other, outdoor tables by a burbling stream, announcing indeed that the café was open for business. While we greatly enjoyed the elegant surroundings and the quality of food on offer, it was obvious that this was more than an ordinary café. The restored convent buildings and new additions is now home to McAuley Place, a bustling and multi-layered innovative social and community project, which has translated into reality its vision of placing older people at the heart of a thriving community. The complex provides independent living for elders in its 53 customized apartments, which also houses an Arts Centre, a Community Centre, Tea-rooms, a Volunteer Hub, a Renaissance Charity Shop, and an urban woodland garden named 'Luisne'-meaning first light. Mc Auley Place is host to a wide range of residents, visitors, and volunteers who reside there, play there, eat there, meet friends there, play and listen to music there, practice art and craft there and generally engage with life there. In the warm inviting foyer there is a major clue to the value system driving this unconventional success story. It is a hand-drawn framed wall-hanging of the UN Principles for Older People, which states that as we get older, we should have access to the educational, cultural, spiritual, and recreational resources of society, and be able to pursue opportunities for the full potential of our development. Mc Auley Place is driven by these principles and works to make them operational daily, making sure that anyone who crosses the Mc Auley Place threshold, of any age, is offered opportunities for self-fulfillment. It is committed to optimizing the Arts as a key factor in creating that access.

Having an interest in all things urban, and taken in by the welcoming and upbeat atmosphere of Mc Auley Place, I decided I needed to find out more about how the idea emerged and how the concept blossomed. Everybody I spoke to referred to the team effort and a spirit of inclusiveness that pervades Mc Auley Place, but the original drive came from a small core team inspired in particular by the energy and vision of one individual, Margharita Solon. She was highly experienced in the nursing care of elders and felt strongly there was something seriously amiss with how society interacted with its older generation. She felt the generally accepted model of nursing-home care, frequently located far away from other services, to be very limited and limiting, and also questioned whether an older person living alone and depending on one hour a week of 'carer-support' was really being helped to 'maintain or regain the optimum level of physical, mental and emotional well-being' When I met Margharita and she agreed to show me round the Mc Auley Place complex, she surprised me by putting on an impromptu performance in a quiet meeting room, sitting in a chair totally silent, hands folded, eyes down, shoulders sagging slowly over three long minutes. It left me with a lasting impression of how an older person can retreat into isolation and have little or no expectation.

The McAuley Place vision is to provide for ‘naturally ageing’ in the right place, and the right place is the community, but it is a community of interest not age. When you walk across the threshold, you are not instantly confronted with age but with a diverse ecology which embraces social interaction and cultural stimulation and which refuses to look on old age as a disease. The Mc Auley Place ethos describes this as ‘social prescribing’, basing the care of older people on non-medical grounds, and creating an environment which is accessible, connected, vibrant, comfortable, pleasing, functional and respectful. The key to this is creativity, and the use of the arts is at the core of the Mc Auley Place mantra. They see a worrying trend in modern society to create environments for older people which are safer and safer, removing all challenges and stress, and in the process creating a living environment which is less robust and more ‘fragile’. If we remove all opportunities to experience the unexpected and engage with beneficial forms of stress, the result is inertia. Mc Auley Place therefore talks about ‘anti-fragile environments, a state of being where you can benefit from a little shock, and being taken out of your comfort-zone. They see creativity as essentially about challenge, often asking you to do things you may fear, refusing you the answers, and allowing the unexpected to pop up. Faced with the unexpected, we have to act, make a decision. McAuley Place provides a dynamic context where an intentionally mixed programme of activities is encouraged and allowed to interact and collide, a place where a truly anti-fragile environment is sustained.

As part of exploring the story of McAuley Place, and getting some insights on how the whole project emerged, I was encouraged to approach a number of willing volunteers, workers, and residents. Sally Logan is one of the original members, and apart from her great humanity and public spirit, has an incredible logistics brain. She remembers going into the semi-derelict convent building, wondering how they would ever make something of it. She got quickly drawn in by Margharita, gave up her golf, and was soon developing a volunteer programme, which now stands at 80, but back then was painstakingly slow to build up. She also remembers being part of the team creating the now impressively successful ‘McAuley Place Convent Tea-Rooms’, virtually running it herself in the first difficult weeks, but coming from a business background, knowing you had to stick with it until you got a bit of traction. Despite her strategic capacity and her emphasis on ‘nuts and bolts’ she has a great empathy with residents, and is particularly inspired by the model of the ‘Mission Houses’ in the US.

Working in a temporary part-time position as co-ordinator of the Arts and Cultural Centre is Veronica Judge. She has an infectious enthusiasm for the Arts and their role in social change, seeing herself as sometimes needing to rock the boat, while as she laughs ‘still staying in it’. Veronica also has strong views on community and how the loss of community has impacted on issues like mental health and obesity. She sees the need for systems and structures to enable and reflect collective action. She sees McAuley Place as a community within a community in Naas, where the culture is dynamic, spontaneous and open, and where residents are living independent lives.

Keeping an eye on the whole ship at McAuley is General Manager Mark Hazzard. His brief is wide-ranging, but at the heart he sees people-focus as being central. In one way or another he has a relationship with up to 170 people including 60 residents, 80 volunteers, 20 people on Government placement schemes, and 11 paid staff two of which are full-time. With people on placement schemes, he likes to ensure that each goes away with some additional acquired skill, for example barista training from the cafe, or a graduate in media studies being encouraged to make a documentary on McAuley Place [planned for 2017]. He also plans to bring in State Agencies for an ‘open-day’ to encourage them to think in advance about the value of young staff getting experience in the multi-disciplinary environment at McAuley Place. When judges visited Naas to assess the project for a major award, Mark got together a mixed group of residents, nurses, business people and staff from the Local Authority, sat them in a circle, got them to introduce themselves and have each say what McAuley Place meant to them. This shows perhaps the spirit of open-ness and the team effort which pervades the project, and the maturing consensus about what McAuley Place stands for. Mark’s enthusiasm for his work comes right across, and it is no surprise to hear him say that he loves his job, and that it took him 25 years to find it.

I also got the opportunity to talk to a very important person, the pastry chef at McAuley Place, the sparkling Anna Burke. I had already been too aware of the amazing display of great cakes in the ‘Convent Tea-Rooms’ and had given up trying to resist. Anna had worked in a number of high-profile

restaurants in the Dublin area, and found McAuley Place so calming after those highly stressed environments. She loves the atmosphere, the 'craic' with regulars, the residents dropping in, the renowned Past Times choir fortifying themselves before sounding heavenly. She makes light of her daily achievements on the baking front, taking pride in using all locally sourced ingredients, baking 60 scones every day, and she has even started a small venture, 'Cakes by Anna'

My final port of call on the interview front was Tony Frost, a resident at McAuley Place. Tony invited me into his comfortable apartment on the ground floor of the complex, facing onto a sunny courtyard. The walls of the apartment were lined with impressive photographs from a sporting life, mainly rugby, and events from Naas Lions Club where he was, and is still involved. He also takes a deep on-going interest in the life of all the residents at McAuley Place, among whom he says, there is a warm supportive relationship. He says that "each appreciates what they have, acknowledge they are well looked after, and in turn they tend to respond". They have their own residents organization which arranges outings and even takes care of a programme of activities at Christmas. He has a special regard for Annie Graham, a resident and former nurse, who still keeps a professional eye on the other residents. He visits the local pub occasionally, where he meets his "Chukka Chukka" pals, who helped to organize a huge fund-raising 'Golf-Classic' for McAuley Place. In visiting Tony, I walked through the elegant 'Residents Lounge', full of light, with high ceilings and period bookshelves, a feature being the ergonomically designed furniture suited to older-age posture, and the absence of a TV.

McAuley- inspiration and evolving model

When you visit McAuley Place and get a glimpse of people sitting on its town-centre lawn, and experience the warmth of reception, rich with baking smells and hung with the townspeople's artwork, and appreciate how it sits in a hub of schools, shops, pubs and offices, you begin to understand why this project is rather unique and also perhaps why society needs this kind of initiative. In Ireland projects tend to be silo-driven, they are either housing, or arts/culture, or commercial, or community, but you don't see too often, the rich spectrum of physical spaces, and glorious collision of uses that you find in McAuley. To put this in place required a new type of thinking and working together. It also needed a different funding model and a lot of networking and drive, to bring parties together who might not normally find themselves in the one project.

There are many lessons to be learned from the evolving model at McAuley Place. One of its key achievements is the manner in which it generates reflection on the role of older people in society. It does this through an ethos which is holistic and interdisciplinary, nurturing a value system which emphasizes integration, refusing to accept that an older generation remains invisible, but instead seeking to integrate people fully into a living community. McAuley Place also creates new perspectives on the enabling role of infrastructure, and the contribution of institutional innovation, particularly in terms of collaboration between sectors. In seeking a town-centre campus, and building identity and a sense of 'Place' which is complex and layered, McAuley Place mirrors the richness and diversity of an ideal urban community. The holistic thrust of the evolving programme spans the spectrum of social, cultural, environmental and economic spheres, and the mixed character of its town-centre location represents an 'Urban Lab' for new thinking and policy on the Irish town. In encouraging the juxtaposition of complementary sub-themes; Art, Community-activity, Home, Enterprise, Café, Volunteer, Nature and Landscape to collide with each other, McAuley Place enables the daily surprise that sustains mental health and human existence.

Appendix 1 - The Health through Learning Centre at McAuley Place

The integration of this woodland garden into the McAuley Place development and the planned Health through Learning Centre, adjacent to it, will further enhance the opportunities to maintain or regain the optimum level of wellbeing for all who visit. The new facility will highlight how learning and sharing crafts, skills and knowledge, can be a tool for maintaining health and wellbeing and promoting intergenerational solidarity.

This was the building which the Mercy Sisters used when they first arrived in Naas in the 1800s and from which, over the years, they developed the adjacent primary and secondary schools which are flourishing today. It's fitting that the building is now being restored and brought back to life as a focal point of learning for people of all ages.

The Health through Learning Centre will consist of a community lounge, three creative/making rooms and accommodation for an artist in residence. It will be open to the entire community - a place to go ... a place to be... for everyone. Phase 1 involved the repair and restoration of the building and funding is now urgently required to complete the development.

The new facility will provide a space where young and old can BE while also enjoying the possibility of exchanging and learning new and old skills. It will assume the role of a drop in centre for young and old and be seen as a gathering space for the community.

Appendix 2 -The Luisne Woodland Garden

The vision for the garden is to create an environment that will promote health and wellbeing for residents and the local people of all ages in line with the United Nations Principles for Older Persons and the Healthy Ireland Framework.

Funding for Phase 1 of the garden was received from the National Lottery through the Department of Health Lottery Fund and supported by the Heritage Department of Kildare County Council. The Project was called the "Slainte Woodland Project" and the next phase will consist of further woodland landscaping and the purchase of more woodland plants and lighting.

Raised beds at the end of the garden are well tended by residents of McAuley Place and yielded their first fruits this year in the form of tomatoes, potatoes, carrots and herbs. The old shed to the left of the entrance gate is a nesting place for bats so we have to be sensitive when we take it out. At the moment, Pat Ryan, volunteer, is working on an outdoor performance/exhibition area at the end of the garden on the convent side. This will provide artists, musical and otherwise, with a platform to display their talents in a very unique setting. He designed the 'Bug house' and his daughter created the sign. The aim of the bug hotel is to enhance the eco system in the garden - we will know it's working when it falls apart! The planned extension will house a pool of water for frog spawn next year.