



Configured Rurality

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Configured Rurality: landscape, community and negotiation in rural Ireland

The individual single-family unit typology has dominated development in rural Ireland since the formation of the Free State, underpinned by a cultural predisposition to living in the countryside¹ and a national obsession with private home-ownership. These attitudes have their roots in the history of land ownership and tenure in Ireland and in the more recent commodification of the home² in a growth-focussed economy. Popular among householders, the construction of one-off houses increased during the economic boom (mid 1990s to late 2000s). However, this dispersed and individualised approach to dwelling does not support the stability and prosperity of rural communities,³ causing many to question the social and financial limitations of the single-family home typology. Housing providers and practitioners have begun researching the logistics of implementing co-housing models developed elsewhere as a model for the Irish urban context.⁴ What alternative models of rural habitation could be considered, models that respond to their physical, cultural, and social context, that harness the resourcefulness, practicality, and sense of community that shared living can offer?

Looking again to the history of land ownership and tenure in Ireland, this essay will explore the dimension of communal living embodied in nineteenth century 'farm-villages' or clachans. As well as reviewing accounts of their form and configuration, we will present first hand observation and analysis. Our analysis uses a performative methodology to understand the resourceful relationship to landscape inherent in these configurations. We discuss an important cultural implication that has been drawn from them; they may not only have reflected but also contributed to the development of a strong oral culture in Ireland.⁵ Could this vernacular configuration of people, space, and resources provide clues or suggestions for configuring contemporary rural communities? Could the active negotiation with environment and society that the settlements embody be transfused into the making of new configurations?

Bearing in mind the complex requirements and aspirations of rural communities, we explore how community space might be interpreted and configured in rural developments today. A project called 'Nimble Spaces', in rural Co. Kilkenny is in the process of building an 'Inclusive Neighbourhood'. The project attempts an alternative response to ownership and shared space that is specific to its particular rural context, drawing on vernacular knowledge as well as contemporary housing and financing models. A series of board games have been developed to explore the potential of the spatial spectrum between individual space and an inclusive public realm, to generate rich and nuanced architectural space by drawing out the future inhabitants' experience and knowledge of communal habitation. Analogous to the active negotiation of communal space embodied in rundale villages, the game begins the complex spatial

negotiation process required in the formation of successful configurations.

The term 'vernacular knowledge' embraces inherited understandings and practices relating to building, environment, dwelling, and settlement. This includes knowledge that may not be immediately apparent. Thus, we use the term as a counter to interpretations of vernacular architecture based purely on physical typology or scenic qualities.⁶ The term 'configuration' is also important in this essay and in the research behind it. There are many words used to describe community across different cultures and contexts, for example, 'congregation', 'society', 'kibbutz', 'clique', 'affiliation', 'neighbourhood', 'assemblage'. In a rural context the word 'configuration' is useful as it implies specific interrelationships between the various arranged elements i.e. where things are spatially in relation to each other and to the site. Equally, 'configuration' describes social relationships and patterns of interaction. This essay explores the importance of configuration in the creation of rural communities and, in doing so, reflects on the nature of participation and negotiation.

Collective practices of living and farming

The plantations of Ireland in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries led to the creation of a landlord-tenant system, which largely unravelled beginning in the late nineteenth century following countrywide campaigns for agrarian reform.⁷ From the 1880s to the 1920s, a series of Land Purchase Acts facilitated the purchase of their holdings by the occupying tenants. Thus a system of small owner-occupied farms became the new norm throughout the country. This reparation process became tied to national independence and the newly-formed Irish Republic

adopted what has been called a ‘republican rurality’ where home and land ownership were conceptualised as a right of self-determination.⁸ Today’s dispersed pattern of one-off houses in the countryside developed from this post-colonial legacy. However, the land reparation process followed the pattern of individual tenant holdings, which was itself a creation of the landlord system. Another form of tenant holding, the rundale village system of nucleated settlement was in fact more adapted to the ecological situation of limited resources, and moreover, to the social, companionship, and communication needs of the population – needs that arguably still exist in rural Ireland today.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, especially in the west of the country,⁹ land holdings were collectively leased and farmed, with the joint-tenants living in nucleated clusters of houses directly adjacent to the most arable area of the holding. The holding often aligned with the ancient Gaelic townland (*baile fearainn*) land division and the land holders were often connected to each other through family and marriage.¹⁰ This system of joint-holding and farming is known as ‘rundale’. Many readers will be familiar with the structure of the rundale holding: the houses formed the core of the settlement; individual houses sometimes had vegetable patches (*garraí*); the arable land around the clachan was jointly farmed, usually for cultivation of oats, potatoes, etc. This was known as the ‘infield’ and it was kept in permanent cultivation. Each family used a variety of strips within the infield, to ensure a fair division of all types of soil – deep, shallow, sandy, boggy, dry. The area beyond the infield was the ‘outfield’ – poorer, more marginal, hilly or boggy ground used mainly for grazing and occasional cultivation (additional potatoes).¹¹ The rest of the lease-holding was used for

common grazing. Further away from the settlement was the mountain pasture or *machair*¹² where animals were taken on a seasonal basis, a practice known as boolying or *buailteachas*.¹³ Rundale configurations often incorporated communal facilities such as a sweat house and lime-kiln¹⁴ and the reciprocal approach to farming extended to other aspects of working and living too, for example house-building, thatching etc. where a system of mutual aid (*comhar na gcomharsana*) was practised.¹⁵

Nineteenth-century agricultural ‘improvers’ viewed the rundale system, with its tiny scattered holdings, as confused and primitive and a barrier to land reform,¹⁶ preferring to divide up holdings, disperse settlements, and relocate each farmer on their own fenced-off holding¹⁷ – a process known as enclosure, that started in earnest from the 1850s on. However, the rundale system of communal living and farming has since been recognised as a responsive environmental strategy. Historical geographers have extolled it as a finely calibrated adaptation to the particular ecological niches of the marginal conditions found in the west of Ireland.¹⁸ As a socially self-sufficient body, a group of residents could inhabit an area encompassing only a limited pocket of arable land. Keeping that land of the infield in continual cultivation was a highly efficient and ‘intelligent’ use of land and resources.¹⁹ It meant that the rundale holdings acted like reclamation units, a ‘mobile pioneer fringe’²⁰ pushing settlement limits from 500ft in 1650 to 800ft in 1840.²¹ This reclamation was recognised in government as a way of dealing with an ever-growing population and was even encouraged, for example by road-building in the west of the country.²²

A negotiation with resources

The rundale resource-sharing praxis provides a logic for the positioning of dwellings within the broader holding. Clustering the land-holders' dwellings together as a 'clachan' allowed the maximum amount of arable land to be given over to farming. Houses were often strategically positioned within town-lands in relation to other resources needed for subsistence, including manure, water supply, and fuel source (bogland).²³ As described above, rundale is now recognised for its ecological ingenuity as a land-use system. However, the evolution of the physical configuration of the housing cluster itself has rarely been explored in depth, and has been fairly unanimously dismissed as 'irregular' or 'haphazard'. Estyn Evans, who is credited with the 'discovery' of the clachan as a settlement type, described them in 1939 in his fieldwork studies as 'loosely gathered' settlements that had 'the air of ignoring the existence of its neighbour'.²⁴

Contemporaneous observers in the nineteenth century also unanimously dismissed clachan clusters as unplanned agglomerations.²⁵ One observer described Dooagh clachan in Achill as 'curious aggregations of miserable huts ...141 huddled close, very much as if they had been shaken out of a bag, and had laid as they fell' and derided the lack of streets.²⁶ These observers were comparing the configurations to the more disciplined English or French villages with ordered streets and centrally positioned services such as the church, pub, school, or shop.²⁷ The rundale villages were purely agrarian and, indeed, they were too remote and too small to have permanent services such as tailoring and skilled wood-working. These trades thus developed an itinerant practice.²⁸ The cultural and political positions that lay behind readings of the perceived formlessness

of the rundale villages have been explored in one study. As an architectural figuration 'emerging through social and environmental negotiation rather than through domination',²⁹ the space of the clachans lay in opposition to the authoritarianism of form, an 'anti-architecture'. The author cites contemporaneous descriptions, for example Synge's account of an eviction on the Aran Islands³⁰ that illustrate the sheltering, defensive quality of the clusters against the incursion of authority.

A negotiation with landscape

Given the specific agrarian purpose of the clachans, and given that the disciplined layout of a planned village was not an aspiration for these vernacular builders, it is more likely that other motivations engendered the configuration of clachans. In other words, the configurations demonstrate an 'intrinsic' response, rather than concern for 'extrinsic philosophical concepts of order derived from Pythagoras, Vitruvius or Palladio such as orthogonality, axis, grids, proportion and symmetry'.³¹ Many accounts recognise basic adaptations to site, for example: 'Slopes facing south or south-east were favoured except in the case of the few clachans built near the sea; in these the houses turn their backs to the strong south-westerly winds.'³² The same fieldwork notes one clachan, Killough, with a 'near-linear lay-out' and distinguishes extremely compact clachans from more open ones, resulting from the clachan's organic growth 'combined with the nature of its site'.³³ These observations acknowledge purposefulness in the siting of clachans, in the relationship between topography and shelter, if not between individual dwellings.³⁴

Some studies go further and question whether the layout of clachans was indeed as haphazard as previously

thought; O'Donnell (1993) observes from her studies of clachans in Inishowen that the configurations were varied, not always 'uniform and haphazard', and represented the manifestation of 'bottom-up planning even within apparently random settlement nucleations'.³⁵ Her fieldwork indicates that topography was the primary determinant in the layout of the Inishowen clachans, with some orientated around rocky outcrops (e.g. Legacurry) and others hugging the side of a mountain. Architect Noel Brady's on-going examination of a remote deserted village on Achill Island,³⁶ once used for transhumance, has identified design rigour and intent in the unique spatial coherence of the configuration. It is from this spatial coherence, rather than merely the value of the structures as types that, he says, contemporary place-making could learn.³⁷ Another study, by folklorist Barry O'Reilly, focuses on the continuing evolution of nucleated settlements, examining the contemporary state of ten such examples. He traces the history of incremental house building up to the present, pointing to kinship as a layer in the generation of the form.³⁸ As a non-closed and non-rigid structure, these arrangements lend themselves to incremental growth over time.

We have examined three rundale villages to investigate the strategic use of landscape elements in their formation. An Liónán Caol/Lenankeel is located on the base of the Urris hills in the west of the Inishowen Peninsula, Co. Donegal. The overall landscape strategy is highly legible as one approaches over the Mamore Gap and into this open coastal vale: the settlement cluster (a) hugs the base of the mountain as it rises steeply from the coastal plain. This is the fulcrum of the holding's resources – arable land (b) panning out to the northeast, rough grazing (c) on the valley plain, supplies of fertiliser from shoreline

(e), and with a road leading from the cluster up to the mountain commonage (d), which was divided between the four rundale settlements in the townland.³⁹ Within the settlement, the houses are configured along the contours with gables to the seaward side, creating sheltered and level yard space in between.

Lagacurry is just north of Lenankeel but in a contrasting landscape area, called the Isle of Doagh. Doagh is a tombolo, an island connected to the mainland by a sand bar. The low-lying landscape is characterised by open plains with sporadic metamorphic rock projections. The Lagacurry settlement is clustered around one such rock outcrop (a), the immediate pockets of land around it treated with seaweed to create a fertile infield (b). The surrounding land (c) is mixed with a sand bank to the south falling towards clay soil that retains moisture, making it boggy and more suitable for rough grazing (b). The rock protrusions have the scale of built structures and are utilised for shelter, enclosure, and access within the settlement; in one case the rock-face acts as a wall enclosing a protected yard. In another, the sloping rock provides access to the upper level of a barn. Slightly elevated, the settlement overlooks the holding and the coastal commonage (d) in a configuration that, unusually, continues to be held in rundale today.⁴⁰

On Achill Island's northwest shore is the farm village of Dumh Goirt/Dugort, strategically sited with grazing commonage (d) in the mountain rising behind and a ready supply of shelly sand and seaweed at the nearby shore (e) for improving both the fertility and drainage of the soil.⁴¹ Potatoes and vegetables could be grown in the arable soil between the settlement and the shore road and on the level ground of the adjacent headland (b) with rougher

land for grazing and occasionally tillage (c). This utilitarian relationship to landscape extends to the micro-scale in the settlement itself; walking between dwellings that in some cases are less than one meter apart, it is possible to identify underlying strategies. Gables are built into the upward sloping ground, facilitating access to fodder storage from the upper level at the sheltered landward side; the long sides of the houses are loosely parallel to each other, creating sheltered external 'circulation corridors' which connect entrances; the floor levels of structures are positioned relative to each other, utilising the topography to achieve visual and spatial separation. These are landscape strategies that achieve utility and nuanced domestic space within a dense configuration.

The building typologies, morphology, circulation, and interstitial spaces of these farm villages grew out of complex and subtle relationships between human activity, topography, materials, and resources, all of which are bound by a utilitarian relationship to the surrounding landscape to form each configuration. Starting to understand the landscape strategies used in these configurations, in this way, corresponds to a 'utilitarian-landscape' interpretation of vernacular architecture.⁴² This is a way of understanding vernacular environments in terms of the resourceful use of landscape elements such as topography, geology, vegetation, watercourses, etc. for imperative utilitarian purpose -- i.e. to create spatial definition, shelter, containment, access, or for agricultural function. Such an interpretation recognises the agency and knowledge of the vernacular creators of these environments.

A negotiated configuration

Today's predilections for personal privacy and individual space are relatively new constructs and many early dwellings show little indication of spatial delineation for individuals or genders, etc.⁴³ This cultural relationship to 'public-ness' would help explain why dwellings could be so close to each other and nonetheless achieve a satisfactory degree of privacy for inhabitants, and perhaps add to their sense of mutual security, as surmised by one contemporaneous observer: '... in the upper reaches of this district, the cottagers reside together, each house contiguous to his neighbour ... possibly for the sake of mutual security'.⁴⁴ Equally, such closely woven webs of habitation could well have been born of the desire for company and community. The close configuration of dwellings enhanced easeful communication by a highly sociable society. We know many dwellers were connected through kinship ties and houses must have been configured according to the dictates of those relationships – like 'webs of social solidarities anchored on a territorial template'.⁴⁵ Thus the clachan layouts can be seen as a response to the social imperative of a highly communicative society. However, it also has been suggested⁴⁶ that clachan living may have, in fact, contributed to the development of communication and story-telling skills in Irish society. The ability to negotiate between parties must have been a necessary and valued skill. In this way, the dense arrangement of the clachan can be read as the physical embodiment of configuring space through processes of oral negotiation and co-operation which contributed to the development of a strong oral culture in Ireland.

The evocative phrase '*comharsa bhéal dorais*' (front door neighbour) is said to have emerged from the time

of clachan living.⁴⁷ A contemporaneous account from Connemara described how ‘people lived so close to one another that men would chat from house to house without ever coming to the door.’⁴⁸ In this sense, the configuration achieves something more complex and ‘urban’ than many contemporary Irish cities. Indeed, the paved, often cobbled area in front of the traditional Irish farmhouse was known as ‘the street’,⁴⁹ implying the public nature of that space. The new post-famine system of ladder farms encouraged farmers to dwell on their own farm holdings. Although arguably well intentioned, such ‘improvements’ certainly led to a more isolated form of living, and there are many accounts from the time that lament the fragmentation of society and of oral culture after the break-up of rundale.⁵⁰ Extending that correlation to the modern dispersed pattern of one-off houses suggests continued erosion of social culture through ever increasing spatial isolation.

Of course, the social life of the clachan should not be romanticised. Many contemporaneous accounts point to squabbling and bickering among clachan dwellers, particularly as they became denser and more sub-divided immediately pre-famine.⁵¹ Nonetheless, the nucleated housing configurations of the rundale system certainly represents a supportive structure of people, landscape, and resources – an active rural community – that has the potential to inform contemporary rural configurations.

Interpreting vernacular knowledge

Aesthetic interpretations of vernacular architecture and configurations are often concerned with the qualities of their form as typology and their scenic relationship to landscape. Such visual approaches to understanding vernacular building, although entrenched, carry with them the danger of missing ecological, social, and

cultural knowledge inherent in these configurations. More recently, a new sensibility has been identified in scholarship and reflective practice in Ireland⁵² based on vernacular processes: heterogeneity and adaptability. Through this lens, the rundale village is not seen as a composition of prismatic forms in a landscape scene. Rather it is understood as a system of living based on resourcefulness, practicality, and community that utilises landscape strategically to generate nuanced domestic space. In this way, it contains vernacular knowledge that can inform strategies for the configuration of contemporary rural communities.

We have explored how the configurations were generated from a negotiation with resources, landscape, and between co-habitants; active agents participating in their environment, in contrast to the passivity of the spectator and consumer associated with rural property today.⁵³ The active agency of the end-user is the ambition of participatory practices in architecture. Starting in the 1960s and 1970s as a reaction to modernism's obsession with purity of form and with what was seen as an overly scientific approach to architecture, practitioners such as Giancarlo de Carlo called for the re-empowerment of the user⁵⁴ and developed methods for users to actively participate in the design process, an early example being Lucien Kroll's cumulative model for Mémé, which participants could modify but never erase.⁵⁵ The term 'participation' has been tainted somewhat since these early days through its appropriation by political or corporate bodies staging what are often token public consultations to push predetermined developments through. This has been criticised as 'pseudo-participation'⁵⁶ or 'placatory participation'⁵⁴ that essentially retains the existing top-down power balance.

Jeremy Till has proposed a model of 'transformative participation' where the architect does not disavow their knowledge⁵⁸ but rather uses it transformatively, drawing out the specialist knowledge of the user as 'expert citizen'. As such, the process has the potential to invigorate design development, challenging the constraints of specialist knowledge. The methods of transformative participation can also challenge the constraints of specialist knowledge, exposing the limits of normative architecture methods – Till refers, for example, to the 'radical reductiveness' of the drawing. He points to the usefulness of conversations with ordinary people, of story-telling in the architectural process. Easy and unfettered, they contain the 'germs of new spatial possibilities'.⁵⁹ This reflects the genuine nature of everyday conversations as opposed to client-architect discussions about architecture, which, we have observed are often distorted by visual/formal associations or fashion. This led us to explore the potential of a game as a means of drawing out discreet vernacular knowledge embedded in conversation and storytelling and transfusing it into the design process.

A contemporary collective

Our practice is working with the Camphill Community in Co. Kilkenny on the Nimble Spaces project to develop three 'inclusive neighbourhoods' in the town of Callan. Camphill is an organisation that provides a range of support services for vulnerable people, in particular residential support for people with intellectual disabilities. They have a life-sharing philosophy, so their workers and residents live together, sharing social spaces and regularly eating together, etc. The 'inclusive neighbourhood' model has developed from the group's communal ethos of working and living together; suited to residents with

varying care needs seeking greater independence and self-determination, as an alternative to more stratified institutional forms of care.

The term 'inclusive neighbourhood'⁶⁰ means a mutually supportive settlement composed of Camphill residents who have various levels of social and care needs together with private individuals, or what are being called 'constructive neighbours'.⁶¹ These 'constructive neighbours' are members of a specially-formed housing co-operative, called Lónra Housing.⁶² The formation of an inclusive, mutually supportive neighbourhood is immediately analogous to rundale settlement with its resource sharing structure and mutual aid systems (*comhar na gcomharsana*), as described. The evolution of the project draws on this vernacular knowledge and sensibility, as well as from successful contemporary urban communities located in cities such as Berlin. Research on the financial models of some recent Berlin housing projects⁶³ fed into the conceptual development of the project, in particular the interrelationships between the financial model, spatial organisation, and participatory design processes.

Co. Kilkenny is located in the 'hill and vale' area of Ireland's central lowland district. Unlike the west and north-west 'peasant fringe' of the country, where the archetype of small-farming and rundale tenures dominated,⁶⁴ the tradition of land holding in this area is more varied. It is characterised by prosperous mixed farming (meadow, pasture, and arable), carefully tended land, and medium-sized dispersed farms. The landscape here also experienced a strong Norman influence, with many tower-houses as well as remnants of motte structures, as seen in Callan, still in evidence today. Immediately before the famine, small farms held in

rundale multiplied, especially on the hill slopes and bogs, to cope with the increasing population.⁶⁵ Many vernacular nucleated settlements in the county have a courtyard form contiguously arranged at one or both sides of the road,⁶⁶ a strategy of enclosure that responds to the condition of open, exposed landscape and a generally flat terrain.

Play as negotiation

There is inherently great complexity involved in planning a collective community. The residents, as described above, are a diverse group of people with different expectations and requirements, as well as different care requirements and different levels of intellectual ability. What all residents had in common is their interest in some level of communality in how they lived. This interest varied widely, from those who could imagine having a partly shared garden to those who would like to eat together every day. This negotiation and layering of interrelationships between shared and individualised space was a rich area for exploration. Retaining privacy while interlocking individual space with graduations of shared space is crucial to the success of such communities. How can one assist in the negotiation of scales of individualisation and sharing found in everyday patterns of space usage? Understanding these nuances enables residents to better understand their existing situation and to imagine future spatial arrangements. The 'Negotiating Space' games were developed to facilitate these explorations.

Playing a game had the potential to allow participants to role-play, to play around with ideas without feeling they are committing to the result or being worried that they might make a mistake. It's 'just a game' and players can simply play again and try some other spatial arrangement. Because the game is entertaining, players shed anxiety and

inhibition about spatial decisions. This makes outcomes liberating and empowering for participants and very useful for brief formation and translation into spatial relationships and architecture. The game format gives players the control to explore and express their individual spatial desires, but with their autonomy subject to the moves of other players and the evolving collective spatial arrangement. The game has the potential to facilitate spatial consensus, built through a gradual series of incremental individual decisions. Thus, the tension and energy between the individual and social group is captured in the social dynamics of playing the game.

Games have been used elsewhere in participatory design processes; Building Initiative in Belfast used game pieces with linked costs to simultaneously explore community priorities whilst refining spatial organisation.⁶⁷ The practice Design Heroine Architecture has specialised in the development of 'context sensitive' games, not only for design processes but also for other complex knowledge exchange processes in the academic and corporate environment.⁶⁸ Baupiloten's Negotiate Dream Space board game used activity and atmosphere cards to determine the desires, needs, and functional requirements of participants.⁶⁹ The series of Negotiating Space games, described here, was developed to facilitate investigations for a specific project. But the games have potential application at varying scales and circumstances as tools for design collaboration that explore and reveal how we live together.

The game series

The first game played was called the 'Enabling Space Game' and explored the experiences and aspirations of shared and private space. The game board is organised as

a spatial graduation from a shared centre to private space on the edge of the board. The space on the board between the shared and private areas could allow proximity and informal degrees of social contact or neighbourliness. The game pieces were developed to describe different activities and indicate an approximate size in relation to a person, as represented by the figures that were also used to identify the different players. These pieces can be put together to form bigger spaces either with one's own pieces or by pooling pieces with other players, for example, to form a larger shared dining space.

The game was also used to record and spatially represent existing living situations. This allows reflection on these situations but also the opportunity to adjust or change these simply by pushing the pieces around. The pieces are quite generic in that they use simple recognisable symbols to indicate activities or uses. This allows participants to maintain their own mental image of the nature of these spaces rather than the pieces indicating the design, decoration, or personalised appropriation of these spaces. The game is primarily about spatial interrelationships rather than the built nature of these spaces.

Following this, the 'Site Strategy Game' was played to explore how this range of shared to private space could be configured on a site. The site parameters were discussed, agreed, and superimposed on the game board and the game played again with the added dimensions of topography, orientation, access, existing site structures, and patterns.

The 'Shape Your Space Game' was played as the final game in the series to explore individuals' personal spatial needs and aspirations. A new set of game pieces, representing the uses/spaces scaled to the proposed structural/spatial grid,

allowed participants to explore options for the internal layouts of their future dwelling. This was played collectively so that participants developed a spatial literacy and explored their own spatial preferences while learning from the spectrum of possibilities proposed by other players. Just as the Site Strategy Game configures social relations on a site, Shape Your Space is about configuring personal preferences in terms of a modular 'architecture' that is in turn configured according to patterns that emerged out of the Enabling Space Game. The game series revealed a complex non-linear process in the development from spatial interrelations, to site relationships, to architecture, and then back to interrelations and site.

An agile architecture

The process of analysing the game configurations and translating them into building then begins, a process conceptualised as 'interlocking modules'. A spatial and structural module was developed that allowed the outcomes of the games to be interpreted in terms of the interlocking layout of homes, shared internal spaces, and shared/private external spaces on each site. Throughout the game-playing process, the outcomes of the games were mapped, documented visually, and distributed. This formed a layered register of project-specific vernacular knowledge, a 'negotiation memory' that continues to inform discussions and spatial decisions as the design develops.⁷⁰

Two main communal spaces developed from the game process. The first is a covered outdoor space, a shared/public veranda or 'super-porch'. The second is the courtyard. The shared super-porch is both a covered circulation space and a space that is appropriated as a front porch and outdoor extension to the adjacent internal living spaces, which address it. As such, it has the qualities

of a micro-street around which the residential spaces are configured. It offers the potential of regular informal contact with neighbours, much like the 'street' in front of the traditional farmhouse as described above. This semi-public covered micro-street shapes and creates a defined edge to the spatially more generous common space of the grassed courtyard and allows circulation along its edge.⁷¹ Similar to the resourceful spatial efficiencies of the rundale model, this pooling of individual outdoor areas into a courtyard results in a generous flexible space, larger than what would be otherwise realisable for individual segregated owner-occupied properties. But the shared space is not limited to recreational or leisure space, as both of the proposed residential clusters have well-established adjacent organic vegetable gardens which are shared working spaces and agricultural resources for the residences and act as shared amenities within the configuration.

The potentiality of participation extends into the architecture itself, which aims to be flexible and robust, an agile architecture that empowers the user to make changes throughout the building's lifetime. Thus there is continuity between the playing of the game and the architectural experience that it is aiming to inform. Such aspiration harks back to Segal's original self-build system for private and social housing which could be constructed by future residents after an evening course of instruction by the architect. The Segal method produced a strong sense of community even before construction was complete.⁷² Cementing of community ties through collective building is reminiscent of the *comhar na gcomharsana* collective work and building practice (*meitheal*) that was commonplace in rural Ireland in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In the highly regulated construction industry of today, such actions are no longer feasible.

However, as an outcome of the participatory design process, flexibility has been made integral to the design so that future changes can be accommodated as spatial requirements change with growing families or developing live-work arrangements. Thus there is continuity between the playing of the game and the architectural experience that it is aiming to inform. The structural module of 3.6m by 2.6m was based on a common room size to allow interchanges and combinations of room types. Double-height areas and individual sun-spaces can be converted into new rooms; areas of the external cladding can be personalised using colour and variation of materials; external opes retain flexibility for future conversion to smaller or larger glazed areas or to doors; the super-porch contains an area for integrated artwork that will evolve in its use during occupancy.

Negotiating space

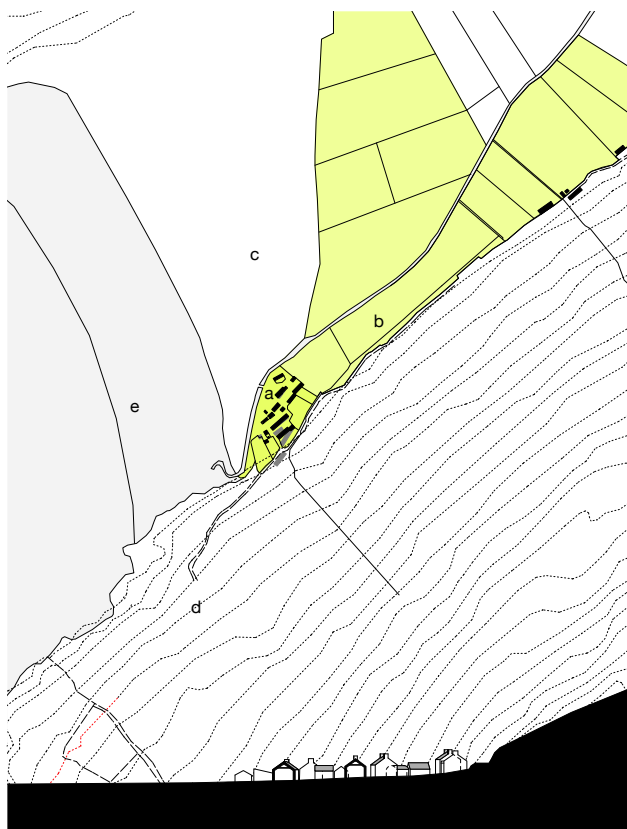
In architectural practice and rural planning, the clachan typology is most often referenced as a precedent for housing schemes with irregular layouts, particularly in rural holiday house developments. This corresponds to what we have described as the scenic interpretation of vernacular architecture, where a composition of forms and its relationship to landscape are understood purely in visual terms. However, architectural scholarship and critical practice have begun to move away from this approach towards a more profound and nuanced understanding of these vernacular environments. For example, Dominic Stevens has cited the rundale system in his work as a model of ecologically adapted development to inform a more resource-focussed approach to home building.⁷³ Ireland's 2006 pavilion at the Venice Biennale contained a project for a holiday housing development that drew imaginatively on

the rundale land-holding concept whereby each land-holder has access to a range of land types and qualities.⁷⁴

The formation of the Nimble Spaces 'inclusive neighbourhood' has a resonance with the intentions of the rundale collective living system and the resource-sharing mindset of its creators. This resonance is reflected in the physical components of these two actively configured environments. In this analogy, the active space of the veranda becomes the farmhouse 'street', the shared courtyard is the infield, and the wider site with its gardens and wooded grounds become the outfield, while the dwellings are clustered to maximise all of these resources. It is in these spaces that easeful everyday communication among residents can be imagined, evoking the intimacy of a clachan and its 'front door neighbours', but with a nuanced configuration of private and shared space that is specific to the modern 'constructive neighbours' who hope to live here.

However, the potential of vernacular knowledge embedded in rundale configurations extends beyond the physical components of their communal space; the value of the social process of their incremental making must be recognised. The clachan environment is a symbiosis and convergence of the inhabitants' everyday physical subjectivity with the structures themselves, a configuration of space through processes of oral negotiation and co-operation. How can the active relationship between society and landscape that the settlements embody be transfused into the making of new configurations? To re-activate such a relationship in the Nimble Spaces project, the potential of play was invoked.⁷⁵ Playing the game stimulated and enabled a layered and co-operative negotiation process that led, not so much to singular consensus,⁷⁶ as to

an understanding of the way in which individual and communal needs are continually negotiated in the making of architecture.

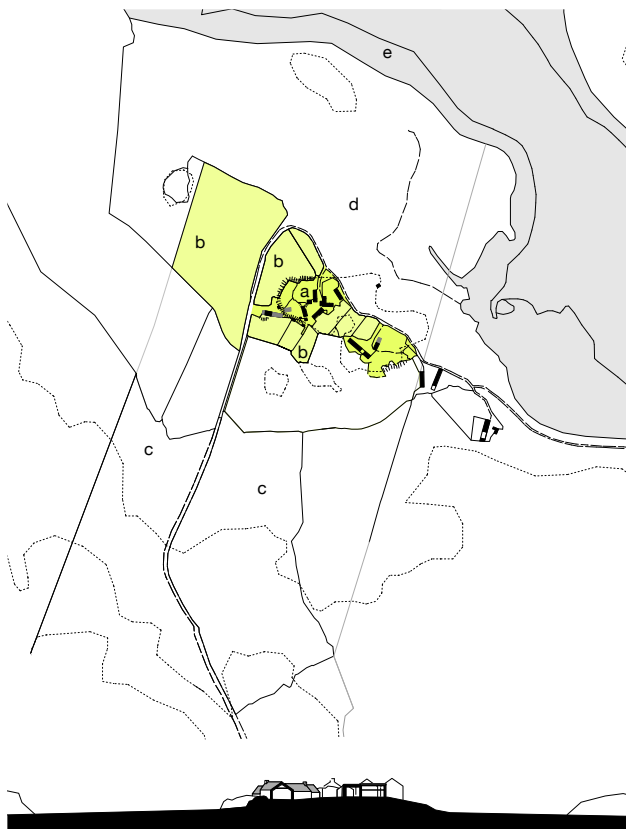


Landownership break-down in Lenankeel
rundale village, Inishowen, Co. Donegal,

- a settlement core/clachan
- b infield/ arable land around the clachan
- c outfield, mainly grazing
- d commonage
- e shoreline

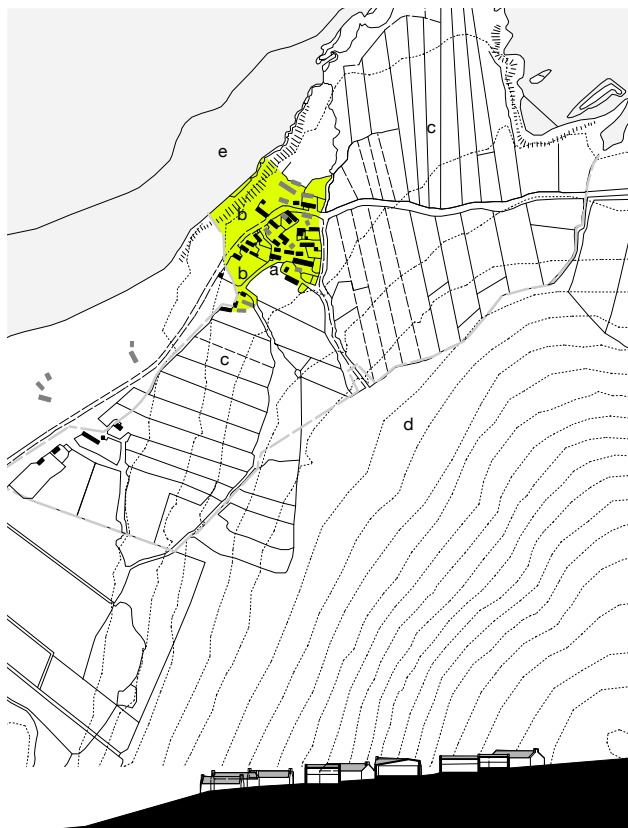


Lenankeel farm village, 2019



Leganacurry rundale village, Co. Donegal,
continues to operate collective ownership





Rundale farm village at Dugort, Achill Island. Strategic use of landscape elements achieves utility and nuanced domestic space within a dense configuration





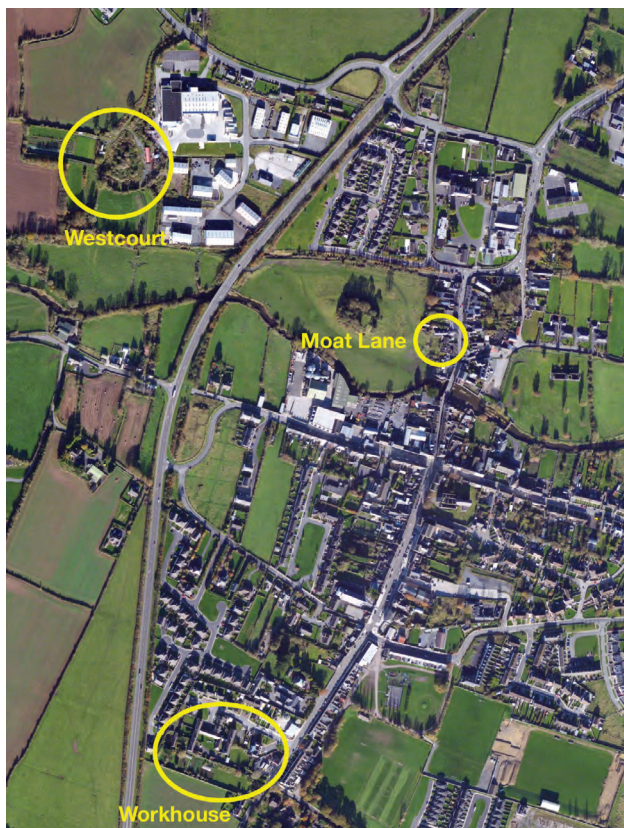
Slievemore, Achill Island. The spatial coherence of this boolying village presents a counter to contemporary architecture with its focus on buildings as individual entities





The area in front of the farmhouse that was known as 'the street', implying the public nature of that space



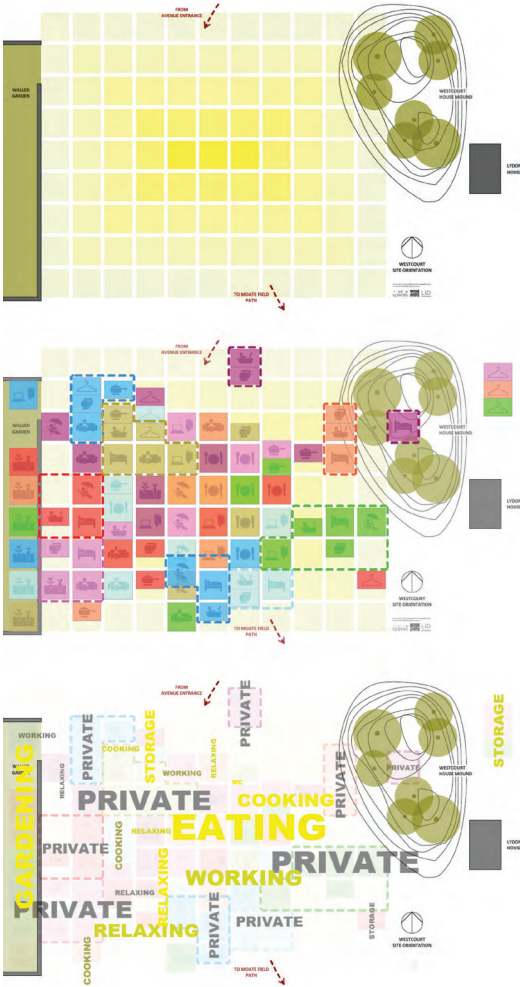


Inclusive neighbourhood sites in Callan:
the Workhouse Orchard, Moat Lane, and
Westcourt Farm



Because the game is entertaining, players shed anxiety and inhibition about spatial decisions

Enabling Space Game. The game format gives players the control to explore and express their individual spatial desires, but with their autonomy subject to the moves of the other players and the evolving collective spatial arrangement



The game outcomes were documented and distributed forming a 'negotiation memory'



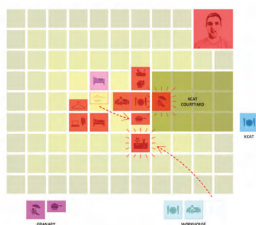
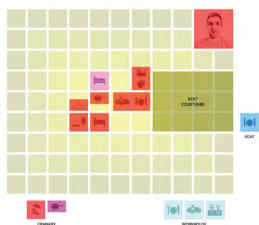
Site Strategy Game. The game is played again with the added dimensions of topography, orientation, access, existing site structures, and patterns. The process of interpreting the game configurations and translating them into a built configuration continues



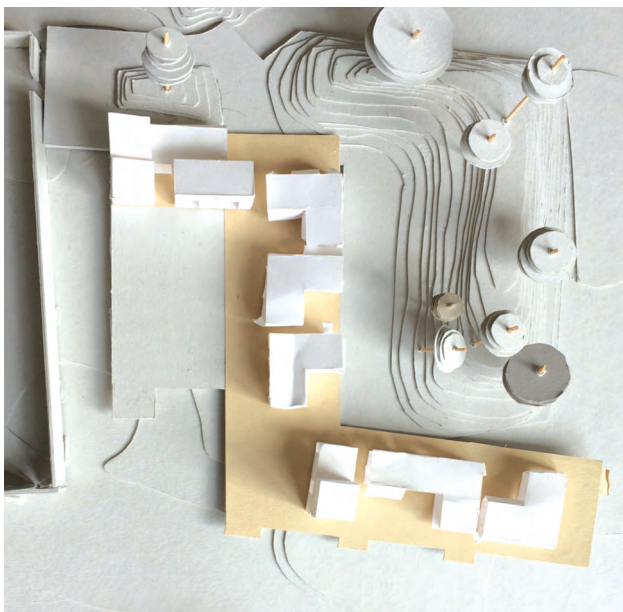
existing situations



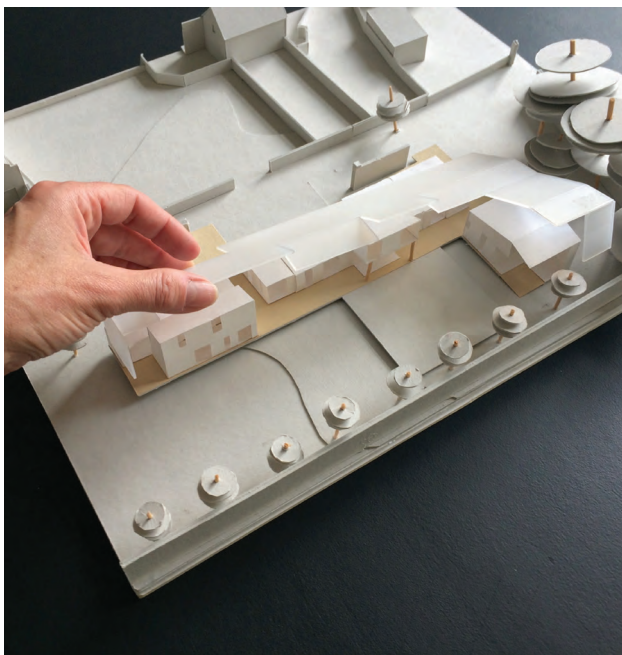
reconfigurations



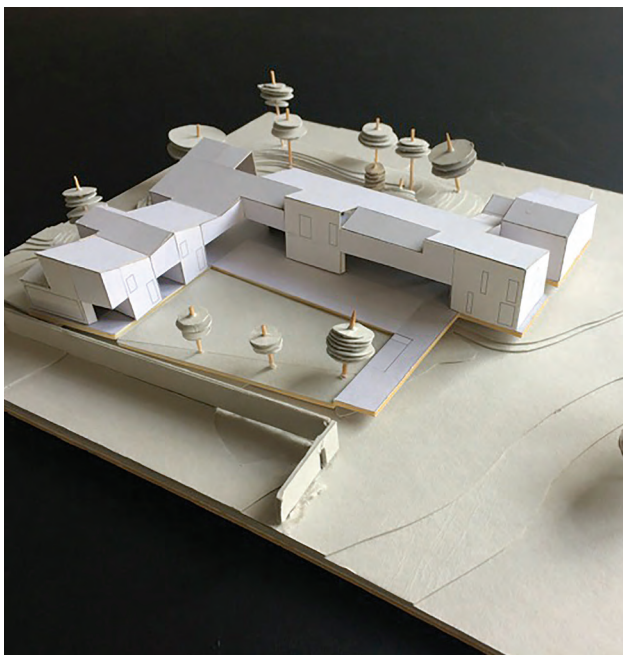
'Shape Your Space' is about configuring personal preferences within a rationalised construction



As the design developed, model workshops were used as part of the participatory design process



The courtyard. Pooling of individual outdoor areas into a courtyard results in a generous flexible space, larger than what would be otherwise realisable for individual, segregated owner-occupied properties



The 'super-porch'. This shared 'veranda' is both a covered circulation space and a space that is appropriated as a front porch and outdoor extension to the adjacent internal living spaces that address it



Shared spaces. It is in these spaces that easeful everyday communication among residents can be imagined, evoking the intimacy of rundale village and its 'front door neighbours'

Notes

- 1 M. Scott and M. Murray, 'Housing Rural Communities: Connecting Rural Housing to Rural Development in Ireland', *Housing Studies*, vol. 24, 2009, p. 760.
- 2 M. Punch, 'Commodity or home? Critical perspectives on Irish housing', in S. O'Sullivan (ed.), *Contemporary Ireland, a sociological map*, Dublin, University College Dublin Press, 2007;
D. Stevens, *Rural: Open to All, Everyone Welcome*, Leitrim, Mermaid Turbulence, 2007, p. 87.
- 3 M. Gkartzios, M. Shucksmith, 'Spatial Anarchy' versus 'Spatial Apartheid': rural housing ironies in Ireland and England', *Town Planning Review*, vol. 86, 2015, p. 66.
- 4 For example, D. Sheridan (ed.), *Translating Housing: Berlin-Belfast*, Belfast, Northern Ireland Department for Social Development, 2014;
C. McDonnell, Cohousing as *Emerging Typology*, Conference Paper AIARG, 2016.
- 5 E. E. Evans, *The Personality of Ireland: habitat, heritage and history*, Dublin, The Lilliput Press, Dublin, 1972, 1992, p. 100;
K. Whelan, 'Clachans: landscape and life in Ireland before and after the Famine', in P. Duffy and W. Nolan (eds.), *At the anvil. Essays in honour of William J. Smyth*, Dublin, Geography Publications, 2012, pp. 453-475.
- 6 See D. McMenamin and D. Sheridan, 'Interpreting vernacular space in Ireland: a new sensibility', *Landscape Research*, 2018, pp. 1-17, for analysis of established and emerging interpretations of vernacular environments in an Irish context.
- 7 F. S. L. Lyons, *Ireland since the famine*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971, p. 604.
- 8 M. Scott, 'Housing Conflicts in the Irish countryside: uses and abuses of postcolonial narratives', *Landscape Research*, vol. 37, 2012, pp. 91-114;
Gkartzios and Shucksmith, op.cit., p. 66.
- 9 There is now a general consensus that the rundale system of joint tenure and farming existed mainly in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries under the landlord system, and not before that as had been previously held by some scholars of Irish historical geography. Evans, who is credited with the 'discovery' of clachans in Ireland, McCourt, and others surmised that the system was of 'great antiquity' originating from Neolithic times (D. McCourt, 'The dynamic quality of Irish rural settlement', in R. Buchanan, E. Jones, and D. McCourt (eds.), *Man and his habitat*, London,

Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971, pp. 126-164. Cartographic scholar, John Andrews, was the first to question this theory, pointing to the lack of archival evidence (J. H. Andrews, 'The mapping of Ireland's cultural landscape 1550-1630', in P. Duffy, D. Edwards, and E. Fitzpatrick (eds.), *Gaelic Ireland c.1250-1650: land, lordship and settlement*, Dublin, Four Courts Press, 2004, pp. 153-180.

A distinction has been made between the farm villages described here and those located in less marginal, more stable areas. With their occupational diversity and connection to markets, they were not as dependent on mutual collaboration. Burtchaell describes those in South Kilkenny, for example, as falling into four distinct morphologies: 1. linear forms, 2. those focussed on a routeways, 3. adjoining courtyard farms, and 4. those focussed on a green or commonage. J. Burtchaell, 'The South Kilkenny Farm Villages', in K. Whelan and W. J. Smyth (eds.), *Common ground: essays on the historical geography of Ireland: presented to T. Jones Hughes*, Cork, Cork University Press, 1988, pp. 112, 120.

- 10 Evans, op. cit., p. 39; Whelan, op. cit., p. 1.
- 11 Description of a rundale holding, based mainly on Whelan, Ibid, p. 1; J. Bell and M. Watson, *Irish Farming Life:*

History and Heritage, Dublin, Four Courts Press, Ireland, 2014, p. 25.

- 12 Evans, op. cit., 1972, p. 94.
- 13 Bell and Watson, op. cit., p. 25.
- 14 E. E. Evans, *Irish Folk Ways*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, Boston, 1957, pp. 32, 122.
- 15 F. H. A. Aalen, K. Whelan, and M. Stout, *Atlas of the Irish rural landscape*, 1st edition, Cork, Cork University Press, 1997, p. 90.
- 16 Aalen et al., op. cit., p. 89; E. Flaherty, 'The macro-context of communality in nineteenth century Ireland: toward a typology of social-ecological complexity', *NIRSA Working Papers Series*, no. 72, 2013, p. 6.
- 17 Bell and Watson, op. cit., p. 29.
- 18 Aalen et al, op. cit.; Whelan, op. cit.; Flaherty, op. cit.
- 19 Aalen et al., Ibid, p. 81.
- 20 Whelan, op. cit., pp. 6-7.
- 21 Eoin Flaherty's research goes further and uses the theory of 'resilience ecology' to show the capacity of the rundale system to adapt; E. Flaherty, op. cit.
- 22 P. Solar, 'Occupation, Poverty and Social Class in pre-Famine Ireland 1740-1850', in M. E. Daly, and E. F. Biagini (eds.), *The Cambridge social history of modern Ireland*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2017, p. 35.

- 23 T. Hughes, 'The townlands of Inishbofin', *Irish Geography*, vol. 3, 1956, p. 131;
M. O'Donnell, 'Farm Cluster in North-West Inishowen, c.1850', *Irish Geography*, vol. 26, 1993, p. 101.
- 24 E. Estyn Evans, 'Some Survivals of the Irish Openfield System', *Geography*, vol. 24, 1939, p. 25.
- 25 Kevin Whelan cites contemporaneous accounts in his article on rundale, 'Clachans: landscape and life in Ireland before and after the Famine', Whelan, op. Cit., 2012.
- 26 W. Jack, 'Report upon the state of primary education in the west connaught districts', *Reports of assistant commissioners*, 1870, p. 350, cited by Whelan, op. cit., p. 17.
- 27 Whelan, op. cit., p. 1; E.E. Evans, *Ireland and the Atlantic Heritage, Selected Writings*, 1st edition, Dublin, The Lilliput Press, 1996, p. 70.
- 28 Evans, Ibid, p. 71.
- 29 M. Dorrian, 'On the Irish clachan and the authority of order and form', 1995, p. 169. This doctoral thesis examines the semantics and interpretation of the 'anti-architecture' of the clachan.
- 30 J. M. Synge, J. B. Yeats, *The Aran Islands*, Belfast, Blackstaff, 1988, pp. 74-82.
- 31 L. Johnston, 'In Search of the Clachán', *Building Material*, no. 16, 2007, pp. 10-15. The author describes his cartographic study and field trip to examine clachan morphology. However, he was, he says, unable to draw detailed specific conclusions because of the lack of extant original settlements.
- 32 B. Mac Aodha, 'Clachán Settlement in Íar-Chonnacht', *Irish Geography*, vol. 5, 1965, p. 23.
- 33 Mac Aodha, Ibid, pp. 23-24.
- 34 As already described, Evans generally saw the settlements as irregular, or even 'lawless' (1996, p. 70), in the sense that they had no perceptible order. But in *Irish Folk Ways* (1957) he writes: 'Despite this apparently casual disorder the selection of a house-site was a matter for the most careful deliberation. Shelter from the prevailing winds was a prime need, so that the houses seem to snuggle together, generally located in a hollow or on a lee slope.' He goes on to describe how vernacular builders had to furthermore contend with the demanding superstitions relating to fairies and fairy pads (Evans, 1957, p. 30) thus recognising a purpose and agency behind the configuration.
- 35 O'Donnell, op. cit., p. 102.
- 36 N. Brady, 'Towards a collective spatial form – an analysis of Achill's Deserted Village', conference paper, AIARG, 2015. This settlement is not strictly a clachan but a 'boolying village'

- used by families/shepherds for seasonal grazing of cattle, and it is likely to predate the clachan configurations being discussed in this essay. According to Kingston (1990) the current village dates back to the 1700s while an earlier settlement on the same site may considerably pre-date the present village. B. Kingston, *Achill Island: The Deserted Village at Slievemore: a study*, Castlebar, Kingston, 1990, p. 77.
- 37 Brady makes the case for design intent based on the rigour with which the setting-out axes are adhered to, local conditions notwithstanding, a rigour he compares to a modernist approach. This, he says, is evidence of 'a more purposeful, directed and knowing response' (p. 13). It might be argued however, that the organising datum of the configuration is in fact the contour of the mountain, with the gables of the structures set out broadly parallel to this contour and along which a path was created to connect the dwellings with each other. This path brings meaning and coherence to the settlement (McMenamin and Sheridan, op.cit., 2018, p. 9).
- 38 B. O'Reilly, *The vernacular settlements of south Kilkenny: an interim statement*, Researchgate Publications, 2010. O'Reilly concludes from this fieldwork that the changes mapped, particularly the construction of new dwellings, indicate that the settlements continue to be viable as places in which to live (p. 10).
- 39 O'Donnell, op. cit., p. 116.
- 40 The descriptions of the holding land-type and usage for Lenankeel and Lagacurry are based on consultation with historical geographer M. O'Donnell, personal communication, July 2018 and July 2019.
- 41 F. Mitchell and M. Ryan, *Reading the Irish Landscape*, Dublin, Townhouse, 2007, p. 343.
- Description of land-type and usage of Dugort based on consultation with Patrick J. Gallagher, local resident, July 2019.
- 42 D. McMenamin, D. Sheridan, 'The utility and aesthetics of landscape: a case study of Irish vernacular architecture', *Journal of Landscape Architecture*, vol. 7, 2012, pp. 46-53.
- 43 A. Gailey, 'Vernacular Housing in North west Ulster', in A. Rowan (ed.), *North west Ulster: the counties of Londonderry, Donegal, Fermanagh, and Tyrone*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1979, pp. 87-102.
- 38 B. O'Reilly, *The vernacular settlements of south Kilkenny: an interim statement*, Researchgate Publications, 2010. O'Reilly concludes from this fieldwork that the changes mapped, particularly the construction of new dwellings, indicate that

- 44 C. Coote, 'A report on the present state of that part of the property of Lord Cremorne ... in the county of Waterford with observations on the localities and capabilities of the estate, from a minute inspection taken in the autumn of 1826', Dartry Papers NLI 1826, uncatalogued, cited by Whelan, op.cit., p. 5.
- 45 Whelan, op.cit., p. 8.
- 46 Evans, op. cit., 1972, p. 100; Whelan, op. cit., p. 14.
- 47 Whelan, op. cit., p. 14.
- 48 C. Ó Gráda, *An Drochshaol: béaloideas agus amhráin*, Dublin, Coiscéim, 1994, p. 80.
- 49 Evans, op. cit., 1957, p.100. The word 'street' is here used in its original sense of a pavement.
- 50 Whelan, op. cit., p.15. The 'hidden solidarity' in pre-famine Ireland is also related to the fact that there was no system of relief, unlike in England which already had the poor-laws at this time. Thus, the inhabitants relied on the informal solidarity of rural society, Solar, op. cit., p. 36.
- 51 For example, in 'Facts from Gweedore' (1946), Lord George Hill writes: 'Fights, trespasses, confusion, disputes and assaults, were the natural and unavoidable consequences of this system', cited by Evans, 1972, p. 94.
- 52 K. Donovan, M. Gkartzios, 'Architecture and rural planning: 'Claiming the vernacular'', *Land Use Policy*, vol. 41, 2014, p. 334; McMenamin and Sheridan, op. cit., 2018.
- 53 H. Lefebvre, *Critique of everyday life (Critique de la vie quotidienne)*, 2nd edition, Paris, Grasset, and Bristol, Bookcraft, 1947 / 1958 / 1991, p. 43.
- 54 In his rousing text, *Architecture's Public* (1970), de Carlo advocates a recognition of the political nature of architecture and the need for participation to re-empower the user: '... the intrinsic aggressiveness of architecture and the forced passivity of the user must dissolve in a condition of creative and decisional equivalence.' G. De Carlo, 'Architecture's Public', in P. Blundell-Jones, J. Till, and D. Petrescu (eds.), *Architecture and participation*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2012, p. 13 (originally in *Parametro*, Bologna, Faenza, 1970).
- 55 P. Blundell-Jones, J. Till, D. Petrescu, *Architecture and participation*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2012, p. 134.
- 56 C. Pateman, *Participation and democratic theory*, London, Cambridge University Press, 1970.
- 57 J. Till, 'The negotiation of hope', in Blundell-Jones, Till, and Petrescu (eds.), op. cit., p. 27.
- 58 Another deficient form of participation identified by Till is the practice of architects acting as technical facilitators in an attempt to bridge the power gap between professional and

- user. It results in architects being unable to use their knowledge 'transformatively'. Instead their skills are used merely 'instrumentally', Till, *Ibid.*, p. 33.
- 59 Till, *op. cit.*, p. 37.
- 60 See <http://www.nimblespace.org>
- 61 See <http://www.nimblespace.org>
- 62 The housing co-operative's mission statement is 'to promote diverse neighbourhoods of people who choose to associate with each other in the spirit of mutual interest, self-responsibility and respect for differences', Lónra Housing Co-operative, 2017.
- 63 D. Sheridan (ed.), *Translating Housing: Berlin-Belfast*, Belfast, Northern Ireland Department for Social Development, 2014.
- 64 K. Whelan, 'Settlement and Society in Eighteenth-Century Ireland', in T. Barry (ed.), *A History of Settlement in Ireland*, London, Routledge, 2000, pp. 187-205.
- 65 Aalen et al., *op. cit.*, p. 5.
- 66 Burtchaell, *op. cit.*, p. 112.
- 67 D. Sheridan, 'Building Initiative in Belfast', *ARQ: Architectural Research Quarterly*, vol. 13, 2009, p. 160.
- 68 H. Harriss, 'Ludic Architecture: Playful Tools for Participation' in *Spatial Design, Design Principles & Practice: An International Journal*, vol. 4, 2010, pp. 175-185.
- 69 S. Hofmann, *Architecture is Participation, Die Baupiloten – Methods and Projects*, Berlin, Jovis, 2014, p. 88.
- 70 Harriss refers to the archiving of participatory outcomes as having a resonance with the double-loop process of concept testing in dialectic theory. Harriss, *op. cit.*, p. 176.
- 71 Barry O'Reilly has drawn attention to the small greens, or as he terms them 'greenlets' as being a commonplace component of vernacular settlement in Ireland that have been largely overlooked. Especially common in Co. Kilkenny, the green provided a temporary grazing spot for cattle on the move and a place for milking. A communal space, they often had pumps, were also used to wash, and were sometimes capable of staging small livestock fairs in the absence of market towns. B. O'Reilly, *The vernacular settlements of Ireland: their context morphology and continuing evolution*, 2012, p. 7.
- 72 Blundell-Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 131.
- 73 Stevens, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

- 74 M. Fagan, P. Kelly, G. Lysaght (eds.), *Sub Urban to Super Rural, Ireland's entry at the Venice Biennale 10th International Architecture Exhibition*, Dublin, Irish Architecture Foundation, 2006, p. 16. With its linear strips of land each containing a dwelling, the scheme by MacGabhann Architects, corresponds more closely perhaps to the post-rundale 'ladder farm' pattern, which like rundale also aimed at giving each farmer a range of land type and quality; Whelan, op. cit., 2012, p. 15; Evans, op. cit., 1972, p. 101.
- 75 The philosophical importance of play has been recognised by Kant, Heidegger, and Gadamer. They saw the open-endedness of play as corresponding to the experience of art and architecture. Gadamer extends the discussion, identifying the concept of 'serious play' in the Platonic dialogues as being analogous to architectural experience. In 'serious play', an agreement to postpone forming opinions and making decisions 'grants the interlocutors a freedom to explore ideas and arguments wherever they might lead without forcing those arguments to serve a predetermined outcome' (P. Kidder, 'Philosophical Hermeneutics and the Ethical Function of Architecture', *Contemporary Aesthetics*, vol. 9, 2011, p. 6). This corresponds to the experience of playing the Negotiating Space games where the field of spatial exploration – the game board – is removed from normative architectural representations and assumptions, thus encouraging participants to suspend preconceptions.
- 76 Till advises against the goal of consensus in participatory practice. Rather, he describes the outcome as 'the negotiation of hope: a potentially contested but ultimately positive process, both alert to the realities and positing a better future'. Till, op. cit., p. 28.