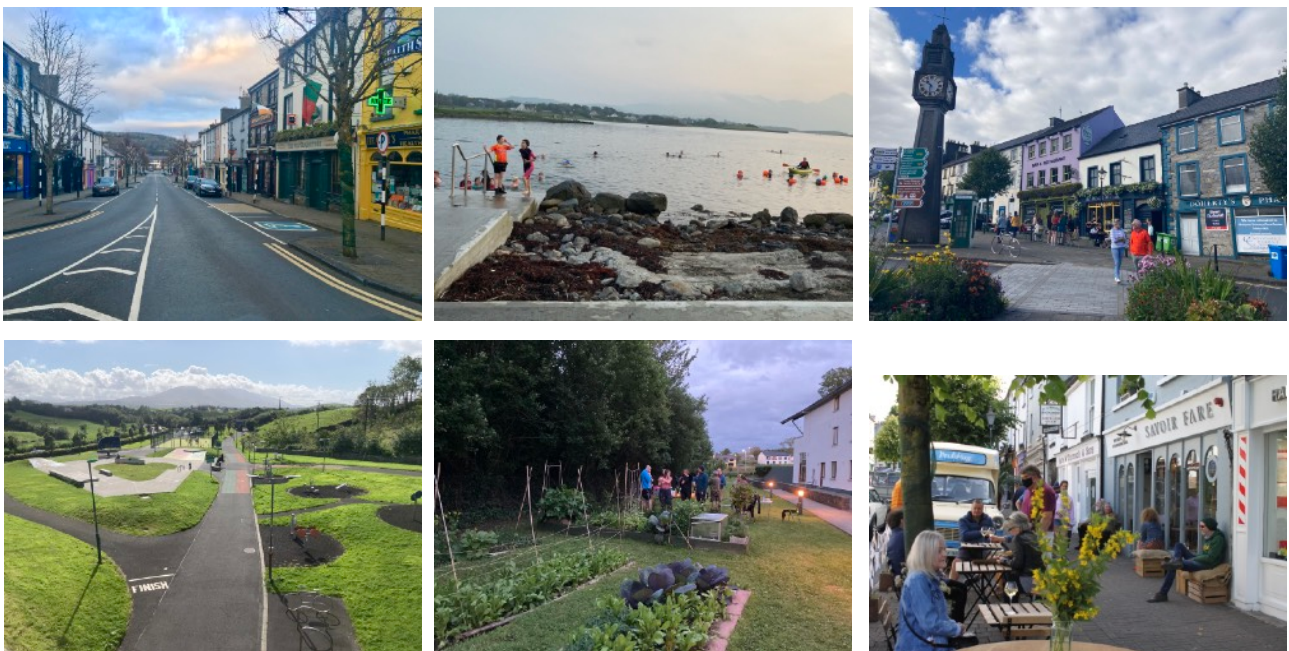


## New European Bauhaus

### Orla Murphy

#### Why is the New European Bauhaus so important?

I'll begin with a story about Westport, a small town of 6000 people on the west coast of Ireland. In March 2020 the towns, cities and countries of the world locked their doors and bid us all to stay home to stay safe. This rapid shut down was happening to save lives, to prevent hospitals being overwhelmed in the face of the novel virus Covid-19. The response demanded solidarity, resilience, cooperation, care for the most vulnerable among us. What happened next may hold the key to the challenge of how to rapidly decarbonise our societies. Because while governments feared lockdown weariness and social unrest, instead the response in this small town, and many others, has opened an extraordinary well of social cohesion, care and innovation. While the challenge to tackle the changing pattern of the virus has been significant, transformative adaptation has occurred. And it has been happening from the bottom up, as communities of people come together to help one another, to manage and even in some ways, to flourish in the face of the pandemic.



Westport, Co. Mayo, Ireland, during and after Covid-19 lockdown, 2020. Photos by the author.

During the first lockdown the town transformed. Neighbours began to look after shared gardens together, grow vegetables, run shopping errands for older residents, even host socially distant outdoor movie nights. Innovative and creative food producers flipped their business to make beautiful food for takeaway, carved out spaces to sit outside from former car parking space, hosted outdoor markets of small local food producers and farmers. The local authority, seeing the need to support this change helped in practical ways, in the form of people power to help look after and tend public spaces, designing and building a new swimming area where the greenway from town meets the ocean. People of all ages now swim year round in the Atlantic; children and young people have rediscovered the freedom afforded by bikes. This bottom-up change happened, and has continued to gain momentum because this type of

change, like Covid-19, is contagious. Because it comes from people, from society, and it is immensely powerful.

The pandemic can teach us about how we need to act in the face of the climate crisis and global heating. To realise the European Commission's ambitious target to reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions by 55% by 2030, and to decarbonise Europe by 2050, we will need to embrace the changes required together, as neighbours. Maintaining global heating to close to 1.5 degrees Celsius and decarbonisation is a long and lasting challenge, that requires fundamental social, behavioural, and cultural change, by everyone, in how we live our lives, how we move; in what we make, repair, buy and eat; in how we care for one another. Thus far, progress has been too slow, too remote from most citizens who do not feel their actions matter or their voices are heard.

Social cohesion in the face of such massive change will be key. Social justice, supporting those whose lives and livelihoods are likely to be most affected by the transition will be vital. This is why change needs to be co-created, by everyone, so that each citizen of Europe is part of the solution. Their actions, aggregated to the scale of the continent can be transformative. Actions from the bottom will need substantial and innovative support from the top, which is why the New European Bauhaus is so important.

By way of example, I can tell you about Ireland, a country of small towns. Increasing car dependency over the last fifty years has caused a chain of connected impacts: poorly planned, peripheral low-density settlement patterns have led to persistent city and town centre vacancy, underperforming infrastructure networks, and degraded public space. There are almost 250,000 empty houses in Ireland<sup>1</sup> and over 1 million homes that require energy upgrade<sup>2</sup>. Air pollution, traffic congestion, long commutes to work and school, and high levels of obesity and associated health problems ensue, along with isolation of elderly and vulnerable due to a lack of public transport. And all with a high carbon dependency on individual fossil fuel transport. While these problems have evolved and deepened over time, it has seemed that we have been, in Patrick Geddes' words "half-blind" to the change<sup>3</sup>.

Covid-19 has put these impacts into sharp relief. Generous public space, well-designed infrastructure including high-speed rural broadband, walkable, liveable neighbourhoods and easy access to schools, health facilities and nature, are now recognised as vital to support our upended society.

### **How can the New European Bauhaus affect meaningful change?**

The New European Bauhaus is exciting because it describes a co-created, people-led and design-informed approach. Lessons from the small example above demonstrate the importance of participatory design, the need to listen to the stories and experience of people to affect positive societal change by design, and the acknowledgement that good design can and must improve the lives of everyone, and in such a way that makes intelligent, efficient use of existing resources and limits unnecessary expansive construction.

My experience and perspective is informed by an interest in towns as compact, socially cohesive settlements. In 2018, I co-curated the Irish Pavilion at the Biennale Architettura. Our team brought the

idea of Learning from Small Towns, to Venice, with an exhibition entitled *Free Market*<sup>4</sup>. We were surprised by the number of people from around the world who identified with similar challenges facing rural towns where they lived. The following year we brought the pavilion on tour to four towns in Ireland, where we learned from the people in those towns about what worked (or didn't) and what could work better. It became clear that a cross-cutting, co-created, trans-disciplinary approach is needed, and that the scale of potential for towns to play a role in decarbonising society is significant.



The Irish Pavilion *Free Market* in La Biennale Architettura, Venezia, 2018. Photo credit Matthew Thompson

In 2019 I co-founded an academic centre, UCD Centre for Irish Towns, to work collaboratively to address gaps in research data and understanding, and to partner with academics, state agencies, and local stakeholders to support the transition of towns to low carbon, compact urban places that are socially cohesive, inclusive, healthy, beautiful places to live, learn, work and grow. In my practice as an architect I continue to collaborate in design and research projects in towns, and contribute to emerging national policy supporting towns.

### **What can the New European Bauhaus do?**

The New European Bauhaus has the scope to scale up and scale out a people-led, design-informed cultural shift, that can transform society, by society, to become a decarbonised, healthy, resilient, diverse and inclusive Europe. The potential to mobilise and inspire with ambition at the scale of the continent is exciting.

Imagine liveable and walkable towns and cities, where, while embracing their cultural distinctiveness, towns, cities and buildings can be designed and renovated to become net positive energy places.

Imagine towns that work together within regional clusters to share food, water, transport and energy resources; that are designed to be resilient and to embrace a circular economy, built on evidence-based research and connected to local knowledge.

Imagine a Europe that supports, cares for and listens to those less frequently heard; one that renovates existing buildings to make homes, schools, places of culture that are carbon positive, beautiful and distinctive; one that builds resilience to extreme weather events using nature based solutions; one that attracts people of all ages to live good quality, socially connected lives.

This is the Europe I imagine. And it is why I am proud to contribute to the New European Bauhaus Roundtable discussion and to act as an Ambassador for the project.

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<sup>1</sup> Census of Population 2016, Profile 1 Housing in Ireland.

<sup>2</sup> Conor Callaghan, The Energy Efficiency of Irish Homes, <https://publicpolicy.ie/papers/the-energy-efficiency-of-irish-homes/>

<sup>3</sup> Patrick Geddes, 1915 (1968ed.) *Cities in Evolution*, 16

<sup>4</sup> See [www.freemarket.ie](http://www.freemarket.ie)