

HOUSING FOR TODAY AND TOMORROW

Design and Delivery

Essay by Paul Keogh

When a research paper that predicted today's housing crisis was presented to the 2011 RIAI / DoECLG National Housing Conference, it was greeted with widespread incredulity, and in some quarters derided as self-interested pleading by its authors (DTZ Sherry FitzGerald) on behalf of the property and construction sector, then in the depths of recession. The existence of a reputed 300,000 surplus units at that time was peddled as 'proof' that there would be little need for any new construction in the years ahead.

This is a far cry from today and the general consensus that Ireland is now in the grip of a major housing crisis, and that dealing with current and future demand will be high on the national agenda for the foreseeable future. Both the ESRI and the Housing Agency project a requirement for up to 80,000 units between now and 2020, whereas output for the current year is estimated to be under 10,000 units.

However, current media coverage indicates a disturbing lack of evidence-based information on how we might deliver the volume of housing required for the years and decades ahead. What type of homes will we need? Where will they be located? How will they be delivered?

Recent warnings by the Department of Finance Secretary General on creating "a Los Angeles-type sprawl with three-bedroom houses all the way out to Kildare" contrast with remarks made by the Taoiseach that "if you had 30,000 three-bedroom detached houses in Dublin, you'd sell them in a week".

Equally, claims from the property sector that the market wants houses, and not apartments, conflict with research by the Housing Agency which indicates that over half the output needed in the years ahead will be for one and two-person households – hardly the kind of people in search of three-bedroom detached houses.

What is regrettable, however, is that the current obsession with spiralling prices and record waiting lists leaves little room for discussion on how planning and design of the construction envisaged for the years ahead might contribute to the development of a more sustainable built environment – economically, socially and environmentally.

Anathema as it may be to those in need of accommodation, house-building is more than bricks and mortar, and putting roofs above people's heads. Housing is the 'fabric' of our cities, towns and villages: it impacts on people's health and wellbeing; it shapes the streets, squares and open spaces that are the public 'rooms' of their locations; and it creates the context for the economic, social, and civic life of their communities.

Successful outcomes depend on the application of high standards in the design and architecture of new housing; not just in terms of the individual home, but also in the urban environment as a whole. Cities, towns and villages that are well-designed, well-managed, well-used and

which have a high quality public realm are more attractive as places to live, work and visit, and as destinations for further investment and employment. This was one of key findings of the UK Urban Task Force's research in the Netherlands, Sweden and Denmark. Its 1999 final report, *Towards an Urban Renaissance*, concluded that "well-designed urban districts and neighbourhoods succeed because they recognise the primary importance of the public realm; the shape of public spaces and the way they link together is essential to the cohesion of urban neighbourhoods and communities".

Remarkably, the Government's recent *Construction 2020 - A Strategy for a Renewed Construction Sector* is silent on these issues. Despite the Government Policy on Architecture's emphasis on the contribution of good design to people's daily lives and the wellbeing of society as a whole, architecture does not get mentioned once within *Construction 2020*. Thankfully, however, it does highlight poor planning and low standards as contributory factors to the economic catastrophe that has paralyzed this country for the past six years. Emphasising this Government's determination to ensure that the lessons of the past are learned, it expresses the intention that a strong and sustainable construction sector be harnessed to ensure that we are "building the right things in the right places...with a planning system which supports that vision".

In this respect, *Construction 2020* reiterates principles that have been embedded in national policy since at least the start of this century, and especially since the 2002 National Spatial Strategy articulated objectives to prevent "excessive suburbanisation" and "to renew, consolidate and strengthen the nation's cities, towns and villages... ensuring that future development adds to their vitality and viability as the focus of the economic, social, and civic life of their communities".

Despite these intentions, the last decade has seen a proliferation of dispersed development, suburbanisation and sprawl. Commerce, education, shopping and industry have largely relocated to the edges, and the vast bulk of new housing has been in suburban estates and one-off houses in the countryside. In response, and in light of "extensive experience gained over recent years", the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government's 2009 *Sustainable Residential Development in Urban Areas* guidelines for local authorities aimed at ensuring that the housing construction projected for the coming decades will be delivered in ways that "support the development of sustainable and integrated development in our cities, towns and villages".

The guidelines cite the 2004 report by the National Economic and Social Council, *Housing in Ireland, Performance and Policy*, and especially the 'sustainable neighbourhood' concept that it championed as an alternative to sprawl. It defined the characteristics of



Image

- 1 The popularity of Dublin's Grand Canal Docks area suggests that the generation which drives the high-tech industries on which our economy depends opt for 'European' urban lifestyles and the levels of density required to support quality transport, shopping, education, employment and leisure facilities within walking distance.
- 2/3 Magee Creedon Keams' Coppinger Court development in Cork exemplifies the possibilities of undeveloped and / or under-utilised lands within urban centres to be developed as attractive places to live, as opposed to edge-of-centre and out-of-town locations. Photos: John Roche.
- 4 'Wainscoted' by Lawrence and Long illustrates how a typical scenario of 1960s bedsits in a Georgian townhouse can be converted into stylish apartments, without any loss to the character, proportions or details of the original structure. Photo: Marie-Louise Halpenny.
- 5 O'Brian Beary's scheme in Capel Street demonstrates the potential of the vacant upper floor accommodation – including protected structures – to contribute to meeting future housing need in urban centres; and the merits of focused tax incentives, such as the now-defunct 'Living Over The Shop' scheme.





Image
6 Modelled on the historic 'Clachan' form of a nucleated settlement, Cox Power Architects' award-winning development in Killeena, Co Mayo, proves that there is a viable and attractive alternative to the isolated one-off dwelling in rural Ireland.



Image
7/8 Employing a 'village-like' layout that emphasises the importance of an attractive public realm, Seán Harrington's Enniskerry scheme is an equally important example of best practice placemaking in the expansion of a small historic town centre. Photos: Philip Lauterbach.

sustainable neighbourhoods as: diverse – combining residential with other uses and activities; compact – enabling residents to perform daily trips without the use of a car; planned – centred around an identifiable core of civic, commercial and cultural uses; attractive – providing a high level of amenity and open space; legible – structured around a fine-grain street network; compact – dense enough to support the economic provision of services, including public transport; and versatile – promoting the integration of different age, income and ethnic groupings.

One of the oft-repeated quotations from the NESC report is its statement that the challenge of building high-quality, sustainable cities and towns compares with the greatest challenges that Ireland has faced – and met – in the past. Notwithstanding all the other issues now on the national agenda, this still remains one of the greatest challenges that we face today. The population growth projected for the coming decades indicates that today's demand for housing will continue unabated, and that homes for up to an additional 500,000 people will be required between now and 2050.

Addressing this challenge, the question we must ask is whether we are going to continue as we have done over the last decades of sprawling low density development: building another 200,000 houses in the countryside and estates remote from schools, shops and workplaces;

squandering resources on the uneconomic provision of services and infrastructure; and consigning another generation to the unsustainable lifestyles that are inherent in car-dependent settlement patterns?

The alternative is to use the opportunities provided by our recovering economy to focus the projected construction programme on the 'sustainable neighbourhood' model: with well-designed cities, towns and villages; with good education, retail and recreational facilities; with quality services, amenities and open spaces; and built to the highest standards of architecture and urban design. These are the choices. If we get it wrong, we will be living with the consequences for decades and beyond. And the costs will be significant – economically, socially and environmentally.

Economically, international research cited in the 2009 Forfás report *Our Cities: Drivers of National Competitiveness* confirms that cities, and not nation states, are the drivers of today's world economy. Stating that Ireland's past record of poor planning, and the failure to co-ordinate private development with public infrastructure, has affected both our quality of life and our economic competitiveness, the report highlights the reality that the investment - and talent - that drives today's knowledge-based economies does not locate in places which don't provide first-class infrastructure and high quality living environments.

In social terms, the Institute of Public Health's 2006 report *Health Impacts of the Built Environment* summarized extensive evidence that some of the main causes of illness today – including stress and obesity – may be exacerbated by built environment factors. Its research indicated that the urban model most likely to promote public health and wellbeing is the mixed-use, walkable neighbourhood as was advocated by the NESC report. Enabling residents to perform daily activities without the use of a car, the IPH report found, contributes to increased levels of physical activity, greater opportunities for social interaction and higher levels of social capital generally.

Environmentally, the higher densities that are found in European cities lead to inherently greener lifestyles: a large percentage of their inhabitants walk, cycle and use public transport, rather than drive; living in townhouses and apartments, they use less energy to heat their homes; and they use infrastructure, services and amenities more efficiently. On average, urban dwellers generate around half the emissions of people who live in lower density suburban and rural locations. It would be short-sighted in the extreme, therefore, if the task of meeting Ireland's 2020 climate and energy reduction targets were to focus on the footprint of individual homes, while ignoring the fact that sprawling development and car dependency

have been largely responsible for the exponential rise in Ireland's transport-related emissions since 1990.

The high quality developments, published in the two volumes of the joint RIAI / DoECLG publications – *The New Housing* – illustrate a multitude of schemes that could be used as exemplars for the housing needed in the years and decades ahead. Housing that delivers high-quality living environments, that responds to the scale and character of its surroundings, that contributes to the quality of the public realm in its location, and that enhances the vitality and vibrancy of cities, towns and villages as places to live, work, shop and visit.

While there has been much hype about a market preference for houses over apartments, the most cursory visit to Dublin's Grand Canal Docks area would suggest that today's thirty-somethings – those who drive the high-tech industries on which our economy depends – are more than happy to opt for 'European' urban lifestyles and the levels of density required to support quality transport, shopping, education, employment and leisure within walking distance.

The sequential approach set out in the DoEHLG *Sustainable Residential Development in Urban Areas* guidelines recommends that development plans promote infill development opportunities, and that under-developed and / or under-utilised lands in urban centres should be prioritised over edge-of-centre and out-of-town locations. McGee Creedon's excellent Coppinger Court development in Cork exemplifies the possibilities of such sites. Facing south across the River Lee, five historic riverside buildings were adapted to apartment use, and the gardens behind developed as terraces of houses around a pair of communal courtyards.

Outside the main cities, the projected housing demand could be harnessed to stimulate regeneration of our rural towns and villages, many of which are in a state of almost-terminal decline. *The New Housing* publications illustrate the potential of brownfield lands and the options these present alternatives to peripheral development. My own practice's infill housing in Gorey, Co. Wexford demonstrates the potential for a typical backlands site to be transformed into an attractive residential enclave – in this case for older people. Could the same principles not be applied to family housing?

Equally, Cox Power Architects' award-winning development of housing and a community building in Kilmeena, Co Mayo, proves that there is an attractive alternative to the isolated one-off rural dwelling. Modelled on the historic 'Clachan', the type of nucleated settlement that prevailed from medieval times in the west of Ireland, the scheme arranges its 15 units around a pair of open spaces focused on the existing infrastructure of the townland - the parish church and GAA pitch. Employing a similar 'village-like' layout that emphasises the importance of an attractive public realm, Seán Harrington's Enniskerry scheme is an equally important example of best practice placemaking in the expansion of a small historic town centre.

As emphasised in the Department of Arts, Heritage and Gaeltacht publication, *Shaping the Future*, adaptation and re-use of existing buildings can also be a driver in pump-priming the regeneration of historic city and town centres. Highly Commended In the 2014 RIAI Awards, Lawrence and Long's 'Wainscoated' project illustrates how a scenario of 1960's bedsits in a Georgian townhouse can be converted into stylish apartments, and without any loss to the character, proportions or details of the original structure. Similarly, O'Briain Beary's 'living over the shop' scheme in Capel Street converts the upper storeys of an 18th century townhouse – most recently used as a clothing factory – into a number of loft-style apartments above a ground floor shop unit. Both projects demonstrate the potential of the hundreds of thousands of square feet of vacant upper floor accommodation around the country – including protected structures – to contribute to meeting future housing need in urban centres; and in the latter case, the merits of focused tax incentives, such as the now-defunct 'Living Over The Shop' scheme, to add to the economic and social vitality of urban places.

Much of the property sector's recent lobbying has been for a revision of the density standards set out in the

Sustainable Residential Development in Urban Areas guidelines. However, as the RIAI / DoEHLG publications illustrate, increased density need not result in either high-rise or low-quality housing. Examples such as OMP's Mount St. Anne's scheme in Milltown, Dublin and the Dun Laoghaire Cosgrave development by McCrossan O'Rourke demonstrate that it is perfectly possible to deliver high-quality, high-density and mixed-tenure enclaves at two, three and four-storeys; comprising apartments and houses – including terraces – at the levels of density set out in the guidelines; and in the latter case incorporating environmental best practice into a development that combines market housing with 146 social and affordable units, plus a supermarket, café, crèche, shops and neighbourhood centre.

At the larger scale, Adamstown, to the west of Dublin, is a good example of the sustainable neighbourhood concept applied to an Irish context. Based on a place-based 'street' plan which draws on the characteristics of traditional urban models – as opposed to the road-orientated planning that has predominated since at least the nineteen sixties. Many aspects of the Adamstown plan anticipate guidance published subsequently in the 2013 Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport / Department of Environment, Community and Local Government Design Manual for Urban Roads & Streets. The principles underpinning the manual seek to ensure that street design in urban areas achieves a balance between all modes of transport – thereby increasing walking, cycling and public transport use – and results in built environments that improve people's quality of life and respond more sympathetically to the character and quality of places and communities. Only partly constructed to date, Adamstown is an excellent model for the type of large-scale development that will inevitably be required to provide for the expansion of city and town centres in the decades ahead.

The standard of developments such as these, and the many more in the RIAI / DoEHLG publications, is attributable to a commitment to quality shared by the developers, planners and designers involved. Going forward, the delivery of quality in the housing development projected for the coming decades requires, first and foremost, that planning authorities promote design objectives in development plans and local area plans – as they have directed to do - and that they implement these in the development management process. Secondly, it requires that developers, both private and public, recognise that the appointment of a high-quality design team is a vital first step in the achievement of successful outcomes. As stated in the most recent planning guidelines: "Design which is inappropriate for its context, or which fails to realise the opportunity of improving the character and quality of an area or a site, should not be accepted".

Architecture matters!

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Image

- 8 Shangan Housing in Ballymun marks a refreshing approach to social housing by creating distinct new urban forms. Photo: Alice Clancy.
- 9 Schemes such as OMP's Mount St. Anne's in Milltown, Dublin demonstrate that it is possible to deliver high-quality, high-density and mixed-tenure enclaves that combine apartments and houses at two, three and four-storey heights, and at the levels of density set out in the Sustainable Residential Development in Urban Areas guidelines. Photo: Gerry O'Leary.
- 10 PKA's housing for older people in Gorey.
- 11 Adamstown, to the west of Dublin, is an example of the sustainable neighbourhood concept applied to an Irish context. Only partly constructed to date, Adamstown provides an excellent model for the type of large-scale development that will inevitably be required to provide for the future expansion of city and town centres. Photo: Gerry O'Leary.
- 12 The Dun Laoghaire Cosgrave development by McCrossan O'Rourke is an exemplary model in terms of incorporating environmental best practice into a mixed-use development that includes market housing with 146 social and affordable units, plus a supermarket, café, crèche, shops and a neighbourhood centre.

