

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.

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".



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. Photo: Kevin Woods.
- 2/3 Magee Creedon Kearns' 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 Halpern.
- 5 O'Brien Beery'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.

