

***Planning for a post ‘Celtic  
Tiger’ Urban Landscape.***

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## ***Introduction.***

From the mid 1990's until the onset of the global economic crisis in 2007, Ireland was one of the strongest economies in Europe. During the 1990s the so called 'Celtic Tiger' Irish economy grew at an average annual rate of 7.5%, more than three times the European average at the time (Murphy, 2000). Ireland's economic success was reflected in the rapid development of its urban landscape and in the pursuit of 'entrepreneurial' style urban planning which aimed to position Irish cities, Dublin in particular, as cosmopolitan, global and capable of competing in an international arena. A proliferation of landmark and high rise developments became symbols of Ireland's success, representing new visions of Ireland's urbanity. This new focus on Ireland's cities brought about a wave of market led regeneration efforts, encouraged by an availability of cheap credit, tax incentives and a climate which encouraged the creation of numerous public private partnerships (PPP's). Today the context for urban development and regeneration is very different. Since 2008 Ireland has been in a deep economic recession with government spending severely curtailed, creating a significant challenge for urban planning to manage city development and regeneration projects.

This paper seeks to provide an overarching review and critique of approaches to urban planning and regeneration in Ireland over the last decade in order to provide insights into how new paradigms for urban development could be shaped and implemented. The paper is structured around an analysis of the Irish response to the crisis in terms of both policy and practice at two spatial scales – the national approach to the crisis and the micro, local based approaches. It will examine both crisis response mechanisms currently employed in Ireland and also examine areas of potential opportunity in terms of alternative approaches to managing and stimulating urban development.

## ***Urban Planning in the Celtic Tiger Era***

One of the most significant outcomes of the remarkable phase of economic growth in Ireland known as the 'Celtic Tiger' was the rapid transformation of the built environment. This period saw Irish urban planning undergoing a significant transformation, as it became increasingly infused with the ethos of entrepreneurialism (MacLaran et al, 2007). The transformation of Irish planning was not an isolated event – Indeed, the political and economic context for such changes were associated with a wider movement towards more market focused or neoliberal urban development strategies across Europe. However It has been argued that the Irish housing boom was 'inextricably shaped by the institution-



ally and place specific nature of Irish neoliberalism' (NIRSA 2010). While Ireland's recession mirrors what is going on in most European states and further afield, the particular causes of the Irish economic crisis were decidedly local in origin as the Irish economy had become unsustainably dependant on the construction industry (and house building specifically).

During this period, urban planning and regeneration in Ireland became associated with new and more flexible forms of engagement with developers, often involving the use of fiscal incentives, special purpose development agencies (such as the Dublin Docklands Development Agency) and joint ventures (e.g Public Private Partnerships). Indeed it has been argued that the goal of Ireland's loose regulatory system was to 'encourage the market rather than restrain it' (Kirby, 2009: 9). Ireland's loose regulatory system combined with an abundance of cheap credit to fuel mass speculative land and property development activity and ultimately created an inflationary spiral of house prices and intense rates of building activity (see figure 1). During this period the total value of mortgage debt increased from 47.2 billion in 2002 to over 139.8 billion at the end of 2007, with house prices following a similar trajectory, reaching a peak of 322,634 for the average new home (a 382% increase since 1991) Kitchin in Fraser et al (2013). Thus, when the construction boom collapsed in 2007 Ireland was left with significant oversupply of housing and zoned development land and many areas are now blighted by large quantities of vacant and unfinished developments.

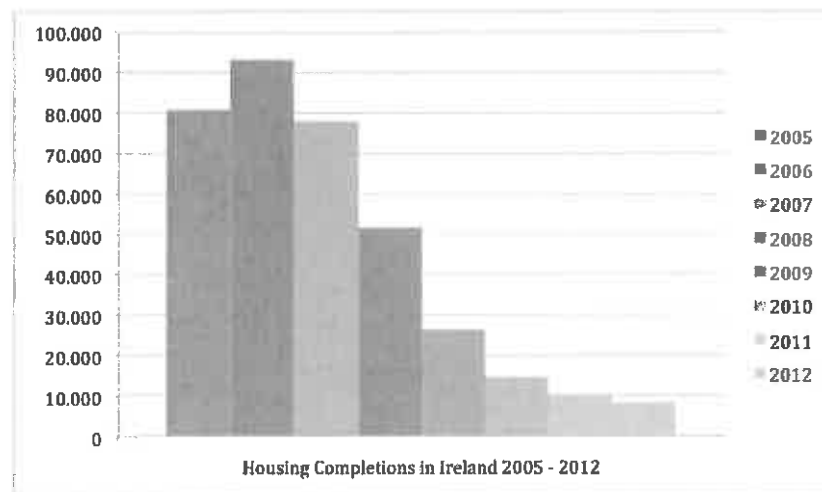


Figure 1: Housing Completions in Ireland 2005 – 2012. (Source: Authors own; Data: CSO)



## ***The Response to the Crisis - NAMA and strategic planning.***

During the Celtic Tiger era the Irish banking system had engaged in excessive lending to the property sector and, with the significant decline in the Irish property market from 2007 onwards, loan impairments have begun to rise substantially. Banks neither had the funds to lend to investors and businesses, nor to pay back loans to international banks. Property buyers and investors, already cautious because of the slowdown in the housing market, found it increasingly difficult to source credit, thus developers found themselves left with liquidity problems that prevented them from finishing already commenced developments.

Unlike as has happened previously in other European countries such as Sweden and more recently in Iceland, Ireland's banks were not allowed to collapse under the debt burden created during the boom. In order to introduce liquidity into the Irish banking system the state took a two-pronged approach: (1) direct recapitalisation or nationalisation, wherein the state took a stake in the banks for preferential shares or took direct ownership, using the national pension reserve and finance procured on the international markets; (2) relieving the banks of their toxic assets by purchasing all property loans of €5m or more issued before December 1<sup>st</sup> 2008 and placing them in a new state agency to manage on behalf of the taxpayer (Kitchin et al, 2010). This state agency is the National Asset Management Agency – or NAMA.

Under the legislation that established NAMA, it has two clear objectives which are as follows:

- 1.- The acquisition from participating institutions of such eligible bank assets as is appropriate,
- 2.- Obtain so far as possible the best achievable financial return for the State having regard to the amount paid, plus whatever additional working or development capital costs for the acquired bank assets.

(Section 10 of the NAMA Act 2009)

A significant portion of NAMA's €77 billion loan (asset) book relates to land and property located both in Ireland and abroad. NAMA, having taken control of many of Ireland's unfinished developments and zoned land, is now the largest land owner in the state. In light of NAMA's primary objective of 'obtaining the best achievable financial return' on these 'assets', the potential impact of this on the future planning and development of the country should be a critical concern. While achieving the



best financial gain may be in the tax payers interest it cannot be considered a core planning objective. NAMA must make important decisions about strategic land holdings and yet there is no overall spatial vision for NAMA assets. The incremental and disjointed disposal of property based assets, it could be argued represents a 'quick fix' property based solution to a property based crisis. The authors question the extent to which asset disposal can be aligned with sustainable development and the interests of the common good. Indeed placing such focus on reviving stalled developments (which in many cases should never have got through the planning process in the first instance) can undermine and inhibit new attempts at innovation and entrepreneurship.

## ***Spatial planning at the cross roads.***

NAMA raises some important questions for future strategic urban planning and development. These questions must be viewed in terms of the current governance and strategic planning context. In early 2013 it was announced that the National Spatial Strategy (NSS) 2002-2020, Ireland's first attempt at strategic long term planning on a National scale, was to be abandoned. The NSS was written in the early 2000's, a time when Ireland was experiencing considerable economic growth and high in-migration and these trends were very much reflected in the strategy. The strategy also reflected political intervention rather than sound planning principles in terms of its settlement hierarchy, which undermined the robustness of the strategy. The strategy demonstrated a lack of scenario planning and rigidity with very little in way of alternatives for weaker economic growth – the situation Ireland now finds itself in. Now, in the absence of a long term National Development plan Irish policy makers seem to be wary of committing to long term strategic planning. Instead the emphasis has been placed on short-term Capital Expenditure programmes with an absence of any clear long-term strategic goals other than a return to economic growth.

However, this departure from the National Spatial Strategy represents a recognition that the planning system has, in many respects, simply not worked efficiently and steps are now being taken to reinvigorate it. Recently the Irish government has announced a reform of local government which seeks to dissolve decision making power to the county level. The reform places local government at the centre of local service provision making it accountable for the development of the county. This should help to empower local communities to realise their potential allowing them to have a greater say in shaping the spatial development of their areas. This new local government reform along with the newly introduced evidence based Core Strategies in the 2010 Planning and Development Act which require counties to demonstrate compliance



with national and regional policy in terms of zoning should help ensure the rampant over zoning of the Celtic Tiger era is a thing of the past.

Ireland now stands at a cross roads in terms of strategic spatial planning. - Its national planning strategy having scrapped the NSS in early 2013 it lacks a strategic long term planning framework. Rather than adopting another rigid national strategy it can opt for a broad strategy placing the emphasis on high level planning goals rather than prescriptive development strategies. The state of Oregon has a set of 19 high level strategic planning goals that must be adopted by all lower level plans. This type of National strategy is far more adaptive than Ireland's prescriptive attempt at National level planning. This type of strategic yet less prescriptive national strategy ensures all regions and counties adhere to the strategic national planning goals yet allow a degree of flexibility in terms of spatial development.

## ***Alternative futures for Ireland's urban development?***

In the earlier sections Ireland's attempts to combat the most debilitating aspects of the financial crisis were discussed; it has abandoned its long term development plan and is attempting to refocus planning and governance towards the people. In this attempt to reorient planning, focus has begun to shift towards Ireland's urban centres and how they can develop in an era of funding shortages.

Irish towns historically have had a very strong community at their core. Many would argue that this was lost during the boom years when weak planning, suburban values and an uncontrolled market led to an overwhelming predominance of low density, greenfield development outside of and often remote from existing town centres (Keogh, 2009).

In the last fifteen years many town centres have become isolated, run down and abandoned as a more and more out of town retail developments were permitted. Today, the procurement of many town and city centre buildings by NAMA may present new challenges – or indeed opportunities. A number of recent initiatives aim to address these issues and encourage the regeneration and repopulation of Ireland's urban centres at minimal cost and without requiring large scale new build developments.

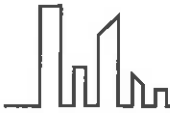


Figure 2 - Interactive Map showing vacant sites in Dublin mapped against current approved and active planning permissions, for full site please visit - <http://rustyb.github.io/ectp-map/>

## The “Living Cities” initiative.

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The “Living Cities” Initiative is one such response which seeks to address urban regeneration on a smaller scale by providing incentives to home and property owners within the historic cities with a distinct focus on:

- 1.- Encouraging people back to the centre of Irish cities to live in historic buildings
- 2.- Encouraging the regeneration of the retail heartland of central business districts”

(Department of Finance, 2013)



Figure 3 – Location map showing Waterford and Limerick



The two pilot project areas for this initiative are Limerick City (West) and Waterford City (South East). Both of these cities possess predominantly Georgian era (1741-1830) (Dublin Civic Trust) city centres with high rates of vacancy and dereliction within the built environment (Limerick Chamber of Commerce, 2010, Waterford City Council, 2011).

The "Living Cities" initiative comes at an interesting time in the wider context of housing reform in an Irish context. Residential property guidelines recently enacted have made a large number of housing units untenable for letting. The Housing (Standards for Rented Houses) Regulations 2008 provides that all rental accommodation must have its own separate sanitary facilities, alongside more stringent requirements relating to heating, facilities for cooking, food storage and laundry (Housing Regulations 2008). Many city centre areas in Waterford, Limerick and in particular, Dublin have a high concentration of residential units including Georgian conversions which fall below these new standards.

There is an intersection between the regeneration of city centre environments and also the provision of housing for lower income earners, which in turn places further pressure on Local Authority (Social) Housing which is currently straining with the existing requirements of the population reliant upon it while also enduring a cut of 62% to its capital budget between 2010-2012 (Irish Council for Social Housing, 2013).

There is a growing body of evidence emerging that demand for this type of social relief is growing steadily meanwhile waiting list times across the major urban areas within Ireland (which now stands close to 100,000 individuals) continue to grow. Given the on-going processes associated with the mortgage debt crisis in Ireland, the numbers of those who will turn to this form of social relief is set to continue to rise. Furthermore, residents of substandard rental accommodation will further contribute to the numbers requiring an alternative housing solution.

The initiative targets tax rebates toward the owner occupiers of retail and residential properties and not toward property developers in an attempt to foster a less commercially driven focus in terms of realising the vision of a more vibrant city centre environment. The "Living Cities" initiative in Limerick and Waterford can therefore serve to provide a test bed for the development of an incentivised approach for residential property owners to redevelop their holdings in order to provide higher standard units for the market while also serving to spark the secondary effects of positive regeneration within the environs of development sites. Responses to the impending housing crisis have been slow from state bodies due to the reduction in funding these entities are suffering. Voluntary housing associations have become one of the main providers of social housing in an Irish context (Irish Council for Social Housing, 2013) and in the event that the measures contained within Articles 6, 7 & 8





of the Housing (Standards for Rented Houses) Regulations 2008 come into effect, it is likely that these bodies will experience a substantial increase in demand for their services as the lowest earners affected by the changes will either be forced to commute unsustainably in terms of distance/means of income or rely on completely on social measures to ensure their access to shelter.

## *Community responses.*

A number of bottom up community initiatives to reclaim urban areas are also evident in many of Ireland's towns and cities. One such example lies in one of Dublin's most historic streets, Thomas Street, which is located in the Liberties area of Dublin City Centre. One third of this street has been found to be derelict, vacant or demolished, with the local business association indicating that it is in danger of 'sliding into irrevocable decline'. Local businesses refer to the decline of the area as 'state sponsored dereliction' as the state entered into agreement with developers and large sites were amalgamated but then never developed (Irish Times, April 2013). Much of these sites now lie idle in the possession of NAMA.



Figure 4 -- Thomas Street Derelict Buildings

Recently, businesses and organisations in the locality including the Guinness Storehouse, the National College of Art and Design and the Digital Hub Development Agency have come together to produce a 90-day plan to "save" the street. The plan aims to improve both the appearance and the perception of the street over a three-month period, to encourage shoppers and tourists to use the street and to show how it can again be an attractive and viable destination for enterprise.

A frequent complaint among the community in the locality was that 'no development ever made its way to Thomas Street or the Liberties during the boom years' (McCarthy, 2013). Today it is considered 'more of stroke of luck than a loss' as many areas in Dublin received homogeneous investment which lacks any real identity. Thomas Street, and the Liberties as a whole, still holds very strong community values and it is this that



has enabled the 90 day plan to be realised. Over the course of this plan, local businesses will be improving their appearance by repainting shop fronts, and removing redundant signs, wiring and external shutters.

In order to promote the street a "business and visitor hub" will be opened. There will be a number of cultural and entertainment events, including the Liberties Festival. NAMA is in control of a number of derelict buildings on this street and has been put under increasing pressure to clean them up and make them available for temporary uses.



Figure 5 – Before and after images of a building clean up.

This is a strong local example of community led development to revitalise its locality and take back some control in how they wish to shape the future of their local economy and community, which has been lost in many communities throughout Dublin and Ireland. It is important to note in this example that investment from Dublin City Council has been provided through initiatives from the local community and not, as has happened previously, the community reacting to a City Council initiative. It is this low level community led development that is required to raise the base line economic activity in Ireland rather than relying on large scale top down economic development that Ireland has seen in previous years.



## *The economic viability of temporary uses.*

Interest in temporary uses of properties and urban space has grown substantially since the advent of the global recession in 2008. Temporary use – which refers 'to temporary activation of vacant or underused land or buildings with no immediate development demand' (Lehtovuori, P and Ruoppila, S; 2012) - represents an opportunity to experiment with urban development.

However, using underutilised land or unfinished/vacant buildings as a viable way to increase the community's economy must be considered in the context of their strategic location regionally and nationally. While unfinished buildings could be transformed through temporary use or even vertical gardens, some of these sites, especially in city centre locations are of very high economic value may be reduced if these uses are accommodated.

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A prime example of this is the unfinished multi storey Anglo Irish Bank building in the financial centre of Dublin— a landscape feature which has become an icon of the boom and bust era (figures 6 and 7 below).



Figures 5 & 6: The large unfinished Anglo Irish Bank building on Dublin's Quays: A visual reminder of the boom and bust era. Among proposals for the redevelopment of this site was a vertical garden.

Last year, the building was sold by NAMA to the Central Bank for 7 million euro. Prior to this, discussion had centred on the idea of constructing a vertical park or greenhouse style allotments within the building for the surrounding local community. While this is a novel idea, the strategic importance of the site makes this economically inappropriate considering Dublin's strength in attracting multinational headquarters such as Google, Dell, etc and past issues with lack of floor space for large companies within the city. In addition, the scale of the site would allow multiple uses – a park of this size, without other uses could potentially be a haven for crime and vandalism and would not represent the human scaled design that modern urbanism promotes.



In addition, significant issues pertain to unfinished residential units across the country which have the potential to be used as social housing. However some of these residential units are located in areas with very little or no physical or social infrastructure. In response this would result in the requirement to establish (most likely) unviable public transport networks. If no social infrastructure is provided then there lies the potential for social segregation, antisocial behaviour and deterioration of an already vulnerable section of society.

The economic viability of developments needs to be assessed on a case by case basis and either be developed to a standard suitable for a specific use or determined unviable and therefore the development should be removed. This unfortunately goes against NAMA's establishment which is to get the best financial return for developments for the state

## ***Towards more adaptive and resilient spatial planning?***

This paper broadly sought to outline approaches to urban planning in Ireland over the last decade. This final section seeks to explore the forces which shape the nature of spatial planning practice in order to provide insights into how new paradigms for urban development could be shaped and implemented.

In order to understand why certain kinds of development are taking place it is important to look beyond the statutory planning of any given city or region. What happens in a given locality is often less the result of local political decisions and more the result of 'deeper' economic and social conditions and forces. According to Taylor (1998) the activity and effects of planning should not be interpreted as if planning was an autonomous activity, operating separately from the rest of society - explaining planning it is necessary to 'situate' planning activity within its 'political economic context'.

A central feature of the political economy of land development is the system of private property rights and a 'free' competitive market in land and development. Thus – in order to view planning within its 'political economic context' – is to assess its effectiveness in shaping development patterns in relation to this neoliberal market system. Spatial planning is specifically about making choices about how we use land and the Irish system was restructured around a free market philosophy with an emphasis on values such as individual gain and the economic worth of housing as a commodity (Punch, 2009).



A number of important domestic factors were instrumental in shaping planning practice, the housing boom and the subsequent ghost estates phenomenon. NIRSA (2010) describes the Irish economic model as 'predicated on constant growth to function' and this focus spilled over into planning practice. Indeed the housing section of the National Spatial Strategy for Ireland (DoEHLG, 2002-2020) had a stated aim of avoiding 'barriers to Ireland's continuing economic growth, competitiveness and social development' – of which traditional regulatory planning, it appears was a 'barrier'. Irish land use planning during the boom period was not dissimilar to that employed in the UK, which has been described as largely exercise in 'trend' planning; that is, planning in which 'the development plan merely reflects market trends in the allocation of land' (Taylor, 1998).

NAMA, the government's response to the crisis, has proved to be politically divisive, with many describing it as 'characteristic of the short termist and reactionary modus operandi of Irish politics' (NIRSA, 2010) while others believe it may provide significant opportunity to promote more plan led development of our strategic sites if attention is refocused towards use of assets rather than their quick disposal (O' Connor and Reid, 2009). It is too early to determine the effects that NAMA is likely to have on the built environment but the authors contend that it is crucial that its aims are realised within an established overarching strategic and spatial vision.

## ***Conclusions.***

Irish spatial planning is at an important crossroad and inevitably, the legacy of the 'boom' period will influence theory and practice for years to come. Currently, many approaches to the crisis seem to be predicated on 'quick fixes to stimulate markets and reinstate growth. Incremental responses (such as redevelopment of NAMA sites, temporary uses etc) tend to be place based and disjointed, lacking strategic direction and spatial cohesion. Ireland no longer has a clear direction for future spatial development with the abandonment of the NSS this year and it is critical that current circumstances do not combine to promote a tendency to short termism and a predomination of non strategic thinking and action. It is time to rethink the purpose and spirit of modern planning and move towards a new paradigm which does not place competitiveness as its guiding motivation but places people at its core.



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Production of Vacant Sites Map

Data Sources

Vacant and Derelict Sites in Dublin – <https://maps.google.com/maps/ms?msid=207327149283039286716.0004d2c7daf84c293b9ea&msa=0>  
This is a dataset prepared by local volunteers mapping the vacant sites within Dublin City. They include images and a short description of each building where possible.

Granted Planning Application Data – <http://dublinked.com/datastore/datasets/dataset-303.php> (DubLinked)

This is a planning application dataset published by Dublin City Council through the Dublinked Open Data platform. It is a dataset of planning applications processed by Dublin City Council from 2003 – 2012.



Tilemill – <http://www.mapbox.com/tilemill/> (Mapbox)

The mapping tool Tilemill was used to create the visualization of the data for the Dublin Area. Planning application data was filtered to only showing planning permissions granted by Dublin City Council in the Period 2003 – 2012.

Completed mapped files were uploaded to Mapbox.com and the completed map can be viewed at <http://a.tiles.mapbox.com/v3/rusty.map-5hc2ghzs/page.html>

## *Team.*



Colin Broderick obtained a BSc in Spatial planning with First Class honours from Dublin Institute of Technology. He is currently pursuing a Master of Science in Geospatial Technologies at ISEGI Nova Lisboa, WWU Munster & UJI Castellón. Formally he worked as a Planner with EirGrid, the Irish Electricity Transmission System Operator. He has designed a Dublin transport map which received wide spread media coverage. Colin also produces visualisations of national geospatial datasets with a focus on those which aid spatial decision making.



Stephen D. Walsh is currently working as a Graduate Planner with the Ageing Well Network, a multidisciplinary body focused on the study of ageing in an Irish context. Stephen is currently studying a Masters (MSc) in Local Development and Innovation in the Dublin Institute of Technology. Stephen has previously graduated with a Masters (MA) in Planning and Sustainable Development from University College Cork.





Aoife Doyle commenced her PhD in the field of urban resilience this year. She will complete her studies under the joint supervision of Dublin Institute of Technology and Future Analytics Consulting, an SME consultancy specialising in spatial planning research. She is currently involved in a number of projects relating to urban security and resilience under the EU 7th Framework Programme. Aoife is a graduate of the BSc in Spatial Planning at Dublin Institute of Technology and the MA in Society and Space with the National Institute for Regional and Spatial Analysis (NIRSA), NUI Maynooth.



Rachel Ivers is currently studying a masters in Transport Infrastructure and Logistics in Delft University of Technology in the Netherlands. Previous to that she graduated with honours in Spatial Planning from Dublin Institute of Technology, Ireland. Rachel is particularly interested in the movement of people within, the consequences that has, on the urban environment.



Philip Kavanagh has just completed his undergraduate degree at Dublin Institute of Technology studying the BSc in Spatial Planning, producing a final year dissertation focusing on the performance of one of Dublin's Quality Bus Corridors. Philip represented the Dublin Institute of Technology as a student representative on the National Council of the Irish Planning Institute. He has also interned with AECOM's Transport Department, working on sustainable transport projects during his time there.