

1. Introduction

(a) Overview

“No one can survive merely by conservation. If there is no new construction, the city cannot stand; not even the old will endure. Each city must find its own formula for combining existing symbols with new ones. Without the latter, antiquity becomes mere repetition.”

Pasqual Maragall, Mayor of Barcelona 1982 – 97.

The essence of a city is its people and the essence of architecture is the satisfaction of the needs of these people. This entails not only the provision of shelter and basic function, but also the procurement of a much more extensive range of needs. For above all, architecture is a cultural and social enterprise rather than simply a 'building business'. Architecture, instilled as it is with current philosophies for living, can have a huge impact on how we live our lives. Indeed it often becomes the very embodiment of these theories, as if they have been writ large in stone.

In Dublin, since the 1960s, the dominant ideologies we have seen materialise in bricks and mortar, so to speak, have been those uncritically heralding the primacy of economic progress and its engine, the car. In seeking models to emulate, proponents of such ideologies have anxiously looked towards America for guidance. The legacy of this tendency is a sprawling low-rise, often unplanned capital city, dominated by traffic and bereft of many of its historical architectural treasures.

In the mid to late 1980s Dublin, and Ireland, was in the depths of recession. Entire areas of the city were wasting away. Buildings and whole streets were in danger of disappearing as city centre roads were widened to accommodate cars and trucks. Suburban sprawl was threatening to engulf the surrounding counties of Wicklow, Meath and Kildare. Frank McDonald, in his book “The Construction of Dublin”, notes that prior to 1990 there was not one private flat available for purchase in Dublin city centre. Today there are more than 13,000. And Dublin remains Europe’s lowest density capital city.

Yet something changed, an ideological shift, a rethink of 'designs for living' has occurred amongst certain forward-looking Irish architects, planners and urban designers. (Even the notion of 'urban design', as the coherent articulation of social space, was alien to many of those deciding what should be built during the 1970s). A concerted effort has been made to halt the sprawl and reinvigorate neglected quarters of central Dublin, creating what Richard Rogers calls a 'Compact City'. One where self-sustaining, 'organic' neighbourhoods of mixed uses and high quality housing prosper alongside each other.

The urban environment of Dublin has changed dramatically in the past decade. An increasing emphasis on urban planning and design has led Dublin Corporation to adopt the model of the sustainable city. For the first time in the country's history Integrated Area Plans have been drafted for areas designated for renewal. The combination of EU structural funds, urban renewal tax incentives and sustained economic growth led to a massive property development boom in the 1990s.

Our backs are now turned to the American model and vast, soulless housing estates increasingly cease to be justified solely in terms of economic expediency and numerical necessity. The source of inspiration is now Europe, in particular the magnificent urban renewal of Barcelona. It is now widely recognised that a holistic approach to urban design must be taken - one that encourages a variety of uses, stresses the importance of adequate transportation and recognises the complex interactions between them.

The variety of experiences, in Dublin, where urban redevelopment has, and is continuing, to address problems of social, economic or physical degradation are examined here. The aim is to link theory and practice in the understanding and evaluation of what has been attempted and achieved. Not since the Wide Streets Commissioners of the 18th century has Dublin had such an opportunity to redevelop.

Where we go from here depends on the courage of our architects, designers, planners and politicians. They have it within their power to put this holistic approach into practice and build a more sustainable urban environment at this crucial juncture in the city's history. If they succeed, and the signs are promising, it will be to everyone's gain.