Forty Years of Irish Urban Planning – An Overview

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Introduction
Back in the mid 1970s when I inherited the teaching of a course on the ‘History of Planning’ in the Department of Town Planning in UCD, the research cupboard was empty; virtually no material existed as to where Irish planning came from, what its purpose was or indeed why Ireland had bothered to adopt planning in the first instance. About two decades later, after many long nights work, including going through 20,000 pages of the Builder, discovering the Irish Architect and Craftsman and perusing countless official and other documents covering the period up to 1960, most of my findings are cited in the references below. This paper has a strong urban focus and for the most part the emphasis is on the Dublin context, the best recorded, but the paper also has regard to developments in Cork and Limerick as well as the other intermediate sized cities and towns.

Background to Modern Planning
The principal findings of this research form the background to Irish urban planning. They show that the enthusiasm for the new science of planning, which electrified social movements in London in the early years of the 20th century, had their echoes in Dublin also. Informed and concerned individuals with interests in housing, conservation and transportation saw planning as a useful tool to bring order and a degree of fairness to the chaos and the squalor that was Dublin in the early 1900s (O’Brien, 1982; Prunty, 1999). The efforts of these pioneers were greatly assisted and promoted by the whirlwind of action arising from the work of the energetic Patrick Geddes and his family in Dublin between 1911 and 1916. The Geddesian approach was holistic and included the mounting of international exhibitions of planning achievements and possibilities, giving evidence to public inquiries, the organisation of lecture programmes with both national and international speakers, the holding of Civics Summer Schools, stimulating local Civics movements in towns across the country and the cajoling of officials, politicians, bishops and trades unionists to use planning as a vehicle to solve the housing crisis and to bring about a city of which all could be proud (Bannon, 1978). Above all, Geddes sought and secured the active support of the then viceroy, Lord Aberdeen, and his wife, Lady Aberdeen. Lady Aberdeen became deeply involved and continued to actively promote social reform and physical improvement for Dublin up until the 1930s (Bannon, 1985).

While this emergent planning movement was drowned in the sea of chaos created by the war of independence and then by the civil war, as well as the abject poverty of the new State, there were a number of significant and important outcomes from the work of Geddes. One of these was the establishment of the Civics Institute of Ireland which continued to promote the case for planning, along Geddesian lines, up to the 1930s.
Members of the Civics Institute were active in the work of the Dublin Reconstruction Movement (Bannon, 1985; McManus, 2002) and the Institute was responsible for the preparation and publication of the Civic Surveys of Dublin (O’Rourke, 1925), and Cork (Cork Town Planning Association, 1926). The Civics Institute also organised the Dublin Civic Weeks, held conferences and lecture events. The Institute also promoted the case for Irish planning legislation, including the ill-fated Town Planning and Rural Amenities Bill of 1929 (Bannon, 1989). Geddes also appears to have been responsible for introducing Raymond Unwin to Dublin; both worked together on a critical examination of Dublin housing estates and Unwin became closely involved in plans for the rebuilding of war-damaged Dublin and the formulation of the Dublin Reconstruction (Emergency Provisions) Act 1916 (Miller, 1985).

The other significant outcome of the involvement of Patrick Geddes in Dublin was his success in securing the support of the viceroy to hold the 1914 Dublin Town Planning Competition. Of the eight entries, only two are now known to have survived. One of these was the winning entry Dublin of the Future: The New Town Plan by Patrick Abercrombie and S. and A. Kelly, complete with its Parisian style civic design proposals for the city centre; their proposals for new suburban development were more up to date and realistic, holding out the prospect of a city of up to two million in the longer term (Abercrombie et al., 1922). The other surviving entry from the competition is the incomplete but highly commended submission entry by Ashbee and Chettle, a submission with a strong sociological emphasis (Bannon, 1999).

Planning and the Irish Free State

Early hopes for a strong and informed planning approach by the Irish government proved to be unfounded. Any government, beset by the ravages of poverty, unemployment and emigration, while also involved in an economic war with its major trading partner, was unlikely to look favourably on what DeValera later described as ‘the seductive occupation of planning’. Planning achievements during the thirty years 1928 to 1958 were few in number and generally limited in their impact. Thus, the permissive Town and Regional Planning Act 1934, and as amended in 1939, may have been good legislation but the acts had little impact and very limited application (Nowlan, 1989).

The Sketch Development Plan for Dublin, 1939, prepared by Abercrombie, Kelly and Robertson, complete with its greenbelt and limits on city size, was both ideologically driven and politically inept (Abercrombie et al., 1941). Much the same could be said of a raft of advisory plans for the other cities and major towns prepared by Gibney, O’Toole, Moffett and even Robertson. For the most part, these plans all lifted their ideas from English preoccupations, lacked any financial realism and paid scant attention to the realities of implementation. Attempts by Manning Robertson to establish a broadly based, cross professional, multi-sectoral planning movement in 1944 through the ‘National Planning Conference’ came to nothing with Robertson’s untimely death the following year (for a discussion of the National Planning Conference and the work of Manning Robertson, see Bannon, 1989, pp57-65 and pp68-69). Somewhat ironically, the very lack of the use of the 1934–39 planning legislation ultimately led to its replacement. Having failed to implement its own resolution to prepare a Planning Scheme ‘with all convenient speed under the acts’, both High and Supreme Court proceedings brought by a building company found against Dublin Corporation. With a threat of imprisonment hanging over the Lord Mayor, the Aldermen and the Burgesses, a Planning Scheme was finally drafted and approved by Dublin Corporation in 1957. In
accordance with the legislation, the Scheme was then submitted for approval to the
Minister and to the Department of Local Government ‘where its arrival could hardly
have been less welcome’ (Nowlan, 1989, p85). For its part, the Department did not
know how best to handle this hot potato and, in the end, it was decided to repeal the
1930s planning acts, to draft new legislation and to begin all over again. In the end, little
of substance had been achieved under the 1930s legislation during its more than twenty-
five year existence.

Looked at in terms of planning practice and in relation to ‘success stories’, the genesis
of Irish planning throughout the first half of the twentieth century is not a particularly
happy one, or one of great achievements. All too often, the story is one of indifference,
both by the general public and their elected representatives. Such apathy was evident in
the lack of responses to the 1933 Town and Regional Planning Bill where Local
Authorities were invited to make comments on the Bill, but none chose to do so. As a
newly emerged ‘post-colonial nation’ whose independence was rooted in the land
question, proposals relating to the ‘common good’, or to the regulation of the use of
land in the public interest, were unlikely to generate public enthusiasm or strong
political commitment. Indeed the earlier political decision through the land acts to
effectively give freehold title to most farmers, was something most unusual at the time
and which now complicates rational planning (Dooley, 2004). With the possible
exception of Patrick Geddes, few of the early practitioners of planning in Ireland either
understood or empathised with the values underpinning the new state based on
‘democratic social polity’, economic and social cooperation, local development, the use
of all forms of natural resources and a keen sense of local control and ‘government’
(Collins, 1922; Griffith, 1920). Rather, they were largely technical, engineering
‘solutions’ devoid of social or economic understanding or relevance. In hindsight, how
ironic seems the idealistic belief of Constance Markievicz that ‘we have thought and
done differently from other nations...a sort of feeling for decentralisation’ (Ferriter,
2004, p14).

Economic Resurgence
In 1959 Sean Lemass finally succeeded to the office of Taoiseach at a time when there
was an up-turn in world trade. Lemass had been one of the few cabinet Ministers in
successive Irish governments to have championed the case for planning and rational
programming. His succession to the leadership, and even the prospect of his succession,
had energised the public service and the public in general (Horgan,1997).

Lemass and the team around him adopted a pragmatic, flexible and innovative approach
to tackling the problems besetting the country. In late 1958, T. K. Whitaker prepared for
the Government a detailed sectoral investment strategy covering the years 1958–1963
(Whitaker, 1958). This acclaimed document closely mirrored Ireland’s First programme
for Economic Expansion, which set an annual growth target of two percent in GNP over
each of the five years from 1958. In this, as in his other activities, Lemass sought to
produce a dynamic approach to management and administration in order to generate
economic dynamism (Lemass, 1961). Both Whitaker’s Grey Book and the
Government’s programme pointed to the danger that infrastructural bottlenecks, urban
congestion and physical constraints could impede economic progress and jeopardise the
programme targets. There was a growing realisation of the urgent necessity for up-to-
date planning legislation and a growing awareness that proper planning was essential for
success.
In May 1960 the Government requested the assistance of a United Nations expert to advise them in relation to urban renewal in Dublin. Charles Abrams was nominated to carry out the task and, after consultations, his brief was extended to deal with Dublin issues in the context of national level proposals relating to planning, housing, urban renewal and related matters (Abrams, 1961). In due course Abrams submitted to the Minister for Local Government and to the City Manager a memorandum containing twenty-four recommendations covering planning legislation and the objectives thereof, the establishment of a planning appeals tribunal, the preparation of an urban renewal programme, the amendment of compulsory purchase legislation, the review of housing programmes and policies, the commissioning of a study on industrial location and the preparation of a scheme for land acquisition for industrial estates. There were also specific recommendations relating to Dublin and the city estate, as well as the preparation of city plans for Dublin, Cork and Limerick. In relation to planning education and research, Abrams called for the ‘institution of research in planning, housing, building materials, building cost, city development, and fostering of courses so as to broaden reservoir of personnel in these areas’. Since the Abrams report generally reflected the government’s approach, it was hardly surprising that most of the recommendations were substantially implemented, driven by the young reforming Minister for Local Government, Neil T. Blaney.

The Enactment of the 1963 Planning Act

One of the first pieces of reform legislation to be brought forward by Minister Blaney was the 1962 Local Government (Planning and Development) Bill, introduced in the Dail on 12th July 1962. While there was some French and US thinking in the antecedents of the Bill, it was largely based on the Town and Country Planning Act 1962 of England and Wales, in spite of the fact that half a century of advice, much of it from Britain, cautioned against Ireland slavishly following the English model. The Bill was somewhat unfortunate in its timing. By 1963, the Planning Advisory Group (PAG committee) was well into its work of recommending major reforms to the English planning system and its legislation; the existing system was considered too local to be economically relevant and, at the same time, too large scale to be socially meaningful (PAG, 1965). While the planning system for England and Wales has been the subject to numerous reviews and modifications between 1965 and 1999, Ireland adopted the old approach and doggedly held on to the pre-PAG version, with some managerial amendments, right up to the end of the twentieth century! The Local Government (Planning and Development) Act 1963 imposed heroic obligations for which Irish society was hopelessly ill prepared. Indeed, significant interests were downright antagonistic to the very concept of planning and the notion of land management, both in principle and in practice.

The principal sections of the 1963 act dealt with Development Plans, Development Control, Amenities, Compensation, Acquisition of Land and Miscellaneous provisions. Under the flagship of ‘decentralisation’, responsibility for the implementation of the planning process was devolved to 87 independent ‘planning authorities’, ranging in size from Dublin Corporation to small urban districts with only a few thousand population. Each planning authority was required to prepare a Development Plan for the area within its own jurisdiction, as well as for any ‘scheduled towns’ therein by October 1967 at the latest. Rather than following the procedures of the earlier planning acts, the Local Government (Planning and Development) Act 1963 opted for a ‘development led’ rather than a ‘plan led’ model, which brought with it a necessity for a major emphasis
on development control and the right to planning appeals, initially to the Minister and post 1976 to an independent appeals board – An Bord Pleanala. Many planning authorities, most notably Dublin Corporation, failed to meet the October 1967 deadline for the completion of what were termed the ‘Mark I’ development plans. Commenting on these first attempts at development plans, Richard Stringer stated:

Most of the first development plans were based on a quick survey yielding minimal information, often using second hand data which was well on the way to being obsolete. The analysis of the information gathered rarely deserved so fine a name. As a result, the fact-to-policy link often seemed very tenuous indeed. Some allowance must be made for the absence of a national and regional policy, but this weak fact-to-policy is best seen in the first or policy sections of the development plans, which were often vague, imprecise and sometimes amounted to little more than pious sentiment. On the social and economic side the link was particularly weak. Here the surveys were even more superficial and such things as population and employment forecasts were little more that guesswork. The tactical components of the development plans were usually better than the policy statements. Yet the programme of intensive objectives were rarely more than the set of projects already in the local authority’s files, with some amenity items added (Stringer, 1971).

The poor quality of this first crop of development plans reflected the limited data available upon which to base plans, the lack of relevant research, the limited resources of planning departments (where these had been established!) and both the lack of staff and the minimal training of most of those within the planning service. Generally, the plans made inadequate allowance for change and failed to realise that the primary function of the plan was to manage change or to forestall change in some cases. With very limited numbers of trained staff and lacking resources in virtually all authorities, with the possible exception of the Dublin and Cork Corporations, the planning system, across much of the country, was embedded within the engineering sections of Local Authorities. The remit of these authorities was exceptionally narrow and almost wholly physical, frequently re-sourcing the fledgling planning system from within their own engineering staff. Stringer had pointed to the fact that increasing numbers of the limited staff available were being absorbed into development control; even within the Department of Local Government the staff available who had worked to produce Planning and Development Circulars, and to advise, guide and support planning authorities, were being deflected into running the planning appeals procedure.

**Missing Support Structures and Policies**

The 1963 act was heralded with a great deal of hope and hype; sustained delivery proved more difficult to achieve and maintain. The prospect that local government would be invigorated and that local authorities would be transformed into ‘Development Corporations’ proved to be unrealisable as local authorities became bereft of local or independent funding. The ensuing difficulties were exacerbated as Government failed to enact legislation to implement the Kenny Report and to bring forward mechanisms to enable local authorities to regulate the supply and/or the price of development land (Kenny Report, 1973).

The missing dimension in the planning act was that of regions, even though by 1965 the Minister was insisting that one of his most important tasks ‘is to establish a regional
planning framework for our social and economic development programmes’ (Blaney, 1965). The White Paper of 1965 on Regional Policy, with its emphasis on development centres as ‘the commercial, financial, educational, health, social and administrative centres of each region’ was never implemented (Government Statement, 1965). Four years later the internationally acclaimed development strategy for the State, as set out in Regional Studies in Ireland (the Buchanan Report), was rejected out of hand (Buchanan and Partners, 1969). Also in 1969 the Report of the Public Service Organisation Review Group recommended the establishment of a super ministry of Regional Development, with an enhanced role for ‘Regional Planning and Development’ (PSORG, 1969). But once again, the proposal was not taken up by government and, instead, the old Ministry of Local Government was re-labelled as the Department of the Environment.

Sandwiched into the narrow confines of the engineering sections of local authorities, whose resource base was being eroded, and working within an administrative system based on rigid hierarchies, there was little opportunity for planning to demonstrate or to develop its balanced approach in terms of its economic, social and aesthetic aims. For the most part planning was seen as routine technical exercise; in keeping with this, the early emphasis was on ‘the training of planners’ rather than their education.

With the retirement of Sean Lemass as Taoiseach in 1966 the concept of local authorities functioning as ‘development corporations’ lost momentum. As the powers of local government were curtailed during the 1970s and the 1980s and as their financial base was eroded, their position became increasingly precarious. The very survival of the Irish planning system itself in these circumstances is a tribute to the hard work, dedication and determination of the staff involved, often pursuing a thankless task in the face of indifference, misunderstanding and downright attacks from vested interests, not to mention the malevolent role played by some leading politicians and others. It was especially difficult for planners to make a significant impact, given that they were employed in local authorities who themselves were relying on ‘the management methods of the small farm and the village shop’ (Barrington, 1991). The decreasing output of Planning and Development Circulars by the Department of the Environment during the 1970s was yet another indicator of a widespread malaise.

What kind of Ireland might we have had if Lemass had come to power ten years earlier or if he had remained on as Taoiseach until his death in 1971? Would he have been able to continue as an inspired leader or would he have been bogged down in the morass that arose from the overspill of the Northern Ireland ‘troubles’?

Planning Successes
Reference has already been made to the survival, if slow growth, of the planning system. Gradually the notion of planning and land management was extended to all the territory of the State; both officials and elected members of planning authorities had to expand their horizons to think in terms of five-year time intervals. Planning achievements are often counted in terms of what ‘did not get through’ while, at the same time, the system of Development Plans and Development Control did provide an increasing level of certainty for private operators in all facets of the land market. The establishment of a de-politicised planning appeals tribunal, An Bord Pleanala, in 1976 did begin to regularise planning decision making.
It has already been noted that, while the Buchanan Regional Studies in Ireland was castigated within the country, it was acclaimed abroad. In addition, the two advisory regional plans for the Dublin and Limerick regions have stood the test of time and greatly assisted in guiding the development of their respective regions for a quarter century (Myles Wright, 1967; Lichfied, 1967). Without the Dublin Transportation Study and the subsequent protection of land for route ways, there would be no M50 in Dublin (Heanue et al., 1971), while, in the case of Cork, the Cork Sub-Regional Study was the first of a series of joint studies by Cork City and County to plan the orderly development of the city and its environs (Gillie, 1971).

But it was An Foras Forbartha (The National Institute for Physical Planning and Construction Research) which was the bright star on Ireland’s planning horizon. Established in 1964 with UN financial assistance, the Institute brought together in a single organisation research into planning and environment, building/housing/construction and roads and traffic, with the subsequent addition of a water resources division. In its twenty-two year existence the Institute produced a quite extraordinary diverse volume of high quality, innovative and lasting research. Amongst the many outputs from the Planning Division, it is possible to cite reports such as The Planning for Amenity and Tourism, the Donegal based Specimen Development Plan (1966), The Protection of the National Heritage (1969), the Buchanan Report on Regional Studies in Ireland (1969), The Gaeltacht Studies which tackled the difficult issue of culture and language in development strategies (1972), The National Coastline Study (1973), the report on Office Location and Regional Development (1973), the Housing Needs Assessment development plan manual (1979) the National Heritage inventory of Areas of Scientific Interest in Ireland (1981) and the planning division’s final report on Regional Planning in the 1990s: A Discussion of the Issues (1987). Amongst the other publications of importance to planning were the series of seminars and associated publications on Ireland in the year 2000. In addition, the Institute provided a ‘conservation advisory service’ principally for local authorities. The Institute also produced and published the Irish Journal of Environmental Science. Through its myriad of activities An Foras Forbartha, and especially its planning division and staff, had provided an important support for those trying to implement the fledgling planning service. In its twenty-two years of service, it also made an important contribution to Ireland’s development and modernisation in the public interest. The abolition of the Institute in 1986, under the guise of reducing public expenditure, had much to do with matters and personnel now under scrutiny by the Flood/Mahon tribunals (Flood, 2002).

In terms of local planning, the approach adopted in Cork over many years serves as a good example of success and good practice. Thus, the 1971 Cork Sub-Regional Study (Gillie, 1971) was followed by the establishment joint committees of Cork city and Cork county to oversee the preparation and implementation of the Cork Land Use/transportation Plan covering the period 1978 to 2001, with the purpose ‘to develop a strategic plan for the orderly growth and co-ordinated development of the Study Area’ of Cork city and its surrounding environs (Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, 1978). Much of the credit for this work goes to Joe McHugh who was city manager from 1974 until 1986. The LUTS plan was reviewed and updated in 1992 (Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, 1992) and the general approach has more recently been followed in the Cork Area Strategic Plan, 2001–2020 (Atkins, 2001). In addition, the Cork authorities made good and innovative use of various EU Initiative and Programmes, including Article 10 funding, the 1994–1999 Sub-Programme on Urban and Village Renewal and the Urban I Community Initiative.
The Resurrection of the Phoenix

The intense nexus of problems besetting the Irish economy and society in the 1970s and the early 1980s proved to be an inhospitable and difficult terrain for the growth of planning. Nevertheless, professional planners were appointed in increasing numbers to local authority posts, planning departments were being established in most counties and the number of planning authorities without qualified planning staff continued to decline. Operationally, the work of the planners improved with the establishment of An Bord Pleanala, while the amending planning acts of 1982, 1983, 1990 and 1992 removed some of the problems arising in practice from the limitations of the principal act of 1963. But it was the resurgence of interest in urban renewal which was to occupy planners to an increasing degree.

From the mid 1970s onwards urban authorities had been encouraged by government to undertake all possible measures to revitalise the urban cores and to bring people back in to create ‘living cities’ (Encounter, 1994). In particular, the city authorities embarked on large-scale programmes of site acquisition around the business cores of the cities – derelict sites, former industrial premises and unused public lands – to be redeveloped for local authority housing provision. This inner cities initiative did much to improve the urban environment, while reversing the drift of population out of the inner cities. Parallel to this, the Government introduced The House Improvement Grants Scheme 1985 to assist the refurbishment of the pre-1940s residential building stock. A new set of urban values was taking hold and, in the process, creating exciting and rewarding work for planners.

The 1982 Urban Development Areas Bill had attempted to advance the renewal process by proposing the establishment of an Inner City Authority for Dublin, together with a number of special purpose urban development commissions. That Bill did not reach the Statute Book, but the approach survived and led to the Urban Renewal Act 1986 and subsequent amendments thereof. The Urban Renewal Act enabled the establishment of the Custom House Docks Development Authority, (later enlarged to become the Dublin Docklands Authority), and charged with the regeneration of part of the Dublin Docklands (Drudy, 1999). The Act also introduced the utilisation of tax breaks to stimulate urban renewal in the derelict parts of cities, and this was later extended to the major urban areas. More recently the urban renewal approach has been complemented by a Town Renewal Scheme, focussed on the smaller urban places. To date, approximately 2,000 projects have been assisted under the various schemes, with a total investment in excess of €4 billion. The various urban renewal schemes have transformed the appearance of Irish towns and cities; they have attracted a young, affluent and middle-class population back into cities and they have provided a massive workload for planners, both in the public service and in consultancy.

The influence of the EEC/EU was also an important driving force for change, particularly in relation to the environment. While the EU Commission does not have a Directorate corresponding to Regional and Urban Planning, many of its policies and actions have contributed significantly to progressive environmental change. The 1992 Treaty of the European Union did extend the competence of the EU in specific matters relating to planning. The operations of the EU have assisted Ireland in a number of ways, not least in its insistence on a planned approach. The EC/EU provided funding or part funding for works to be undertaken. As the EU moved progressively from a projects approach to a more planned procedure and ultimately to a programme
approach, the need for the inputs of planners increased exponentially. Likewise the implementation of EU Directives gave rise to increased planning requirements and led to a professional mode of operation. Perhaps of even greater importance has been the informational and networking role of various EU bodies and organisations, backed up by dissemination of best practice models and guidance. Within an Irish context, the LEADER Programme, the Rural Environmental Protection Scheme, the Urban Community Initiatives and the Operational Programme for Local Urban and Rural Development, 1994–1999 (OPLURD) have also provided funding and have helped transform the way we do things at national, regional and local levels. Without the influence of the European Spatial Development Perspective 1999 (European Commission, 1999), it is unlikely that we would have seen the Irish initiative to prepare the National Spatial Strategy, 2002–2020 (NSS) (Department of Environment and Local Government, 2002). Finally, and perhaps most important for Ireland, has been the trans-national educational role of the EU.

**Evaluation of the OP for Local Urban and Rural Development – An Example**

The Operational Programme for Local Urban and Rural Development, 1994–1999 was a model of what planning might be about. It was intended to generate social and economic development at local level, and to involve local communities in integrated local development actions. This was an integrated programme designed to cater for the three aims of planning – social, economic and physical – in a holistic, integrated fashion within a coherent administrative system.

The reality ended up more as three parallel exercises, each operated independently by a separate Government Department or Agency, with limited cross-over between the strands of the programme. The administrative arrangement of central control and local implementation, coupled with an absence of any regional input such as horizontal coordination or local integration, limited the overall impact of the programme. The Irish implementation of the O.P. was a good illustration of the way in which the hierarchical system of administration had served to constrict the scope of planning, while the so-called decentralised local level suffered almost continuous restriction of its powers or freedom of action. However, the programme was an important demonstration model; it proved inspirational and it has led to the greater use of performance monitoring mechanisms and to some recognition of the importance of horizontal integration at local levels. The work under URBAN II in Ballyfermot both continues the OPLURD approach demonstrates how a focussed, well-resourced programme can impact positively on a local area (PriceWaterhouseCoopers, 2003).

**Lessons Learned – Planning at the Turn of the Century?**

The fifteen years from 1985 have witnessed steady progress in the establishment of a planning system throughout the country, with increasing staff and other resources allocated to planning in most local authorities. But planning, which should be a multifaceted, integrating professional procedure, continued to be restricted to a confined space on the administrative chessboard, 'boxed in', where its true potential could not and cannot be effectively demonstrated, much less achieved in most instances. Unlike the situation in many advanced countries where a hierarchy of integrated plans is the norm, Ireland lacked a theoretically strong, hierarchically articulated or integrated planning system. The 1963 act was proving itself an inadequate instrument upon which to build a modern and effective planning system capable of dealing with the needs of the late twentieth century.
By the early 1990s many voices were calling for the reform of local government and the strengthening of the role of planners, as well as the status of planners. The 1991 report of the advisory committee on local government reorganisation and reform had set out a blueprint for the reinvigoration of Irish sub-national governance (Barrington, 1991). In turn, the Devolution Commission supported the idea of three levels of local government – regional, county and sub-county levels – and the Commission went on to recommend that ‘integrated multi-purpose development plans should form the basis of the local government system, both in the discharge of its own functions and as a framework for all public bodies delivering services within the county’ (Devolution Commission, 1996). The views of the Devolution Commission were endorsed by the National Economic and Social Council, commenting that ‘it makes sense to seek to develop the local authority as a focus for co-ordination and linkage at local level, building on the experience of the local development processes’ then operating under the EU part-funded Local Development programmes (NESC, 1996). The case for the strengthening of local government was being positively considered and led to the White Paper on Better Local Government: A programme for Change (Government of Ireland, 1996).

Better Local Government had been developed around four key principles. These were to enhance local democracy, to serve the customer better, to develop efficiency and to provide proper resources for local authorities. The White Paper proposed the establishment of Strategic Policy Committees and Corporate Policy Groups in each local authority, as well as the removal of the dual structure of officers and non-officers (for a fuller account of the contents of the White Paper see Keogan, 2003). While removing the previous rigid tiers of professional personnel, the new system enabled local authority employees, including professional planners, to become Directors of Services and part of the management structures for the delivery of services.

While the White Paper did not deal with the issue of regions, the consequences of the unprecedented growth of the Dublin conurbation led to the necessity of appointing consultants to prepare Strategic Planning Guidelines for the management of growth and change in the seven counties which constitute the Greater Dublin Area (GDA) over the period 1999 to 2011 (Brady Shipman Martin, 1999). While these guidelines were non-statutory, local authorities were required ‘to have regard to’ their recommendations in making their Development Plan reviews. Generally, the guidelines did provide a context and a framework for the development of the GDA during a period of unprecedented expansion.

Alongside the preparation of the guidelines for the GDA, the Minister for the Environment and Local Government, following extensive consultations, brought forward a new comprehensive planning bill in 1999. The Planning and Development Act 2000 represented a major enhancement in the scope and relevance of the Irish planning code, bringing Ireland very much into line with advanced planning thought both within the EU and in other Member states (European Commission, 1999). The act provided for a hierarchy of plans from Local Area Plans to Development Plans and Regional Planning Guidelines. Amongst the many innovations introduced by the act were the preparation of Housing Strategies, enabling the designation of Strategic Development Zones and the revision and updating of all facets of the planning code including plan making procedures, development control, the protection of structures and the enhancement of the role of An Bord Pleanala (Grist, 2003). In modernising the planning structures and procedures, the Planning and Development Act 2000 necessitates a major increase in resources, financial, manpower and research, if the full
potential of the legislation is to be realised. The act signals that planning has finally been elevated to a higher plateaux within the decision making machinery of the State and its sub-national structures.

After a hiatus of almost thirty years, the very rapid growth of the Greater Dublin Area had generated renewed calls from a wide spectrum of opinion for a 'national development plan' or strategy. After due deliberation, the National Development Plan, 2000–2006 confirmed the Government’s commitment to the preparation of 'a National Spatial Planning Strategy' which 'will take the form of a broad planning strategy for the country at large' (Government of Ireland, 1999). The task of preparing the National Spatial Strategy, 2002–2020 was mandated to the Department of the Environment and Local Government and the strategy was completed and published in 2002 (Government of Ireland, 2002). The recommended strategy can be seen in Figure 1.

**Figure 1. National Spatial Strategy**

[Diagram of National Spatial Strategy with various locations marked such as Dublin, Cork, Limerick, etc., and shaded areas indicating different strategies like Consolidating, Reinforcing, Strengthening, Revitalising.]

Source: drawing by Stephen Hannon, Geography Department, University College Dublin.
The newly titled Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government was charged with implementing the spatial strategy; importantly, the policies and proposals of all government departments and agencies are supposed to conform to the strategy. As the Taoiseach stated at the launch of the strategy, 'The Government supports it [the NSS] fully and all public policies must, and will, be consistent with the strategy'. While the DOEHLG is endeavouring to implement the strategy within its own remit, it is not clear that all public bodies are proactive towards the strategy.

Full implementation of the NSS will require concentrated and consistent government support and action across a wide range of policies including decentralisation, enterprise development, higher education, tourism etc. In this regard, the announcement of the relocation of 10,000 public sector posts out of Dublin to fifty-three locations around the country, almost all to centres other than the NSS Gateways, is difficult to reconcile with the overall strategy (Dail Debates, 2003). Likewise, the report of the Enterprise Strategy Group devotes one non-committal paragraph to the strategy. In a society 'bedevilled by localism' as Dr Garrett FitzGerald has put it, there is a danger that the strategy will be eroded at the expense of the regions and the country, at least outside Dublin.

The National Spatial strategy is the keystone of the planning infrastructure of this country and of the island as a whole. It offers a route map for future investment and development. However, its implementation requires tangible reassurance that key elements of the strategy, particularly the promotion of the designated Gateways, will receive the level of public investment and support necessary to deliver the targets. Otherwise, there is a danger that the momentum will evaporate. It would be too bad if the publication itself and its associated photo opportunity were to become the only result of the work behind the strategy. Planners have much to lose if the current opportunities are squandered. On the other hand, dedicated implementation should lead to economic savings and social benefit for the country, its regions and localities.

**Conclusion**

The planning system has achieved much under very difficult and sometimes hostile circumstances. Much of our history exhibits the evidence of social divisions and, in recent times, a growing sense of individualism and the demise of social concern – there are echoes of Thatcher's 'there is no longer such a thing as society.' Also, in a country which has derived its independence from a land based revolution, and where land interests remain strong, concepts of land management and the redistribution of the windfalls from profits in land are often hard to swallow.

But if planning is to be widely effective in achieving a balanced approach to the environmental, economic and social needs of Irish society, the profession needs to deepen its philosophical and theoretical roots. To the best of my memory, there has not been a talk or lecture to the planning fraternity on what could rightly be called planning theory or planning philosophy at any time during the past forty years. As the old adage has it, 'there is nothing so practical as a good theory.' A sound theoretical basis for its beliefs is an essential foundation for effective professional commitment and action. Rather, those who toiled in what are called 'academic-research institutions' were more likely to be criticised for not being au fait with 'current practice', as if current practice was an adequate measuring stick. A good theoretical foundation could have assisted the planning profession in defining and in prioritising what was important and what should be the focus of action. Enlightened theory should have been the key to defining the subject, practice and the profession. Theory is the foundation upon which planning
could convincingly defend its role in society. History, culture and society are essential ingredients of any theory or philosophy relevant to a given society, including Ireland. Effective planning practice must also rest on a considered and objective understanding of the culture, history and values of the society for which plans are being prepared. A well-argued theoretical foundation is all the more important as the number of professional planners increases, as scope for specialisation increases and as more people from a wide range of countries come to work in the Irish planning service.

This review of the operation of the planning system also suggests that the profession needs to be more open to new educational approaches. The idea that universities should operate a system of direct entry to their planning courses was anathema and has been opposed for too long. Likewise, too few planners have immersed themselves in re-education programmes, despite the increased availability of such courses. Tied to the past nature of planning education, planning research is still in its infancy and there remains a critical need to develop evidence based policy. In the past, the publication of theme volumes of *National Planning Conference Proceedings* and *Policy Papers* were an important support to the fledgling profession, as was the publication of *Pleanail* annually since 1982. However, in the changing environment of the twenty-first century, there is a need to revamp *Pleanail* as a high quality, refereed journal of a good academic standard, serving the needs of a modern profession.

If Irish planning is to claim its rightful place and meet the challenges ahead, there is a need for the profession and its cognate affiliates to speak with one coherent voice, representative of and with the support of all planners in the State and, hopefully, with the support of all planners on the island. Professional divisions have for too long been destructive, divisive and demoralising. The carry-on of two competing institutes within a small profession is little short of madness. It reminds me of William Hazlitt’s remark about the Tories and the Whigs in the nineteenth century as being ‘like two rival stage-coaches that splashed each other with mud, but went by the same road to the same destination’. A united professional voice could have the membership, the resources and the energy to reposition the profession, making it central to decisions on the major issues shaping the future development of the country, its regions and local organisations. It is imperative that planning and the planning profession moves to take its rightful place at the centre of public policy, lifting its gaze from the local to the regional, to the national and the international horizons. Planners must work as the active promoters of broad physical change in its proper economic and social context and in the interests of the common good (Douglas, 2004).

But through dedication and hard work the planning service has come through some very difficult times. New horizons are opening up for planning. But to maximise its position and to realise its full potential, Ireland needs a strong, unified and well-resourced planning profession operating a first-class planning service. The people of Ireland, and most especially the exceptional young graduates entering the profession, deserve nothing less. Planning is not just a luxury to be used in the good times only; the rational, sustainable use of resources is of even greater importance in times of difficulty and recession. Planning must move in from the margins and become much more central to government decision making over the next forty years. To recall Professor Paddy Lynch speaking at a planning lecture some forty years ago ‘we do not have to plan to fail; all we have to do is to fail to plan.’
References


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