
PAPERS FROM PRACTICE : PLANNING SUBURBIA

Dublin's North Fringe: A New Model for Suburban Greenfield Development

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The process described here represents a negotiated Masterplan initiated by Dublin Corporation to provide a coherent urban design and implementation framework for the development of a major new urban area on the northern fringe of the city. This approach was adopted in order to comply with policy requirements regarding more sustainable mixed-use urban development patterns. Specific issues addressed in the proposal include the inclusion of a wide range of uses, the distinct character of different areas, the provision of an infrastructural 'spine', amenity areas and public parks. The area covered by this initiative includes lands owned by Dublin Corporation and a number of private owners. Applications for planning permission are currently being formulated based upon the agreed framework. Development permission will be granted to applications that include the required mix of private, affordable and social housing in compliance with the planning Acts, and such development will have to comply with the permissions and conditions as granted.

Along with Pelletstown and Docklands, the North Fringe constitutes one of the key sites in the Borough area which can deliver a significant quantum of residential units. While responding to a Governmental policy context which required the integration of land use and transport, the Corporation was anxious to develop an action plan which applied enlightened urban principles to the challenge of placemaking and produced a built fabric with a strong sense of place and identity. The plan, which emerged, was a collaboration between Dublin Corporation and Town Planning Consultants, Urban Initiatives.

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Location:

The North Fringe Area is located in the north eastern corner of the County Borough approximately 7km north of the city centre and c. 1 km west of the coastal village of Baldoyle. (North of Clare Hall and to the east of Darndale).

1998 Dublin City Development Plan:

The necessity for an Action Plan for the North Fringe Area stemmed from the rezoning of some 132ha (322 acres) of previously undeveloped land, on the north-eastern edge of the County Borough, in the 1999 Dublin City Development Plan.

Planning Policies Informing the Action Plan:

The approach to the preparation of the Action Plan has been informed by recently published planning policies and guidelines, the majority of which are a response to the principles of sustainable development. The main ones were;

- Sustainable Development - A Strategy for Ireland, 1997.
- Strategic Planning Guidelines for the Greater Dublin Area, 1999.
- DoE Residential Density Guidelines, 1999.
- D TI Strategy.

All of the plans are a response to the principles of sustainable development as agreed at the Earth Summit in Rio in 1992. The main planning thrust of these plans can be summarised as follows:

- Prioritising public transport
- The promotion of a more compact urban form
- Higher densities in association with public transport
- Improved mix of uses in developments
- Protection of the natural environment

Objectives of the Action Plan:

The Action Area Plan aimed to fulfil a number of different objectives, the main ones being:

- To establish the basis of a coherent urban structure, based on urban design principles, as a focus for the new community and its integration with established communities in the area.
- In the interests of sustainability, to create a greater focus on public transport and to reduce the reliance on cars.
- To achieve a sufficient density of development to sustain efficient public transport networks and a viable mix of uses and community facilities.
- To articulate a series of urban design principles to generate a quality design response in the development of the area.
- To promote the creation of high quality public realm, where art, architecture and landscape are dynamic components.

Urban Design Objectives:

Successful urban design focuses primarily on the relationship between buildings, uses and the public domain. An urban character depends particularly on buildings having an adequate scale to contain space. The relationship, therefore, between the width of the street and the height of buildings is always a relevant concern. The urban design objectives for the North Fringe Area were to create:

A place with its own strong identity and individual character

Spatial continuity and enclosure

High standards of design and environmental quality in all areas but particularly in the public realm

High levels of accessibility and ease of movement within the area and to neighbouring areas

A clear hierarchy of routes and spaces that are easy to understand and use

Internal and external layouts that are adaptable to changing social, technological, economic and market conditions

Diversity through a mix of compatible uses

The integration of land uses and transport.

Principal Elements of Spatial Structure:

Moving from a series of agreed urban principles and urban design objectives into a spatial expression of these principles and objectives is one of the most difficult steps in the design process. The need to link up the Malahide Road junction with the Belfast railway line inspired the key concept and structuring device of the whole plan, the central urban spine with its sequence of urban squares. The principle elements of the spatial structure were as follows:

An activity spine in the form of a boulevard axis, extending from the Malahide Road to the proposed railway station, as the primary community focus.

A series of 'green links' running north-south terminating in recreational or other community facilities with high space requirements.

A redesigned and significantly enhanced central park (Father Collins Park) with improved sports and recreational facilities.

Strong links back to existing developments at Clare Hall Estate and Donaghmede Shopping Centre.

A new perimeter road defining the northern development limit.

The landscape features of the Mayne River and its associated tree belt protected as an ecological habitat and linear amenity area.

A series of residential squares linked by a network of pedestrian / cycle routes.

Having presented the North Fringe Action Plan to City Council, the next step was to begin consultation with the two key landowners/developers with a view to designing a range of character areas which reflected the urban design principles and incorporated the key elements of the spatial layout of the Action Plan. The key challenge here was to translate the broad guidance framework of the Action Plan into an implementation phase. While requiring a much greater degree of detailed design, a range of issues began to emerge which, if unresolved, could undermine the radical thrust of the Action Plan. These included the character of the

route structure, the challenge of integrating social and affordable housing and the need to generate a mixed use character along the main spine.

The Corporation decided on the vehicle of an implementation framework for resolving the issues above and other problems which might derail successful implementation of the project. The two main developers worked closely with Dublin Corporation in drawing up a consensus which covered the following key areas:

The creation of a detailed route structure,

The development of urban design aspects including a wide range of character areas.

The need to create a continuous thread of mixed use along the spine.

The development of a vision and landscape plan for the Father Collins Park.

The successful integration of the 20% social and affordable housing into the overall layout.

The need to incorporate a sequence of phasing, which would deliver critical elements of public infrastructure, was also to be addressed.

Several of the key subject areas were addressed through workshop formats chaired by the Planning Department and bringing together a range of professionals representing the developers and also the main Departments of Dublin Corporation.

The central philosophy underpinning the development of a route and movement structure was the creation of interconnectedness between all types of streets. This involved challenging the rigid hierarchy which has governed design approaches to suburban road building and prevented the construction of traditional city streets. While developing a typology of street types to include avenues, boulevards, streets, lanes and mews, certain key streets and spines were emphasised in order to generate an urban structure which was coherent, legible and memorable.

The development of a series of local character areas involved the application of the urban design principles outlined earlier, in particular the requirement for linked facades and adequate massing to generate an appropriate sense of containment. In essence, this meant moving from the traditional two storey scale associated with suburban Dublin and striving instead to achieve the urban scale and character of the inner city. Incorporating a sustainable density of population provided a solid platform for this new urban scale. The higher densities around the Malahide Road junction adjacent to quality bus routes around the new rail station, and along the main urban spine between them would generate a higher order urban scale of 4-5 storeys which would step down somewhat as one moved away from the high street, nodes and gateways of the central spine.

On the basis that sustainable urban areas must have a generous provision of mixed uses, serious consideration was given to aspects of location, viability and the quantum of possible retail and service uses. While a certain provision of local shopping and community facilities would be required throughout the scheme, a major challenge exists in terms of generating a continuous thread of commercial vitality along the full extent of the central spine. Pulses of

mixed use will be achievable at the Malahide Road junction and at the new Station Square and to some degree in the smaller public squares along the spine. This will have to be supplemented by an architectural energy applied to vitality uses such as live work units or shopfront treatments to small scale offices housing the commercial and service firms of the knowledge industry.

The implementation framework also had to consider how key elements of public infrastructure would be delivered in an area with up to 7,000 housing units. Elements of public utilities such as sewerage and water were least problematic in that they were part of a regional infrastructure developed in agreement between local authorities and funded by central government. Individual housing units are levied subsequently for linking up to these services. The provision of a new train station, ambitious projects such as new public urban squares and the costly infrastructure of a large undeveloped public park to international contemporary standards is more challenging and would require such projects to be costed and a levy on units applied across all phases of the overall project in order to underpin the funding of this infrastructure.

The value of the implementation framework, still to be finalised, will be appreciated particularly at planning application stage when many of the problems associated with the co-ordination and integration of the phasing of individual developers will hopefully have been resolved. Critical elements of mixed use and key projects in the public domain, necessary to engender confidence and constitute a statement of intent on urban quality from day one, can be front loaded as part of an agreed consensus on phasing