

A PERFECT STORM: PLANNING FOR A MORE SUSTAINABLE STEADY STATE ON THE ISLAND OF IRELAND.



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This paper explores the changing futures for land-use planning on the island of Ireland. There are two different sets of regulatory and forward planning arrangements which raise questions for the management of space on the island and the cross-border axis. There is a move to establish new integrated thinking for planning on the island yet this is taking place at a time of unprecedented uncertainty – around the intellectual basis for planning and new economic and environmental limits. This changes the context for planning for both territories on the island and the future relations between them.

Introduction

The modern world has changed dramatically – in economic, social, political, ideological and environmental terms. Dysfunctional financial environments and unstable market and business conditions have been created following an unsustainable economic boom and collapse. The consequences pose significant challenges for governments, governance arrangements and policy implementation. Indeed, there are deeper psychological and behavioural dimensions to the causes and effects of this recent economic history across the island of Ireland. Deploying a complex set of metaphors to analyse the performance of the Republic of Ireland's (heretofore referred to as 'Ireland') economy, for example, Waters (2012: 128) asserts that "the enforced fatherlessness" of both the private and public realms led to chaos, regressions

and a narrowing of collective horizons to selfish group and individualistic interests, as the siblings set to squabbling about the spoils". The explicit turn to individualism with its attendant implications for government, governance, public policy and the notion of the public interest is not confined to the island of Ireland (Packer, 2013). Such a broad turn, however, suggests the complex and confused states of affairs that are now in place on the island.

This paper explores the challenges to this anticipated new integrated approach - the battle for ideas taking place over the future role of land-use planning in modern societies, considers the new parameters to planning, thinking and practice, and explores the uncertain planning arrangements across the island of Ireland.

Some contextual matters

There are a number of important contextual considerations to be taken into account in seeking to understand the challenges facing planning and governance across the island of Ireland as whole. The first matter relates to the wider economic conditions. The current environment was created by market failures associated (principally) with land and property development activities operating on a very grand scale and uncontrolled manner. In Ireland, for example, but evident elsewhere, as in Northern Ireland, an earlier inflationary spiral of property prices, speculative land trading, and intense rates of building activity in the commercial and retail property sectors took place (McDonald & Sheridan, 2008; O'Toole, 2009). This created a particular type of economic and business bubble with attendant social, economic and environmental spill-over effects (Callan *et al*, 2013). The implications of the property driven economic boom and bust are now fundamental to societal well-being - with unemployment and particularly job losses in the construction sectors, house price deflation and negative equity with significant social and personal

impacts being to the fore. Land and property development was central to the boom and bust and as a result has experienced marked effects. There is a mismatch between demand and supply across national economic spaces.

As a consequence, conventional assumptions about the *realpolitik* of market processes have been questioned and an imbalance between demand and supply in a range of sectors is evident at national and regional scales – as demonstrated by the oversupply of housing in Ireland – vividly described as ‘haunted landscapes’ and ‘ghost estates’ (Kitchin *et al*, 2010). Indeed, at the global scale, questions have been raised about the nature of an oversupply of labour, productive capacity and capital relative to the (deflated) demand (Alpert, 2013). These dysfunctional market conditions are spatially differentiated across economic space, creating distinct sets of challenges for national, regional and local planning and governance arrangements; with planning facing screeds of new vistas.

The second matter relates to the political environment which has been and remains dominated by neo-liberal thinking which has involved an anti-government ethos, pro-business priorities and has rested on a screed of austerity measures in both Ireland and Northern Ireland. This agenda is based on the perceived need to reduce government debt and spending, together with rebalancing policy initiatives to correct the perceived public-private sector imbalances in national, regional and local economies. It has also involved a (re-) turn to de-regulation measures to encourage private sector investment and development, such as the new interest in the possible designation of enterprise zones in Northern Ireland. Enterprise zones were a feature of an earlier phase of neo-liberal economic policy in the early 1980s in the UK and have been reprised to address the economic geography of recession (Squires & Hall, 2013). There is a considerable advocacy for their designation in Northern Ireland as part of wider debates over appropriate rates of corporation tax when compared

to Ireland. The measure involves fiscal relief and simplified land-use planning arrangements to encourage new investment and economic activity. Enterprise zones remain part of the neo-liberal policy portfolio largely on the basis of its rhetoric rather than the reality. *Plus ça change?*

The combination of these economic, ideological, political and practical policy circumstances and conditions has proved to be toxic. The effects of the boom created structural, scalar and spatial effects – leading to a divided economic geography – in both Ireland and in Northern Ireland (as part of the larger UK economy with its evident London centricity and north-south divide). Indeed, Dolphin (2009) argued that when compared to earlier economic cycles the nature of the current cumulative economic recession and austerity is of a different complexity. The political responses operating within this new spatial context may be interpreted as relatively conventional tinged with a neo-liberal bias, and can further serve to exacerbate the systemic divisions in the spatial economies involved. This raises questions for land-use planning and spatial planning and sets new parameters to their role and potential in the future – whether there is a recovery or not.

Moreover, the neo-liberal agenda has served to create an intellectual environment in which the role of the public sector is being questioned with an evident turn to market and business solutions to engineer economic stability and recovery. In this ideological environment the role of land-use planning has attracted considerable opprobrium. On the one hand, land-use planning had faced considerable challenges and difficulties in regulating land and property developments in the earlier boom conditions (Bartley, 2007). On the other hand, land-use planning is now inhibiting steps to economic recovery as a consequence of its delays, costs and uncertainties which are inhibiting private sector investment and development (Morton, 2012). In effect, as Lovering (2010) argued, these new conditions could seriously transform the future spirit and purpose of land-use planning. Will established land-use planning

arrangements – together with their associated regional policy arrangements - remain appropriate in the future?

A battle for ideas

The ideological context in which land-use planning now operates in the two parts of the island of Ireland has changed radically from when the two systems were first introduced. This is perhaps the greatest challenge to economic, social and environmental standards as the particular ideological influence is transforming the regulatory context in which societal decision making takes place. There are two planning systems operating across the island and both have undergone considerable change and maturation – the enthusiastic turn to spatial planning in Ireland is a case in point. The centralisation of land-use planning in Northern Ireland as a consequence of political circumstances in the 1970s offers a different perspective on how land-use planning has evolved over time.

Today, however, a new canvas is apparent - the current changing parameters to land-use planning (and spatial planning) are philosophical, economic, political, social and practical in character. In general terms, there has been a very dramatic shift from a broad articulation of social democratic values to an explicit neo-liberal economic orthodoxy littered with market infused ideas, pro-business stances, limited government and restricted public expenditure. This represents a considerable transformation of the discipline of political economy (Milonakis & Fine, 2009). To illustrate the significance of this new context, the social democratic position tended to assert a case for state intervention such as regional policy, urban regeneration measures and land-use planning to correct market failures in local and regional economies. This included the land and property development sectors whereby any associated spill-over effects could be regulated, infrastructure provided in an efficient manner to support development schemes, and the interests of different groups could be better accommodated. On the basis of this reasoning and value set, land-use

planning was introduced to ensure land and property development served the public interest.

The traditional and conventional view has now being supplanted by claims that planning represents a 'government failure'. The maturation of this alternative, neo-liberal perspective has been in place since the 1980s yet is becoming increasingly evident and strident in both Ireland and Northern Ireland. The latter, as part of the devolved UK, is possibly more implicit than explicit when compared to events in England. The neo-liberal position asserts that the land-use planning process (its decision making, its setting of conditions, and enforcement arrangements) imposes a host of social, economic and environmental costs on the private land and property development sector. Now, based on an assertion of private property rights, and drawing on the ideas associated with new institutional economics and transaction cost economics, a range of alternative market-based approaches has been proposed (Webster, 2005). This intellectual reasoning promotes management approaches which rest on market engagement and incentives to secure a broader public interest. In contrast to the social democratic position, the neo-liberal agenda posits a generic critique of state intervention, advocates a business or market solution to issues, and this has been extended into nearly all aspects of life that have been traditionally governed by non-market arrangements (Sandel, 2012). The permeation of market values into all facets of our lives brings with it new constructions of our perceived conventional ways of doing things. In effect, there has been a shift from a conformative model based on regulatory certainty to a performative model with improved strategic flexibility (Steele, 2011). This suggests that planning was viewed as a state regulatory intervention to ensure that change – in land and property development – conformed with the agreed public interest as set out in strategic planning policy, development plans and political judgements. The shift is now towards evidence-based performance that is delivering private sector activity, investment and development. That shift changes the intellectual,

philosophical and operational context to land-use planning and spatial planning.

Current economic conditions are held to be a significant turning point for conventional understandings of the role of land-use planning, associated state-market-civil relations and the nature of the established state intervention instruments. The battle of ideas over the role of land-use planning in the current state of affairs may be illustrated by selected advocacy documents – drawn from think tanks and professional bodies representing different facets of land and property development. Think tanks, in particular, are highly influential in terms of questioning, informing, and leading government thinking and policy design (Cockett, 1995). Think tanks are active on both the left and right of the political spectrum, but at this time the free market or neo-liberal oriented bodies are increasingly assertive. Think tanks are not necessarily homogenous and often offer eclectic sets of ideas and proposals. In the context of land-use planning, for example, they would not recommend the complete abolition of land and property development regulations but tend to assert that planning represents a 'government failure' and should be replaced by more restricted regulations and alternative market based approaches.

There are a host of positions which take a critical line on government intervention generally and land-use planning in particular and which assert the case for more market-based or business-infused approaches. This position is epitomised by Morton (2011: 7), for example, who argued that a "stunted planning system, a product of a 1940s utopian vision of bureaucratic control has failed us for too long". Such critical views have been expressed for some time – reflecting a deeper rooted critique of public sector and planning. In a similar vein, Mackay (2004) argued that land-use planning acts as a brake on development, and as a consequence works against the wider public interest. Indeed, there has been a relative deluge of such arguments around themes concerning the perceived negative impacts on housing provision, design standards (Evans &

Hartwich, 2005 a, b) and the more responsive and localised land-use planning arrangements elsewhere such as those in Germany and Switzerland.

The broad neo-liberal position not only sets out critiques of land-use planning but promotes affirmative market actions as well. Morton (2011), for example, calls for a full overhaul of the planning system whereby a 'Presumption against Interference' by government should be at the heart of land-use planning. He advocates that business should be free to build as it sees fit – unless 50% of those in the immediate vicinity oppose such development, or in the case of high quality amenity land (e.g. National Parks or Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty). Further, Morton (2011) argues that there should be an emphasis on quality with local people being the arbiters, thereby enabling a democratic check on development plans. Importantly, this line of reasoning asserts the case for financial incentives as the basis for land-use planning regulations as with the reform of green belts to allow some development in the designated areas in return for upgrading the remainder of the belts. He suggests that compensation should go to those in the immediate vicinity of new development. There is also sympathy for alternative governance arrangements – as with the promotion of designating Business Improvement Districts as offering a different business-led approach to providing the required incentives, funding, and governance in town centres (Lloyd & Peel, 2008). These ideas are influenced by the broad neo-liberal thinking of minimal government and regulation and an approach based on private sector and business interests to secure the required performance.

New parameters

There is another contextual change to land-use planning in the future. Whilst neo-liberal market thinking has permeated government thinking to such an extent that it has reinvented land-use planning as a service specific to property owners and interests (Feindt, 2010), there is a further new contextual re-alignment for conventional planning practices. This turns on the question as to whether

economic recovery will lead to the sort of economic growth that can support a land-use planning system. The International Labour Organisation (2014), for example, has argued that the economic recovery may be jobless – with increasing unemployment and inequality across the world even as economies regain some stability. Inevitably, there would be spatial differentiations to this position with different geographies of opportunity emerging. Indeed, it is clear at the present time that economic recovery is taking place in closely demarcated places. In the UK, evidence suggests London dominates economic growth, with the larger English cities demonstrating recovery in employment but with the persistent and widening inequalities between different parts of the country (Centre for Cities, 2014). This has given rise to a marked regional economic geography which creates uneven conditions in which to facilitate recovery and growth. As land-use planning is a national, or in the case of Northern Ireland a devolved regional, state attention may have to be paid to enabling more flexible forward planning and regulatory arrangements to address the variegated economic, social and physical conditions.

Further, it is also the case that a more dramatic scenario may prevail. It could be the case that modern advanced industrial economies – such as Ireland and Northern Ireland - may have to plan and manage for reductions in economic performance and growth – essentially to achieve a more sustainable steady state (Alier, 2009). This may be engendered by changed global trading relations and bargaining positions, under-performing capital, finance and banking sectors as a hangover from the recession, inefficient labour markets as a result of skill leakages, natural resource limitations, energy restrictions and disruptions, and environmental events such as flooding which require a diversion of infrastructure investment to mitigate and adapt to changed circumstances. In this context, the absence of economic growth to require regulation and management and the lack of available resource to fund a planning system, together with new parameters to societal action, would transform the

context for planning (Janssen-Jansen *et al*, 2012). A completely new mind set would be required to plan in a confining and confined world. Indeed, there are arguments that there is a case for a deliberate down scaling in economic activity and with priorities being recast around new energy parameters and ecological sustainability (Alexander, 2012). This would radically realign the very essence of planning and demand new skills and practices to account for such changed conditions.

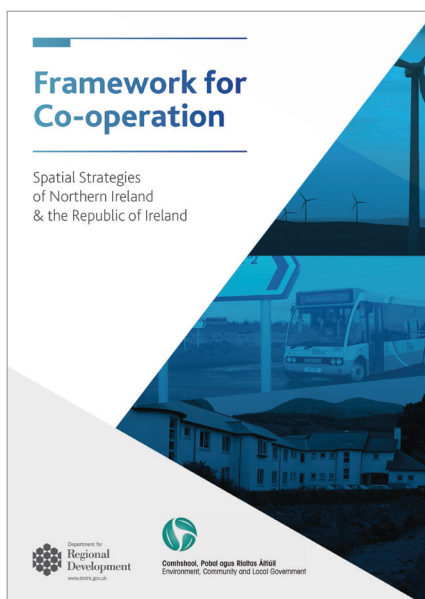
What happens to land-use planning if economic growth remains absent? What is the capacity of the land-use planning system to continue the appropriate form of state intervention to secure whatever is presented as the public interest? What are the chances of these scenarios setting new limits to economic, social and environmental conditions within which land-use planning might operate? Janssen-Jansen *et al* (2012) argue that the problems for the land-use planning system do not rest solely with the economic recession and resulting dysfunctional land and property development markets, but rather with the systemic weaknesses in the planning and development system itself. This suggests that land-use planning regulations were designed to manage land and property development under specific conditions. There have been some heroic assumptions about the operation of land and property development processes which are not borne out in reality – such as the viability of information and negotiation between interests. In addition, whilst these have not occurred in practice to date, there may be a more marked deterioration in the conditions in which planning operates. More dysfunctional operating circumstances may prevail in which land-use planning would have to concentrate more on increasing sustainability, the stewardship of available resources and maintaining the quality of existing environments. It would also have to become more ‘political’ in that the new world would be characterised by conflict and trade-offs requiring deep skills to ensure that a public interest aspect remains.

Uneven planning on the island of Ireland

In June 2013, the *Framework for Co-operation: Spatial Strategies of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland* was jointly published by the Department for Regional Development and Department of Environment, Community and Local Government (also referenced by P. White, this issue, p.8). The *Framework for Co-operation* is a non-statutory approach to providing advice and guidance at relevant spatial or geographical scales between the two states. It takes the form of a dialogue and guidance about the planning arrangements and priorities in both states, and addresses the island spatial territory and the cross-border question. Such joint working already takes place, for example, in the context of energy infrastructure, but the spatial planning document seeks greater awareness of two different interpretations of planning. In effect, the *Framework for Co-operation* is an optimistic statement of intent in promoting a greater strategic approach to planning and development across the island economy – yet it is taking place in a very uncertain context and a highly febrile time for planning in general and planning across Ireland's spatial economy in particular.

Indeed, over and above the ideological undermining of land-use planning and the possibility of planning in very different conditions, the island of Ireland is undergoing complex institutional change in its planning arrangements. There is considerable uncertainty in both states. Both Ireland and Northern Ireland are putting in place reforms to their planning and governance arrangements. In Ireland, a reform of regional and local government was launched in 2012 (Department of Environment, Community and Local Government, 2012). This is part of a broader agenda for constitutional change to secure both technocratic and democratic improvements in local governance and planning. It involves regional administrative changes, a reduction in the number of local authorities and elected officials, recasting of funding, and new responsibilities for economic development, and sustaining and creating jobs. The intended agenda may yet represent a new understanding of land-use planning – in terms of economic ambitions.

In Northern Ireland, a similar reshaping of local government is in train – the Review of Public Administration (RPA). This will involve a reorganisation of local government in Northern Ireland in terms of numbers of authorities (a reduction from 26 to 11), new boundaries, and new responsibilities. Powers that will be devolved will include land-use planning, roads, urban regeneration, community development, housing, local economic development and local tourism. It will also involve the new responsibility for community planning. The process of reorganisation is anticipated to be completed by April 2015. In Northern Ireland, the reform of local government is bound up with the modernisation of land-use planning. The *Planning Act (Northern Ireland)* secured Royal Assent in 2011 but it has to wait for the Review of Public Administration to take effect to become fully operational. There is some uncertainty associated with this inter-regnum, however, as witnessed by the ill-fated attempt to promote an interim measure – the *Planning Bill 2013* – which failed in the Northern Ireland Assembly. The primary objective of the Planning Bill



was to speed up the implementation of a number of reforms contained within the 2011 legislation. These included furthering sustainable development and enhancing the environment; enabling faster processing of planning applications and securing a faster and fairer planning appeals system; ensuring enhanced community involvement; and providing for simpler and tougher enforcement.

At the consideration stage in the Northern Ireland Assembly there were 34 Amendments tabled addressing a wide range of issues, such as sustainable development. The most controversial Amendment, however, was tabled by the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to allow the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, to create "Economically Significant Planning Zones". This would have the effect to grant in relation to the zone, or any part of it specified in the scheme, planning permission for development specified in the scheme or for development of any class so specified. This Amendment essentially challenges the philosophy of the planning reforms and directly confuses consideration of environmental matters. Following legal advice, the Minister for the Environment did not proceed with presenting the Planning Bill to Stormont in October 2013. This does not appear to offer the necessary stability for land-use planning and spatial planning in Northern Ireland to be executed against a broader canvas of change.

The uneven planning and governance arrangements in Ireland and Northern Ireland create considerable uncertainty for the current innovation around strategic cooperation between them. The combination of ambition on the one hand, and the realities of capacities on the other, both taking place in a broader context of ideological and political turmoil with longer term unknowns to be taken into account, must question the potential of the position at this stage.

Conclusions

There is the very real prospect that Ireland and Northern Ireland will be operating in changed

circumstances. The combination of current economic conditions, together with prevailing neo-liberal thinking, the emphasis on market infused ideas and the politics of austerity is changing the context for conventional land-use planning generally, and specifically in Ireland and Northern Ireland. There is a critical intellectual environment which is testing the appropriateness of established land-use planning arrangements. Certainly, whilst not advocating the abolition of planning regulations there is considerable pressure to recast planning arrangements. The on-going reforms to planning and governance in both Ireland and Northern Ireland also create uncertainties – and it is evident that the changes being effected represent variations on the existing architectures of planning – following practices noted elsewhere (Peel & Lloyd, 2007). The future is also highly uncertain with concerns over the appropriateness of conventional planning to deal with a lack of economic growth – and this will be rendered more complex by the inevitable uneven economic geography.

It is important to acknowledge the countervailing thinking. There remains an alternative advocacy with questions being raised about the case for alternative debates and challenges to the neo-liberal logic (Dolphin & Nash, 2011). This comprises a broad array of arguments which generally suggest the retention and strengthening of stronger government, intervention and public expenditure including a land-use planning system. In macro-economic terms, for example, Reed & Lawson (2011) argued for more active government with respect to social investment, reform of constitutional and public services, a low carbon economy and planning for a long-term economic future. Subsequently, Reed (2012) has advocated a strategy of green infrastructure investment, with measures based on the promotion of equality and attention to the needs of regional and local labour markets. The emphasis on alternative or new forms of intervention, such as a proposed Green New Deal to reconcile environment and infrastructure provision (New Economics Foundation, 2009), reflects a broad acknowledgement of the

complex economic, social and environmental trade-offs and priorities that require reconciliation in a modern state. Indeed, attention is paid to the case for stronger intervention by local government (ippr north, 2013) to facilitate appropriate investment in infrastructure, housing and small business development reflecting the specific conditions in individual localities. This broad advocacy is not necessarily arguing for a return to the conventional approaches in place prior to the boom and bust conditions but seeks more appropriate approaches to the specificities of places and spaces.

In this broad line of reasoning, there is support for a positive land-use planning system. The Royal Town Planning Institute (2010), for instance, argued that spatial planning can be a means of promoting economic recovery and wealth creation whilst addressing climate change and enabling better place shaping for communities. Similarly, the Town and Country Planning Association (2010) promoted a case for positive regional strategic planning. Support for land-use planning can be implicit – as shown in the report on securing economic growth by Lord Heseltine (2012). Whilst its focus was on England it challenged the current nostrums of the neo-liberal policies which resolutely rest on London-centricity and trickle-down economics. In contrast, Heseltine advocated public–private relations in enabling regeneration and local economic development, and acknowledged the importance of positive land-use planning. Again, this may be taken that there are arguments recognising that land-use planning will be required but will have to 'change its spots' in the new world of the post-recession. It could be that different forms of land-use planning emerge and may even vary across specific territories to match prevailing needs, conditions and opportunities.

The new co-operative strategic planning framework for Ireland and Northern Ireland will have to proactively address key parameters which raise pan-island concerns such as mitigation and adaptation strategies over flooding and coastal erosion, the onshore developments around offshore energy, the related matters of employability, emigration and

immigration, resource limits and skill leakages and ensuring infrastructure networks which serve the island of Ireland space as a whole. The strategic agenda will need to address not solely the needs of the Irish border area but a catalogue of other planning and governance challenges – associated with, for example, the needs of the other marginal rural areas across the island; urban agendas of social inclusion and regeneration; and the shadow effects of the growth of the larger cities on their commuting and rural hinterlands. Strategic planning will have to be very different in the future.

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