



Reimagining our Cities: Driving an Agenda of Transformation

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INTERNATIONAL CENTRE FOR
LOCAL AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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These briefing papers are published as a way to highlight current cross-border, and local and regional development issues, perspectives and insights. All opinions expressed are those of the authors.

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INTRODUCTION

Smart cities, ones that attract investment and foster strong, quality urban environments where good infrastructure enables a good quality of life and opportunities for employment, are places that make smart decisions. The smart decisions about the city need to be long-term, visionary decisions based on clear strategy. The sampling of the culture and environment in both Boston and Cambridge in November in the lead up to the 2018 Golden Bridges Awards (16 November 2018) made one thing clear: there is a shared ambition that the wider Boston metropolitan area should continue to be one of the most dynamic city regions in the US.

The commitment of the participants - politicians, civic, community, business and educational - to the 'place' is reflected in the remarkable pace of growth that is evident in and around the city. While Boston is not without its problems, some of them shared with most other metropolitan areas (the homelessness is very evident in the city centre for example), the level of progressive leadership gives a degree of confidence that the city is taking a holistic approach to its future.

The regeneration of South Boston Docklands – or the Seaport District – bears witness to vast tracts of land gaining new purposes, including new public amenities. The regeneration of this District, expected to take up to another decade to complete, has also resulted in the city having to face the challenge of rising sea levels and the resulting need for resiliency in building design. This, and other facets of Boston's regeneration, will be explored in future conversations planned with the Boston Planning and Development Agency.

Crossing the Charles River, the City of Cambridge has one of the most progressive and agile 'Complete Streets' programmes in the US that seeks to develop the city streets as living spaces reflecting the needs of residents. The quiet assurance of Susanne Rasmussen, Director of Environmental and Transportation Planning in the City's Community Development Department (CDD), hides the obvious commitment to delivering living streets for Cambridge.

COMPLETE STREETS PROGRAMME

'Complete Streets', as applied in Massachusetts, is a funded programme providing assistance to local authorities to implement safer travel programmes for all users. Importantly, the implementation of this approach is underpinned by sustainable growth strategies, climate protection plans, physical improvements to the urban fabric, transportation plans, and enterprise opportunities. The extensive buy-in to the programme in the wider Boston area where the approach "puts pedestrians, bicyclists and transit users on equal footing with motor-vehicle drivers" is increasingly evident and, crucially, is seen as a central means of improving quality of life by "creating streets that aregreat public spaces".

Examination of the space needs of buses, bikes, pedestrians and cars, and how they share the streets, has led to a long-term programme of adapting the existing streets to multi-modal traffic and to providing quality public spaces. Safer streets with appropriate investment is evident through a bike share scheme that eases movement around the neighbourhoods. Separated bike lanes have been co-designed by planners, engineers and operations crews to improve safety and increase sustainable access to Cambridge.

Photos: Taken during a walking tour of Cambridge in November 2018 with representatives from the CDD



(Source: Quinn, 2018)

In creating narrower travel lanes, separated bike lanes have also led to lower motor vehicle speeds and shorter crossing distances for people walking. The programmes undertaken by the CDD also provides practical real-world solutions, and establishes design standards for the guidance of new private sector development that is springing up across the city. Working within a defined budget the municipality is providing cost effective but significant incremental changes for the benefit of community.

Fundamentally this programme is underpinned by a clearly defined, long term strategic approach that has local credibility; credibility built on local consultation and a capacity to respond to new opportunities.

While the governance and funding models used in Boston and Cambridge are quite different from those in the North-West, the strategic approach to planning and delivery of urban spaces and places provides relevant experience that can be considered across the island of Ireland. It is a smart city approach to achieving a quality living environment for our towns and villages.

LEARNING FOR THE ISLAND OF IRELAND

The opportunity to stand back and see how places function, and how people move about day-to-day, belies a single clear but understated commitment to improving quality of life through good design: not just in relation to traffic management, but also how this approach can be one of the main underpinnings of the success of a town socially and economically. The smart decision making in a Complete Streets programme is based on taking a multimodal approach to traffic and mixing it with climate adaptation responses to design along with maximum use of available technology.

This real smart city approach, and an unambiguous commitment to its implementation by government, is producing results in other city regions in the US and Europe. It is getting some traction in Ireland but perhaps not enough as yet to get broader acceptance that it is the right thing to do. The experiences voiced by colleagues in the greater Boston area accepts that taking this direction in developing better places is a huge commitment and needs resources, but – and this is a common theme arising from conversations – a key aspect of achieving successful implementation is robust and comprehensive consultation with all sectors of the local community, and providing strong channels for people to look at the details and to make their contribution.