

Geographers and planning: some reflections*

Arnold Horner **

In this ‘decade of anniversaries’, where 2014 was dominated by the drama of commemorating the centenary of the outbreak of a calamitous war, geographers and others may all too easily under-value other significant dates. For example, 2014 also marked the 50th anniversary of the coming into force of the 1963 Local Government (Planning and Development) Act, and was also the centenary of the Dublin Civic Exhibition whose associated planning competition resulted in the visionary *Dublin of the Future*. Spearheaded by the English architect-planner, Patrick Abercrombie, the latter was an ambitious unofficial agenda laying out principles and possibilities for the grandiose renewal of an ailing city (Bannon 1985). Notwithstanding its utopian dimensions, this seminal work (finally published in 1922) and the companion *Dublin Civic Survey* (1925) were profoundly significant influences, being repeatedly re-visited, as the suburban girdle developed and as the central city morphed during the middle decades of the last century (McManus 2002). Deservedly, if belatedly and perhaps all too briefly, the exhibition, the competition and Abercrombie were recognised in ‘City Assembled: A Moving Panorama inspired by the Dublin Civic Exhibition’, which was on display at the City Assembly Rooms in Dublin during early 2015 (McDonald 2015). More permanently, the University College Dublin Library, in association with the Irish Architectural Archive, has added to its digital library a unique collection of the three surviving competition entries, among them being the winning Abercrombie submission (UCD 2014).

Also future-oriented but much more utilitarian was the 1963 Planning Act that is the stimulus for the following rather diverse reflections. Heralded at the time as a landmark, this legislation has subsequently been subject to amendments, modifications and consolidations, most notably in a 2000 Act and in various official ‘guidelines’ such as those on ‘sustainable rural housing’ issued in 2005, and will be further revised in a proposed national planning framework scheduled for late 2015. Nonetheless, it was the 1963 Act that was formative, creating the local planning framework within which, for better or for worse, the architecture, infrastructure and general physical appearance of modern Ireland has been moulded. Enshrining some fairly straightforward objectives, the Act required local authorities to accept the discipline of making a development plan that would set out their medium-term infrastructure priorities within the context of fairly simple land use mappings and zonings. The development plan would then serve also as a control framework

* Drafts of this commentary were written in September 2013 and September 2014. The present version includes updates to April 2015 to take account of some recent publications.

** Email: arnold.horner@ucd.ie

providing authorities with the guidelines for regulating both public and private development according to rational, clearly-expressed principles. From the outset, this major initiative created both expectation and apprehension. Its principles were widely welcomed, and its commitment appeared reinforced when, also in 1964, the government, with United Nations support, established An Foras Forbartha: the National Institute for Physical Planning and Construction Research as a state-supported institute to help promote good physical planning.

These developments came at a time when many local authorities still lacked full-time planning officers and when planning offices were still so rudimentary that (not for the last time either) outside consultants had to be commissioned to formulate some of the now-mandatory five-year development plans. Challenging as it was, the new framework appeared to offer seriously positive possibilities for rational environmental management. It would have been hard to foresee that within 25 years (as Bannon (2004), Bartley (2007) and others, including, most recently, O'Leary (2014) have portrayed), An Foras Forbartha would have been disbanded by government sleight of hand and that – as well as being restructured by new bodies such as the Environmental Protection Agency and by new methodologies such as environmental impact assessment – the planning system would be increasingly pressurised by the intense lobbyings of the diverse clientelist interest groups, legitimate and otherwise, that have flourished across a rapidly-developing but loosely-regulated modern Ireland.

From its inception too, the 1963 Act has been highly significant for geography and geographers in Ireland. It was accepted that geography (both as a subject and as a physical condition) was a key component of environmental management, and that a geography training could be a valuable input to the development of the emergent planning profession. From the late 1960s, generations of geographers across Ireland have been attracted to planning as an opportunity for the practical application of some of those key ideas and skills in fieldwork and analysis that were, in the early decades at least, critical to their geography training. Other disciplines have also been important for planning, notably engineering, architecture and economics, but those 'synthesis skills' that their discipline once boasted have made geographers particularly valuable and ensured that a steady flow of graduates sought a career in planning. Even for those not professionally attracted, geographical skills could loom large, as a planning dimension (or lack of it in some instances) extends across so many environmental issues.

For these reasons, it behoves academic geographers to continue to relate to and engage with Irish planning, and to maintain a critical appraisal of its operation. Because so much of the system is immersed in immediate issues, and so much of it may be viewed through the lenses of particular interest groups, there is a repeated need for more dispassionate appraisal. Yet it is unfortunately not clear if the limited resources available in professional institutes or academic departments have either the focus, the resources or indeed the motivation to make seriously critical evaluations of some aspects of the planning system. Arguably the links between officialdom and the evaluators have on occasion become unhealthily close. Some

of those who in theory might be best qualified to offer clear critiques have almost certainly had their independence challenged by being the beneficiaries of official grants or by otherwise operating within the system as consultants. Public agencies have on occasion also imposed needlessly restrictive controls on the publication and dissemination of research results.

A trenchant article in a 2013 issue of *Village* magazine (Lumley 2013) has characterised the 1963 Act as leaving ‘a legacy of sprawl and dross’, claiming that ‘its main indulgence is that the term planning and corruption are now interchangeable’. Such an assessment surely needs to be counterbalanced by a recognition that in some of its objectives the Act and its successors have been reasonably effective. For example, development control regulations have usually ensured that estates and other building developments have at least met basic specified standards. Regulation has arguably produced a much more attractive, considered and balanced urban design, particularly in some larger city environments, than is seen in the creative chaos of some parts of North America. It is important also to appreciate just how much Ireland has transformed over the last fifty years. Not only has the population grown by over 50%, standards of living have improved greatly for many, and expectations in such matters as housing are now very different. Just over fifty years ago, only a bare majority of the population had a flush toilet or access to a public mains water supply, a sixth of all private dwellings still had no electricity supply. A tantalising ‘what if?’ question is to speculate on how Ireland might now look had there been no planning legislation during this period of far-reaching change.

Yet the planning system is also surely one of those institutions that deserves the most forthright, critical appraisal. Particularly over the last 15 to 20 years, the system appears to have struggled in the face of intensifying sectoral priorities and of a prevailing neoliberal sentiment (extending well beyond Ireland and planning) that supports less regulation. In his *Village* article, Lumley points out that a quarter of a million ‘suburban-style houses’ have been built outside towns and villages during the last fifty years. The desecration and trivialisation of parts of the countryside, and the privatisation of roadside and scenic views, are among the less edifying consequences of a light-touch planning system with limited backbone. The lack of any seriously-accepted, logically-articulated and spatially-stratified strategic planning framework is another crucial failure. When a national spatial strategy was finally formulated in 2002 (with some key input from geographers) it was immediately left to wither, being widely ignored in much key decision-making.

More than a decade later, the absence of both a coherent spatial strategy and any sort of serious commitment to landscape/countryside policy continues to be evident in many aspects of what passes for a strategic planning framework in Ireland. The tunnel vision of policies that are overwhelmingly sector-driven and sector-bound is particularly apparent in relation to public health services and energy supplies. As more than one government minister has found to his cost, apparently logical state-wide (so-called ‘national’) policies can produce a furious

local sting and ultimately a confused official response. The public health service, and such energy initiatives as a countrywide pylon system, wind-farms and the landing of offshore oil (not to mention the issues now looming with fracking) have proved to have controversial spatial/landscape dimensions. In their application, even the populist catch-cries of ‘more jobs’ and ‘more houses’ soon translate – as the children’s hospital controversy also demonstrates – to ‘location, location, location’, and to locational consequences.

However effective it may be for some aspects of urban design and for the more routine issues at a local scale, the planning system appears to struggle with the spatial implications of broader state policy. Particular deficiencies appear to lie in forecasting methods, in the formulation and enforcement of guidelines (for example, criteria for valuing landscape), and in a joined-up understanding of how the environment operates as an interlocking *system*. Even with the passing of time, it is hard to comprehend how the authorities in a state with a population less than five million could have sanctioned an annual output of up to 80,000 housing units during the mid-2000s or how so much unnecessary retail space could have been provided at inappropriate locations. One consequence of the high number of ‘one-off’ dwelling units being built, reaching 30% of the total in some years, is that there are now over 400,000 septic tank units in situ across Ireland – a major factor in the contamination of groundwater that is in turn compromising a growing number of public water supplies.

Recently-quoted statistics for County Kerry (population 145,000 in 2011) provide some indication of the local impact of Ireland’s housing excesses (*Irish Times*, 3 September 2014). Of the 72,000 total housing units in the county, over half (38,000) are classified as being in the countryside, 8,200 are identified as holiday homes and some 12,000 are empty and considered habitable. A massive 17,600 housing units were built in just five years between 2002 and 2007, of which 7,600 were one-offs in the countryside. Space was thereby provided for a potential population of 46,000, yet the county population only actually increased by 6,000. Small wonder that, on his return to the county after fourteen years, the senior Kerry county planner, Paul Stack, commented (*Kerryman*, 20 April 2011)

I couldn’t believe what I came back to, planning went out of control.
It’s like the Celtic Tiger, we knew we were wrong and we kept going.
We are destroying our county with one-off houses and people are
now suffering from the sins of others.

An estimated two million gallons (nine million litres) of effluent a day now flows into groundwater in Kerry.

Notwithstanding some highly innovative work (e.g. Kitchin *et al.* 2010, 2012), it remains puzzling that so little attention has been given in Ireland to the consequences of urban sprawl and to the devastating impact of so much one-off housing. A series of feature articles aptly named ‘future proof’ in the *Irish Independent* (2015) has recently underscored a diversity of planning-related

issues that may deserve further analysis; for example, the ‘doughnut’ development of Limerick and other cities, the development of appropriate transport city-region infrastructure, and strategies to deal with a perceived crisis across rural Ireland. Scope exists for much more analysis of inter-county variations in the planning experience. At a time of very striking changes to local services, when so many small towns are challenged by the cumulative effects of banks re-trenching, pubs closing and out of town retail centres (to name but a few of the more prominent adjustments), it is surprising that there seems quite limited interest in such topics as analysing and modelling ‘central place’ aspects of the changing settlement system, or in putting hard facts on the scale of land use changes and on the extent to which residential densities may have altered in recent decades.

Those concerned for the countryside are unlikely to find it encouraging that one of the latest and more wide-ranging attempts to diagnose the problems of rural Ireland (oddly defined as being everywhere outside the five largest cities) has so little to say about the value and potential of landscape. Notwithstanding an espousal of ‘integrated’ and ‘multi-sectoral’ approaches, the densely-written reports of the ‘Commission for the Economic Development of Rural Areas’ (CEDRA, undated but 2013-14) appear to be landscape-, and also heritage-, blind. Yet the cumulative impact of tens of thousands of ‘one-off’ housing permissions, and the scars from sector-inspired tax incentive ‘schemes’ such as those for some holiday centres and other designated districts during the late 1990s/early 2000s (McManus 2011), are a potent reminder of how, over the decades, gratuitous planning incoherence, producing casual landscape and broader environmental degradation, can be generated.

In these challenging circumstances, the robustness of the planning system is critical for the future of Ireland’s built and natural environments. When the constitution of the principal arbiter, An Bord Pleanála, remains under great pressure and could yet prove to have a quite fragile integrity, the witness and honesty of the academic community may be of particular importance in providing analyses of Ireland that cut through the make-believe of various lobbyists and other spin doctors. The maintenance of a strong intellectual base for the education and training of future planning practitioners, involving a continuing development of responsive, effective and creative planning education programmes, is of crucial long-term significance, and would seem to be most readily facilitated when the programme accreditation process clearly avoids being parochial and institutionally self-regarding.

As matters stand, the country seems to be awash with documentation on many aspects of the planning system, broadly interpreted. There is no shortage of studies, reports, recommendations and analyses, some critical, some supportive, of the present planning set-up. Yet it is arguable that only the multidisciplinary *Atlas of the Irish Rural Landscape* (Aalen *et al.* 1997, 2011), which has sold over 20,000 copies and has gone to a second edition, has greatly engaged the public at large. The Heritage Council has for more than a decade produced a steady stream of publications seeking to raise landscape awareness (e.g. Starrett 2007,

Heritage Council 2010), and in recent years it has particularly engaged with archaeologists to develop techniques of landscape categorisation (Lambrick *et al.* 2013). Supplementing the long-established and sometimes solitary efforts of An Taisce, dedicated landscape alliances and institutes have also been formed.

Such initiatives have undoubtedly been crucial both as support and as a rationale for the ‘landscape character assessments’ incorporated in some current local authority plans; for example, the Kildare County Development Plan for 2011-2017 features maps of landscape character and landscape sensitivity accompanied by extended lists of scenic views and a series of landscape policies and objectives. Yet, as the pylon issue highlights, county plans need reinforcement by being set within a wider framework. The recently-formulated ten-year draft national landscape strategy (DHAG 2014) builds on earlier official involvements such as the wafer-thin, now fifteen-year old, draft guidelines for landscape and landscape assessment (DELG 2000) and tries to take landscape to a countrywide arena. Yet it also displays the ‘problems of a strategy intended to serve both development of urban housing estates and protection of the Wild Atlantic Way’, what Viney (2015) calls ‘a daunting range of interests’. In struggling to deal with what the draft national strategy rather clumsily terms ‘a dynamic, multi-functional, multi-dimensional space housing many forms of life’, the ‘impact factor’ of these various documents seems to be much reduced across the wider public and with key policy-makers.

Some independent-minded planners have been effective in using mainstream media to offer their arguments on the landscape and other effects of particular policies (e.g. O Gráda 2005, 2014a, 2014b, 2015). Critical perspectives, providing a wide range of examples of how some of the less palatable aspects of recent development may be investigated, have also been offered on such exemplary, digitally-informed web-sites as <http://irelandafternama.wordpress.com/> and <http://www.airo.ie/>, in both of which geographers have been prominent, and in the apparently anonymous <http://oneoffireland.wordpress.com/>. Yet such highly-worthy initiatives also face the problem of how to connect with mainstream public opinion and, especially, the policy-making elite. As with many other analyses in ‘silo-driven’ modern Ireland, the main compliment they may be paid is to be ignored, and it remains to be seen if the new draft landscape strategy can be made any more effective in its place-specific interpretation than the much-ignored spatial strategy of 2002. The effective communication and dissemination of information and policy proposals continues to challenge the analysts.

The current research agenda, notwithstanding its volume, creativity and diversity, arguably still touches on only a selection of the many issues that might be expected to attract the attention of geographers and academic planners. In part, this situation is because the resources available are quite limited; in part, this may reflect the intellectual tunnels within which many academics work. In his stimulating monograph on ‘*what is Geography?*’ Bonnett (2008, p.34) observes that many university geographers have developed a deep suspicion of synthesis, and that having ‘a narrow, tightly defined field of interest and knowledge [has

become] synonymous with having something serious to say'. Remarking on how universities obsess about 'fragmented, specialist rationalities', Bonnett worries about the dangers of creating the conditions for the hollowing out of what he calls 'the geographical imagination'. In such a scenario, Geography may be ill-equipped to serve planning and the wider world, perhaps to serve even itself.

Commenting on how academic geography can become enmeshed in educational and state bureaucracies, Bonnett fears (p.99) for the future of the much-discussed geographical imagination in 'the society of long-work hours, constant surveillance and materialist, isolated lives ... a society in which freedom is dying'. There is the very real danger that Geography may become prisoner to the 'bureaucratic forms and mechanisms that hinder the ability to connect, challenge and synthesise' (p.113). Yet these developments appear to be intensifying at the very time when, in the 'real world' far beyond a sometimes-narcissistic academia, environmental crises deepen, the demand for synthesis strengthens, and societies desperately need the perspectives that an unfettered geographical imagination can offer. In this respect, the recently-launched, information-rich website www.dublindashboard.ie, with its versatile opportunities for both querying and public participation, appears to represent a genuinely significant breakthrough in the way geographers can make a technologically-sophisticated, accessible contribution to a wider world.

As a neoliberal-minded Ireland struggles to emerge from the latest crisis of capitalism, new issues are raised and some old ones are revived. A perception can sometimes seem to prevail that space is a free resource and that much of the country can be reduced to a series of development sites, if not for speculative buildings, well maybe for wind-farms, forestry or fracking. It may be too easily forgotten that space is inhabited, that landscape has a cultural and visual value, that there is a competition for land, and that development has significant, sometimes multiple, collateral effects that cannot be assumed away in the real world. Fifty years after those first moves to initiate the 1963 Act an opportunity continues to present itself for the achievements and disappointments to be given wide-ranging and critical appraisal. Such a review might expand further upon both the recent general review by O'Leary (2014) and the incisive and wide-ranging, but somewhat under-publicised, assessment of the performance of the planning system 2000-2011 by An Taisce (2012; also Village, 2012). In any such appraisal, there is also an opportunity to incorporate a continuing, broader, reinvigorated and technologically-innovative interrogation of the geographical dimensions to Ireland's recent development.

Arnold Horner, Glenageary, Co. Dublin

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