

## **Editorial — Gateways and ghost estates:**

Signifying Irish national identity after the Celtic Tiger era

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### **Abstract**

Ireland has seen unprecedented growth in the last decade, resulting in an array of new architecture. Architecture has been reviewed throughout history as one of the best methods of understanding the society that produced it. How have recent construction projects in Ireland reflected our society and sense of national identity? This paper attempts to clarify the role of urban iconography in communication, and to look at how contemporary Ireland might be interpreted through our most recent examples. Taking ghost estates and ‘landmark developments’ as key features of Ireland’s architectural legacy, I hope to examine how closely these built forms represent Irish society after the Celtic Tiger era.

If semiotics, beyond being the science of recognised systems of signs, is really to be a science studying all cultural phenomena as if they were systems of signs — on the hypothesis that all cultural phenomena are, in reality, systems of signs, or that culture can be understood as communication — then one of the fields in which it will undoubtedly find itself most challenged is that of architecture.

— Umberto Eco 2000, p. 182

The Celtic Tiger is the name given to the recent period of prosperity in Ireland. This unprecedented economic growth gave rise to enormous changes in Irish society. In a relatively short space of time, Ireland had become the poster child for economic success in the EU, following decades of high unemployment. Foreign investment, an expanding

services sector and — perhaps most significantly — a prosperous property market, all contributed to Ireland's improved fortunes.

“National identity, in this view, is not a natural attribute that precedes statehood, but a process” [Vale 1992, p45]. The last two decades have seen enormous change in Ireland, and this had a profound effect on the Irish sense of self; one which is still evolving. A wave of construction swept through the country — housing estates, large retail developments, and for the first time in Irish history, a push towards high-rise development. In 2006, Alan Mee, director of the Urban Design Masters programme at University College Dublin, described Ireland's development: “We're on a trajectory from farms to tower blocks with no stop in between.” [Cullinan 2006] In some cases, this resulted in architecture of a truly exemplary standard. There seemed to be a sense in the country that Irish cities could now compare favourably with any international counterpart: “These days it's not so outlandish to compare Dublin with other European cities...Recently, respected US business magazine *Forbes* rated Dublin the fifth-most-important city in Europe for doing business, ranking it alongside the likes of London, Amsterdam and Helsinki.” [O'Halloran 2007] However in 2008, the ‘bubble’ burst. In simple terms, the banking sector had over-extended itself — primarily in the form of loans to property developers. As is often the case in recessions, the construction industry was one of the first to feel the effects of tightening constraints. Due to the scale of construction works — both recently completed and in progress — at the time it was doubly clear that things had changed. Construction sites were abandoned leaving half completed properties and commercial units scattered around the country. ‘Landmark developments’ remained tenantless long after the fanfare of their arrival had ended. By mid 2009 unemployment in Ireland had risen to 12 per cent, over double of what it had been a year previously [Kirby 2010].

One of the first questions to be addressed in relation to architecture during the last twenty years or so is what, if anything, it has to say about the economic and social changes that allowed much of it to be produced. In order to begin answering this question I would draw attention to an essay by semiotician Umberto Eco. In ‘Function and Sign: The semiotics of architecture’ Eco discusses the ability of architecture to communicate: “The spoon promotes a certain way of eating, and signifies that way of eating, just as the cave promotes the act of taking shelter and signifies the existence of the possible functions; and both objects signify even when they are not being used...” [Eco 2000, p183] What I am trying to highlight in this context is that architecture carries meaning. Sometimes this meaning is implicit and it is always open to alternative interpretations, but the forms buildings take and the functions they are intended to serve do speak to us about why they were built.

Historically speaking the role of urban iconography in Ireland has been significant. Following the foundation of the Irish Free State in 1922, a ‘Celtic Revival’ of art and culture was used to re-appropriate Colonial urban artefacts. The Celtic Revival was notable ar-

chitecturally for its use of Celtic symbolism—such as intricate interlace patterns— and monumental depictions of figures from Irish history and folklore. “[V]arious aspects of the urban landscape did play a significant role in marking the transition from the colonial to the post-colonial” [Whelan 2001, p135]. This suggests a tradition in Ireland of using visual communication to convey societal change.

It may not be possible to characterise the architecture of the Celtic Tiger period as a building typology in and of itself. However, it has become commonplace to refer to construction projects of this period under the same umbrella. Renowned architecture critic JR Curtis was scathing in his appraisal of Ireland’s recent output in his essay for the AAI [Architectural Association of Ireland] Awards 2011 catalogue. In his view the ‘boom’ had a very tangible impact on the type of architecture being produced: “The wreckage and vulgarisation are there for all to see in everything from gated communities and mansions on open land that look as if they have been cribbed from soap operas on American TV to silly downtown ‘iconic’ landmarks that interrupt the urban scale. In the middle of this orgy of mediocrity and fast money, there are several fine interventions, often tucked away down mews lanes or else inserted in the spaces left over from convent gardens or lunatic asylums.” [McDonald 2011]. It seems that there is an overarching similarity in much of the building work of the last twenty years which is not just formal or functional. I believe that this unifying principle is in the ideology of those involved in producing these buildings. While describing the varieties of architectural code — the ways architecture can be classified — Eco makes the point that architecture is a business: “...but the architect cannot be engaged in the practice of architecture without inserting himself into a given economy and technology and trying to embrace the logic he finds there, even when he would like to contest it...” [Eco 2000, p196] This article is not intended as a defence or vilification of the construction industry, but I feel it is important to realise that architecture is always dependent on external factors. I would argue that the Celtic Tiger era produced external factors that were unique in Irish history. This has resulted in an environment where reframing national identity seemed both natural and logical.

## **Landmark development- gateways to the future**

Architecturally speaking the Celtic Tiger era was in many ways the story of Irish introspection and extroversion. With budget surpluses holding steady, policy makers looked inwards to address our planning difficulties. The density question and how we compared to international standards became a serious issue for the construction industry. On the other hand, Ireland had done well from foreign investment and the government was keen to garner more. This meant that Ireland had to be seen to be everything that a multinational corporation could want in a European headquarters. These two concepts — creating higher density and inventing cosmopolitan European cities — merged in the form of the

landmark development.

The difficulty with achieving higher densities in the city is that Irish people remain reluctant to view apartments as feasible long-term residences. There are a number of reasons for this. The first is Ireland's poor track record with apartment design. The perception among the public was that apartments were short term accommodation. The result was that apartment design was often of a very poor standard. In 2007, UCD [University College Dublin] Department of Planning and Environmental Policy conducted a survey of residents in apartments in Dublin City. Issues identified included: lack of open space, lack of storage, poor sound insulation and poor layout.

Indeed, criticism of high-rise residential apartments seems to have come from all sectors. Most tellingly perhaps were comments from Dick Roche, Minister for the Environment from September 2004 until June 2007: "We have seen failures in the past in the huge soulless housing estates on the edges of some of our towns and cities, or the Corbusier-style housing project that just didn't work in Ballymun, and which is now being replaced at enormous cost" [Cullinan 2007]. The comparison between the Ballymun tower blocks and Le Corbusier's Unités is unfortunate. It does somewhat explain our failure to embrace high-rise structures. Though looking to international models and examples of excellence, the interpretation in places like Ballymun was based on a misunderstanding of what these structures were. The point of the Unité was that it worked as a vertical town with amenities like shops and cafes and a gym, which were intended to socialise the community. The Ballymun flats were poor quality apartment blocks with inadequate facilities. Yet I feel this misconception that Ballymun has defined apartment living, had a long, damaging legacy.

This brings us to the second issue with Irish perceptions of apartment living. Journalist Gary Quinn eloquently summarised the relationship between apartments and class: "[A]partment living here is really all about class. We like to dress it up and talk about the loss of our gardens and our innate link to the land but really we just don't want to be seen as common" [Quinn 2007]. Again, I feel that this ties into the fact that the quality of apartments in Ireland was quite low. Unfortunately the apartment has come to embody the poor living standards that those on lower incomes are often forced to accept.

The UCD survey found that 77 per cent of residents felt they were either likely or very likely to move residence in the following five years [Dublin City Council 2007, p5]. This statistic backs up the commonly held belief that the apartment is merely a short-term accommodation: "Unlike our continental European cousins we have cultural attachments to being kings in our castles; how else can one explain the proliferation of one-off houses in the countryside, removed from basic services in towns and villages?" [McDonald 2007].

The Celtic Tiger became the age of the high-rise, and local authorities were determined to reframe the public's perception. Dublin City Council went some way to doing this with the publication of new guidelines for new apartment buildings in 2007. 'Achieving Liveable Sustainable New Apartment Homes for Dublin City' set out recommendations

for minimum floor areas and access to amenities. Skyscraper developments began to appear, being hailed as examples of international excellence and luxury. Apartment blocks were now spacious enough to accommodate growing families. It is clear in the way that many of these developments were marketed and in the emphasis on their modern international style aesthetic that the form was particularly important. The aesthetics helped to reinforce the perception that these 'landmark' buildings would cement Ireland's position internationally. These would create a new vision of Ireland as both cosmopolitan and global.

Indeed, internationalism was one of the most conspicuous effects of the Celtic Tiger. For many the 'Celtic Tiger' was primarily the product of globalisation reaching Ireland. Respected economist Fred Gottheil questioned the true nature of the 'boom years' in his 2003 article, 'Ireland: What's Celtic about the Celtic Tiger?' He suggests that the influence of foreign investment — especially American firms operating in Ireland - on the Irish economy was more significant than home grown innovation. "What was really Irish about Ireland's economic performance? That is to say, was it really a Celtic Tiger at work in Ireland or a US tiger caged in a Celtic zoo?" [Kirby 2010, pp.148-9]. Regardless of its true nature, the Celtic Tiger gave Ireland cause for optimism.

Architecturally speaking, the confidence that was prevailing in the Irish psyche translated into developments described as aspirational and iconic. The race to build ever taller towers among key developers gave physical expression to the national reaching for the sky. One of the most publicised of these was The Elysian in Cork City.

## **The Elysian — 'beacon' and 'eyesore'**

In many ways, the story of the Elysian is the story of the Celtic Tiger. Lacking the controversy of other landmark developments — notably those planned by figures like Sean Dunne and Bono in Dublin — the Elysian largely went unnoticed until it was crowned as Ireland's tallest residential building. This landmark role was celebrated by developers O'Flynn Construction: "The brief was simple, create a landmark building for Cork which shows the positive energy of its inhabitants, make it a showpiece for the way City Centre development should go" [www.theelysian.ie] It seems the building was expected to embody all the characteristics of the Celtic Tiger in urban Ireland. It was physically and symbolically like a beacon over the city.

Designed by Wilson Architects, an award winning Irish practice, the development's appearance was described as taking its influence from major European urban centres, especially London's Docklands. The ability to define the Elysian as being of an international standard was obviously very significant. One of the roles assigned to the Elysian project was to act as a gateway to Cork City for visitors arriving from the airport. The development's tower

was to act as signifier of the city and its people. Therefore a design synonymous with European urbanity would be legible shorthand for 'International city centre'.

In my opinion, the Elysian development is not the most attractive addition to the city. It certainly does not compare favourably to the neighbouring extension to City Hall by ABK Architects or the nearby Cork School of Music by Murray O'Laoire, to name two other Celtic Tiger era projects. Yet its presence in the city is unique; it hangs over the skyline towering above its surroundings, unquestionably a landmark.

The apartments in the complex were aimed at the upper end of the market. Prices ranged from €375,000 for a one-bed apartment to €2m for a three-level penthouse. However, its launch in September 2008 coincided with increasing stock market fluctuations. This marked the beginnings of the property crash — the development has yet to recover from this bad timing. Eighty-five per cent of the retail and residential units are currently unoccupied. By night, few lights can be seen within the Elysian making it not so much 'like a beacon' as a shadow over the city. By early 2009, only 25 of the 211 units had been sold. The development has become a very different kind of symbol in the intervening period: "With the advertising bunting long since taken down, locals, in reference to a nearby bar called the Idle Hour, began to rename the Elysian the "Idle Tower" [O'Connell 2011].

In this regard, the Elysian is particularly interesting, acting both as a landmark and as a ghost estate. The distinction between The Elysian and other vacant developments is that it promised a new vision of Irish urbanity. Ghost developments almost always describe rural or suburban ideals and generally have nothing to say about progress. In contrast, the Elysian was to be an example to follow but became instead the embodiment of the economic downturn. This transformation makes it a far more potent symbol, because it was intended to be a signifier of Cork and Ireland. Situated at the edge of the city's docklands, it was to be one of many tall landmark structures in a large-scale redevelopment of the area. However, in the wake of the recession these plans have halted, leaving the Elysian completely out of context with its surroundings. The issue with the promise of the new is how to reconcile the image of the future with what already exists. The Elysian is a significant intervention which some locals have not welcomed. Its presence has come to signify some of the negative aspects of post Celtic Tiger era Ireland. One resident described it as follows: "Fifty years ago, it was a little community here and everybody knew everybody and was there to help. You miss that now. It is a white elephant. It was terrible it was built, really. I have no problem with development — it's the scale I don't like" [O'Connell 2011].

Some people remain hopeful however. In the quality of the development and the image it paints of modern Ireland, the Elysian can possibly be seen as a monument to a future that may still be possible. Though there is certainly room for criticism, those who live with the landmark are optimistic. The owner of one of the commercial units believes things will change for The Elysian; "The way I had envisaged this place originally, which tied in

with the developer's vision for it, it would have been a dream...It is never going to go back to the way it was or get the money they would have gotten in 2008. I do see it turning, though, and people moving in here" [O'Connell 2011].

Symbols are always open to individual interpretation. Similarly, one's view of 'modern Ireland' can be coloured by one's attitude to development and community. Though progress should be embraced, it is important to recognise the value of local communities to urban richness. With Ireland becoming more multicultural and attempting to achieve international standards, we need to recognise that higher density does not equate to stronger communities. Development needs to happen in response to local communities. These are the people who live with landmark architecture and regardless of what our international image may be, it is their support which is most important.

## **Ghost estates- tradition and the Irish psyche**

The perception in Ireland has always been that families live in houses. Apartments are acceptable for the young and single, but children need front and back gardens. Despite attempts from architects, planners and developers to sell the apartment lifestyle to families, the traditional image largely remains the same. Frank McDonald, Environment Editor with *The Irish Times*, described how in 2007, the then Lord Mayor of Dublin Paddy Burke summed up the situation at a Dublin City Council conference on urban sprawl: "there was something in the Irish psyche that made it impossible to imagine raising a family in an apartment. What people want, the Lord Mayor told everyone, was a house their own with a front and back garden where kids could play safely. Even tenants in inner city Corpo [Corporation or social housing] flat complexes, many of whom raised children there, aspired to having a house in the suburbs, he said" [McDonald 2007].

The result — according to a Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government survey carried out in autumn 2010 — is 33,226 houses that are either complete or near complete and vacant [Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government 2011, p2]. The same survey found that 78,195 houses were complete and occupied. This demonstrates the scale of development in predominantly rural and suburban areas.

A number of factors converged to create these developments including traditional values, lax planning decisions and greed. The ghost estate has come to symbolise much of what was negative about the Celtic Tiger period. In my opinion, there are two principle issues here. One is that this type of development was built at all; reflecting the demand for traditional houses regardless of design merit. The other is that so many of these developments were allowed to be constructed. That the housing estate proliferated to the extent it did is telling. Developers are business men and, as such, are keenly aware of what the market wants. Again I am reminded of the Umberto Eco reference to architects having to work within external factors.

Money was the driving force in the spread of housing estates. As house prices in Ireland's cities continued to increase, families determined to have a suburban lifestyle looked to neighbouring counties. Dublin's 'commuter belt' in particular saw the impact of this migration. The extent to which this was seen as a national issue is evident in the fact that *The Irish Times* produced an eight part series investigating the impact on 'commuter counties'.

In the years 1997 to 2003 Carlow's urban population grew from 17,000 to 22,000 [Sheridan 2003a]. In the same period Ratoath, a small Co. Meath village, saw its population rise by 82.3 per cent [Sheridan 2003b]. It appears that the payback for commuting was the idea of a better life. The move from the city to the country was a move away from all the negative issues associated with urban life and towards an idyll. "In countless cases, there are deeper motives...worries about children being enmeshed in rampant anti-social gangs; the woman too terrorised to walk to the shops or get a bus; the family devastated by the new neighbours from hell; schools so poor in every sense that even the teachers are bailing out" [Sheridan 2003c]. The idea of a rural or suburban life seems to have been a powerful incentive. However, in many cases the reality could not meet these expectations. Lack of amenities was central to this, as smaller towns and villages saw their hinterland expand beyond their ability to cater for them. As Kathy Sheridan reported; "The question is, where will it all end? "With all their talk of 'facilities' and 'amenities' and big roads and fancy shops and developments, you'd have to wonder what they're looking for here," says a "country" man. "Do they really want to live in the country — or will they never rest until they have Dublin down here with them?" [Sheridan 2003c].

Very few of the housing developments constructed during this era were of any real architectural value. Architecture had very little to do with the spread of housing estates, what mattered was what they represented. Today, the design of these estates is perhaps equally irrelevant when compared to their symbolism. The Reendesert estate in Ballylickey in West Cork is described as being "in keeping with the quaint charm of the village" [Madden 2011]. However this vacant development is now recognised as "an eyesore" by locals, a fact evident to those who visit the village. "Consecutive Tidy Towns reports document the development of the estate over the years, from its promising early days to its current "sad and unfortunate" state. In 2010, the judges noted that the local residents' "causes of frustration are clearly etched onto the landscape" [Madden 2011].

Despite higher densities and a variety of dwelling types, the development of new towns outside Dublin city, like Adamstown and Clongriffin, represent much the same ideology as ghost estates. I am making this classification primarily on the basis of location. Situated outside the city, these developments were seen to be removed from urban problems. However these were much larger developments that were intended to include adequate infrastructure for a large population. Also, in terms of design, these developments were intended to be 'European' in feel rather than the more traditional housing estates. Speaking of Adamstown, Niall Toner gave this description: "Visually at least, the place has more



in common with a post-war European-style suburb than a Dublin one” [Toner 2010, p10]. Though still housing only one-tenth of its projected population, Adamstown has been quite successful in fostering a sense of community through the provision of infrastructure. Jude Byrne, chief project manager at Adamstown for developers Castlethorn Construction described their long-term vision for the development: “Adamstown is not just about starter homes. The intention is to provide homes for growing families then later on the area will cater for older people and we intend to have the medical services in place to back that up” [Toner 2010, p11]. Indeed the positive aspects of this development arise from its designation as a Strategic Development Zone (SDZ). This meant that planning permission for residential development would only be granted if adequate social and economic infrastructure was in place. This was described by journalist Niall Toner as “an alternative to the traditional “nod-and-a-wink” approach of Irish developers” [Toner 2010, p11]. Perhaps that was where the true success lies.

## **Rebuilding — after the Celtic Tiger era**

The architecture produced during the Celtic Tiger era rendered visible prevailing attitudes in Irish society during this period. Just as post-Independence Irish architecture was marked by Celtic symbolism, Celtic Tiger era architecture is notable for its scale and international feel. There are a number of categories which encapsulate Celtic Tiger architecture — the landmark development; residential, commercial or cultural; the high density residential development, and the housing estate.

The key issues during the Celtic Tiger centred on how Ireland would progress. How would we be seen by the world? How would we face the challenges of population growth and multiculturalism sustainably? Much of the debate over the last two decades focused on density and how to achieve sustainable urban populations as Irish cities continued to expand. As a result, this period drew into sharp relief the urban-rural divide. The boundary between the thinking here can be seen in the types of development produced in both settings. Cities and urban centres were the sites of landmark architecture, and high-rise development. Rural and suburban areas continued to be the stronghold of housing estates which were built at an unprecedented rate. Developers, planners and architects were determined to convince people of the benefits of apartment life. Yet the Irish remained largely reluctant to accept that apartments could be long-term family homes. Perception has arguably never been so important.

So have our attitudes changed? In some ways I think they have; we began to embrace globalised ‘norms’ more easily. We started to look international examples and see a way to emulate them. We got a glimpse of the progress we are capable of making towards high standard infrastructure, and have come to expect more. However, we are still some distance from accepting high density as the only viable solution for the future. That so many hous-

ing estates were built is testament to this fact and to the weakness of many local planning authorities. Perhaps the legacy of the Celtic Tiger will be a positive one. From the debris of the property market we may build a sustainable future where everyone has access to good design and adequate amenities. In conclusion, I am reminded of a project by artist Emma Houlihan: [[http://www.leitrimsculpturecentre.ie/programme/exhibitions/exb\\_residency\\_emmaandtony.htm](http://www.leitrimsculpturecentre.ie/programme/exhibitions/exb_residency_emmaandtony.htm)] While in residence in a Leitrim arts centre, Houlihan took an interest in the many ghost estates in the county. She questioned what was going to happen to all the rubble from houses that had to be demolished. Taking the rubble from a demolished house she recast it to form the blocks [voussoirs] of an arch. The arch is now on exhibition as a deconstructed pile of debris, yet implicit within it is the possibility that it can be rebuilt. This is a moral for us and for those who plan our cities, towns and countryside. Though we may now seem to be irreparably damaged we can rebuild; but it will take time, courage and an open mind. Ireland will build again. What we build, only time will tell.

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