

THE IRISH TOWN - DYING AT THE CROSSROADS?

(from the website www.developer.ie)

This is an extract from an essay by Paul Keogh of Paul Keogh Architects (www.pka.ie). The full text can be downloaded in pdf format by clicking here [paul-keogh-essay-on-sustainable-development.pdf](#)

Higher density residential development in the right locations, well serviced with public transport and community facilities, and built to the best possible standards – that’s what lies at the core of Government policy to encourage more sustainable urban development, according to the Department of the Environment’s recent guidelines for planning authorities – Sustainable Residential Development in Urban Areas.[1]



The guidelines are the latest in a decade of policy documents in which Government has sought to encourage more sustainable urban development. The Residential Density Guidelines (1999), the National Spatial Strategy (2002), the NESC housing report (2004), the Sustainable Rural Housing Guidelines (2005) and Delivering Homes, Sustaining Communities (2007) all expressed commitments to promote the development, renewal and improvement of towns and villages.

Yet, the vast bulk of housing construction has been in suburban estates and one-off houses in the countryside, with few enough examples of 'new housing development in or at the edges of villages and small towns of a quality of design, character, scale and layout that fits well with the town or village involved and presents a high quality living environment...supporting public transport and reducing dependency on car based commuting' [2] or 'attractive and affordable housing options to meet the housing needs of urban communities and persons wishing to live in urban areas.' [3]

On the contrary, weak planning, suburban social values and an uncontrolled market during the boom years conspired to facilitate an overwhelming predominance of low-density greenfield development outside of – and often remote from – existing urban centres. With the exception of tax-driven apartments social and affordable housing, few family homes have been built in towns and village centres, and essential services, retailing and businesses have relocated to the outskirts. In short, the decline of the inhabited town is in freefall and rural Ireland is becoming overwhelmingly suburban.

If we can learn anything from the current market crisis, it is that the last decade produced not only too many units, but that they were of the wrong type, and they were built in the wrong locations. Yet, notwithstanding the recent collapse of residential construction, commentators continue to forecast that demographic changes in Irish society and medium to long-term economic growth will create a strong demand for new housing in the decade ahead – up to 45,000 units per annum according to some projections. Also, the cultural and demographic revolution Ireland is undergoing – more households, smaller families and changing lifestyles – suggests the need for something different to the standard house types offered by the market to date.

Therefore, if we are to manage the projected growth in housing development sustainably, we need to review our uncritical application of the suburban model, and acknowledge that the sprawl it generates has been one of the major contributors to our untenable level of carbon emissions, our unsustainable dependence on private motoring, our inadequate infrastructure provision, our declining levels of social capital, and – not least – the depopulation and decline of our rural towns and villages.

1. DoEHLG: *Sustainable Residential Development in Urban Areas*. Consultation draft guidelines for planning authorities. February 2008.
2. DoEHLG: *National Spatial Strategy for Ireland 2002 – 2020*. (p106)
3. DoEHLG: *Sustainable Rural Housing: Guidelines for Planning Authorities* (p10).