

Irish Housing Design and Development

- by Graham H from www.archiseek.com



Living in Ireland, 2006.

One-off housing has rightly received a lot of attention here, but the buildings in which the majority of Irish people live, David McWilliams' piggy in the middles as it were, much less so - namely sprawling housing estates. The design, layout and efficiency of these houses in Ireland is generally regarded as appalling, and in my view is much worse than is perceived by the agenda-setting greater-Dublin/mid-Leinster population who have seen a degree of improvement in design at least in recent years. But outside the Dublin area, just as with development 100 or 200 years ago, the quality falls through the floor, only this time not even basic standards in proportion and finishing are adhered to, as happened in the past.

I think the above image illustrates very well one of the major drivers in the explosion of one-off housing we have seen of late, as PDLL has pointedly highlighted in various threads. Not that it can be used as an excuse for the scale of what we're seeing in the countryside, as people will always want to build their own thing given the opportunity, but the astoundingly poor residential developments we are experiencing in urban Ireland (which includes hamlet, village, town and city) are in no small way contributing to the ever-growing apathy with the housing sector in this country, encouraging people, if not quite forcing them, to self-build - eschewing the horrible way in which we are now expected to live, which essentially is what developers are dictating. Developers, not planners.

We have the bizarre situation of profit-driven builders - experts in finance, bricks and mortar -

controlling how many hundreds of thousands of people, if not millions into the future, live their lives. Controlling how our society operates. Controlling the aesthetics of the buildings and broader environments of where we live. Controlling how we interact with our communities, indeed even the very success of communities. Controlling the *format* of communities; dictating who will live in a certain development and who will not by virtue of the size, nature and accessibility of units constructed, and the provision or otherwise of social and affordable housing. Controlling how the wider country's environment is treated, and how it will continue to be treated into the future on a host of levels. Controlling the social costs to the State, again on so many levels – either by virtue of what is built, or what not is built resulting in problems being created elsewhere or at best being sustained elsewhere.

To suggest that developers are the sole drivers in how housing developments are built would be naive, but they still hold far too much clout relative to planners. It seems if a sprawling estate of monotonous units is proposed, and in line with zoning and Area Plans etc, the authority can do little other than wave it on subject to minor tweaks here and there. Certainly that's the impression one gets from an outside perspective.

This was just meant to be about aesthetics, but seems to have widened a bit.

The above introductory image is that of a new housing estate in Dundalk – about 15 minutes walk from the town centre on the important Avenue Road that some might know. Built by McParland Brothers to name and shame, this 'superb development' of lumpen detached and semi-detached houses is accessed via a soulless entrance road from the Avenue Road, lined on all sides by spirit-crushing six foot pebble-dashed walls as if the entrance to a penitentiary. The first view of the estate is that of the back arses, soil pipes, satellite dishes and garden sheds of half the houses in the development – a view not only for those entering the place, but also that for all passing traffic on the main road. And neatly rounded off with crude and depressing, wholly outdated sodium lampposts. This is what constitutes planning in Ireland in 2006.

Where are the planners? Did a planning professional even view this file? Well come to think of it, it seems one did, as the 'softening' sticks that estate agents call trees and the po-faced 'high quality finish' entrance piers scream the desperate input of an LA rep of some kind.

In typically cynical developer style, and a phenomenon we are now seeing from Bantry to Bangor, the houses comprising the 'public face' of the estate running along the main road are tarted up with a multitude of colours, cut stone dressings, gables n fairytale fancy bits, arched windows and neatly finished garden walls and fences:



The reality of the estate proper however, is quite a different matter. As you can see in the distance, all of a sudden the fantasy ends and hard reality bites, as the beta carotene colourant comes out and the accountants move in. The bog-standard 3-bed semi emerges, as do the industrial vats of banana paste and lorry loads of plastic windows, fascias, soffits, guttering and downpipes. No variety in unit size is accommodated, no variation in aesthetics is permitted, no interest or focal point is added to any road, and bare breeze block walls comprise the boundaries of each plot. Every driveway accommodates two cars, and the entrance to the estate is designed almost as if to dissuade residents from entering or exiting in any manner other than inside the protective confines of an automobile.

Development Irish-style, in all its soul-shattering glory, truly manifests itself.

It really is so depressing seeing this sort of muck still going up; the fact that it's some of the better stuff being built in contrast to more rural areas is all the more crushing. It is astonishing we're still building this rubbish nearly fifty years after first being introduced on a mass scale – the only progress made being the 'luxury' feature of a television aerial socket being included in the master bedroom and the kitchen being plumbed for a dishwasher. (We're supposed to be grateful for these things by the way). The bare minimum in insulation and efficiency of heating systems again examples of startling modernity that we are to be eternally indebted to developers for their provision.

Whatever about the stunted textbook design of Irish housing, it never fails to astound how developers, even when building in the 'traditional' idiom cannot do things properly. Just look at the proportions of this muck – the stodgy leaden character, the vast areas of blank wall, the quality of finish, the plastic features, the token gestures, the ridiculous scaling, the breaking of arched windows with horizontal opening lights...the list goes on.



And why oh why isn't PVC banned across the board at this stage for use in residential developments, as it is in some counties now? Such a prohibition ought to feature in every Development Plan in the land – hardly likely though considering the clout of the building industry amongst our political elite, and the certain outpouring of anguish at the loss of their cheap-n-cheerful quick-fix solution to filling those annoying big gaps in their cavity block walls.

Does anyone have other examples of such reprehensible building – and indeed **good** examples, to be positive about things, particularly those that manage to reach decent densities and employ quality design using the fairly conventional house model, without going the apartment route. This is Ireland's biggest problem I think - it's an either/or proposition being made by all developers with apartments and semi-ds, or the combination of both as a token gesture which largely doesn't work either.

It's difficult to be positive though when you see the likes of the television programme 'Showhouse' in all its shameless glory. Modern Ireland personified.