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# SubUrban to SuperRural

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1 Immigration Council of Ireland: 'Background information and statistics on immigration to Ireland.' June 2005  
2 IDA: Website of the Irish Industrial Development Authority 2006

3 Data courtesy Marc Imhoff of NASA GSFC and Christopher Elvidge of NOAA NGDC. Image by Craig Mayhew and Robert Simmon, NASA GSFC.

This image of Earth's city lights was created with data from the Defense Meteorological Satellite Program (DMSP) Operational Linescan System (OLS). Originally designed to view clouds by moonlight, the OLS is also used to map the locations of permanent lights on the Earth's surface.

4 OECD: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

THE SPRAWL SURROUNDING our urban centers is driven by Ireland's obsession with the car and an innate desire to live on the land. A mono-functional organism, the simplicity of sprawl has become a universal solution to housing throughout the island—a uniquely successful product of our national psyche and the free market, reinforced by a lack of infrastructure, co-ordinated planning, regulation and political will.

The absence of any alternative development models or expectations presents the freedom to re-imagine this condition at a time of immense change and evolution within Irish society. According to Eurostat, Ireland has the sixth lowest population density in the EU but this is projected to increase by 25% in the next 25 years<sup>1</sup>, creating an obligation to propose new models for development that will be environmentally, socially and culturally sustainable.

Accepting our current reality of road-based infrastructure and the widespread desire to live in low-density housing, the challenge facing Ireland is how to evolve new living conditions that are not a sub-genre of the urban but rather a hybrid of the best aspects of both rural and urban—a super-rural condition. It will require both an attitude that values land for its intrinsic qualities and not simply as a location for housing and an inversion of the fundamentally negative paradigm of less-than-urban to an essentially positive one of more-than-rural.

In curating Ireland's participation in the Venice Biennale 2006 we sought to take on this challenge by asking our generation of Irish architects to test this paradigm shift through the formulation of specific projects and scenarios that would illuminate a vision of how the SubUrban might evolve into the SuperRural between now and 2030.

## The world's most globalised economy

Ireland is now the most globalised economy in the world, a situation that places it fiscally, if not geographically, closer to Boston than Berlin. With an economy focused on high-end, high-tech manufacturing and services provision, it is the largest exporter of software in the world.<sup>2</sup> OECD figures show that the economy has enjoyed the



Earth's City Lights (Detail)<sup>3</sup>

highest growth rates in the EU for most of the last decade.<sup>4</sup> This unprecedented economic success is drawing up to 70,000 immigrants annually to the country, which is altering our understanding of what it means to be Irish and has given Ireland the fastest growing population in Europe. Immigration is driving population increase and accelerating the urbanisation of the country. Ireland has some catching up to do as we have a relatively low urban population. We became a predominantly urbanized society only within the last generation. The economic boom appears to be sustained by the building industry providing housing for the growing population and on factors that are substantially outside our control—low interest rates set in Frankfurt and the presence of multinationals attracted by low corporation tax rates.

**5** SEI: Sustainable Energy Ireland. Morgan Bazillian, Fergal O'Leary, Brian Ó Gallachóir and Martin Howley: *Security of Supply Metrics*. 2006

**6** SEI: Sustainable Energy Ireland. Fergal O'Leary, Martin Howley and Brian Ó Gallachóir: *Residential Report—Energy in Ireland, 1990-2004*. 2005

**7** NRA: National Roads Authority Website

**8** SEI: Residential Report

**9** SEI: Security of Supply Metrics

**10** SEI: *Residential Report*: 'There was a remarkable increase in dwelling completions over the period 1990 to 2004, from 19,139 completions in 1990 to 76,954 completions in 2004, an increase of 300%. The figure of 76,954 was also the highest over the period and represented a 12% increase on completions in 2003.' According to the Central Statistics Office, a record 86,200 dwellings were completed in 2005.

**11** Eurostat: Statistical Office of the European Commission. Social Portrait of Europe.

**12** CSO: Central Statistics Office preliminary results of Census 2006

**13** NRA: *Transport policy* 'Roads... account for 96% of passengers and 93% of freight transport'

**14** NDP: Transport 21

**15** CIA: *World Fact Book*, Ireland, Geography Note

**16** Department of Agriculture and Food website: 80% of the agricultural area is devoted to grass... Beef and milk production currently account for 58% of total agricultural output at producer prices... The total number of farms was 141,500 in 2000, down from 223,400 in 1980. The average farm size was 31.4 hectares.

**17** SEI: Residential Report

The price of this rapid economic success is that Ireland has become the fifth most oil-dependent country in the EU—ninth in the world—which, given that we are barely industrialised, highlights the lack of natural resources on the island and emphasises our high per capita energy use.<sup>5</sup> Small indigenous reserves of gas and peat are both likely to be spent by 2030, further increasing our dependence on imported energy. Although Ireland's CO<sub>2</sub> emissions (climate corrected) per dwelling were 97% above the EU-15 average in 2003, most of Ireland's production of greenhouse gasses comes from transport.<sup>6</sup> Not such a surprise when the vast majority of goods and passengers are transported by road.<sup>7</sup> Transport is by far our largest energy user, running well ahead of electricity production, home heating and industry, with agriculture barely registering.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, Ireland's temperate climate and position on the western edge of Europe, facing the Atlantic, give us the best potential for wind, wave and biomass exploitation in the EU.<sup>9</sup> Yet to date only 2.2% of our energy comes from renewables, a situation which is gradually changing as the government has brought in limited tax relief for domestic use of alternative energy. Rising oil prices are placing the issue of fuel and food security at the top of the agenda and they are now being seen as serious issues in considering the long-term success of our economy.

### Housing boom

Almost half of all dwellings in Ireland have been planned and delivered by the private sector since 1990. The majority of dwellings, 82% and growing, are either owned outright or are in the process of being purchased (mortgaged).<sup>10</sup> 95% of the population lived in an individual house in 1998, compared to an EU-15 average of only 53%.<sup>11</sup> Our new-found wealth has been driving a housing boom to accommodate not just the annual influx of foreign nationals but also affluent young Irish leaving

the family home to buy their own. Whereas the incoming population is heading for town, the indigenous Irish are heading for the suburbs. Even though the urban population is technically increasing, the population in many urban centers is actually dropping<sup>12</sup> as suburban sprawl continues to soak up this 'urban population', expanding in a self-sustaining ring with diminishing reference or contact with the centre it notionally surrounds. The reality for many so-called city dwellers is that they are as car dependent as their rural neighbors. They are probably just as likely as a rural dweller to get in the car to go to work or the shops or to drop the children off at school. Both are just as likely to be dependent on the local petrol station for their basic needs and out-of-town shopping centers for retail therapy. Consequently, traffic congestion in and around the major urban centres is endemic and it can often be quicker to commute from 50km away than to travel across town.

### Roads

Ireland's sprawling towns and cities are tied together by an ever-expanding road network while the railway network is under-funded and neglected.<sup>13</sup> There is an unprecedented road-building programme underway, which will quadruple the length of motorways and dual carriageways by 2015. By contrast, the length of rail track is less than it was a century ago and apart from recent light rail in Dublin and the objective to reopen 70km of disused track, there is no new rail on the cards.<sup>14</sup> 2006 will



see the first hourly intercity service between the country's two largest cities—Dublin, with a population 1.1 million, and Cork, with a population of 0.25 million—which, by increasing capacity, will open up points in between for further development. 40% of the population already lives within 100km of Dublin,<sup>15</sup> underlining its economic and political dominance. The Greater Dublin Area has become a commuter zone stretching halfway across the country, threatening to join

with the sprawl generated by Cork, Galway and Limerick to form one continuous super-sprawl condition on the island. Sprawl creates dormitory accommodation, deserted during the week as the daily exodus starts earlier and ends later to avoid the chronic traffic congestion.

Suburban sprawl has become the enemy of both town and country, draining the life from one and expanding relentlessly over the other, while choking both with cars tracing the daily triangle of home, school, work, and back again. It expands relentlessly at very low-density, squandering formerly productive agricultural land, stretching services and infrastructure to uneconomic levels and eroding the social fabric of rural life. The line between urban and rural is blurring, robbing both of their essential character. Urban-generated populations live in suburban enclaves stitched on to towns and villages, generating a new cash crop—sites for houses—as manicured lawns fast replace farmed land.<sup>16</sup> Meanwhile, the urban cores become heritage-themed retail experiences for tourists and visitors.

### The Irish Dream

The logic of applying higher densities to urban areas is well understood and accepted, but it has failed to solve the issue of increasing demand for residential accommodation in Ireland over the last 15 years. Ultimately, higher urban densities will only solve part of the housing problem, as long as the primary demand is for houses and the design of viable family apartments is paid mere lip service by developers or regarded as a hopeful aspiration by planners. In parallel with the decline in urban—as opposed to suburban—populations, the rural population has been steadily dropping, in this case since the mid-19th century when it was decimated by famine. The trend is accelerating in most areas, accompanied by a decline in agricultural employment. Planning policy prevents people without local employment or a family connection from living in many areas of the country. Even so, a significant proportion—up to 33%—of dwellings are built in open countryside each year<sup>17</sup>, evidence of robust rural entrepreneurship. Encouraged by government tax incentives, many new dwellings, particularly along the coast, have been built as tourist accommodation or second homes, however, and remain vacant for most of the year.

Solutions have not been forthcoming from politicians, planners or architects and the debate has become polarized: build nothing outside the urban centres or let people build what they want, where they want. Neither attitude seems to hold the answer and both are likely to perpetuate the current unsatisfactory situation.

The decline in agricultural incomes and the seeming ability to turn any half-acre into a housing site has led to a rash of dormer bungalows sitting in barely landscaped fields with elusive privacy provided by distance from neighbors. This, ultimately, is the Irish Dream. But not everyone is lucky enough to be able to afford such rural isolation, particularly if work is two

hours away by car. The imperative of proximity to urban centers produces a version of the dream in low-density, low-rise semi detached developments sprawling across the fields around every town and village within striking distance of a city.

#### **The paradigm shift**

For proposed new settlement patterns to be credible, they must be socially, environmentally and culturally sustainable, valuing the land for its intrinsic qualities and not just as a site for the construction of housing, satisfying the desire to live on the land without degrading the visual amenity of the countryside at a time when tourism is of growing importance to the economy. They must engage with the existing patterns of the urban or rural landscape, becoming part of it and not just in it or on it.

15 years ago when Group 91 were looking to address the issues of the day, the creation of viable models for urban living was uppermost in their minds. That argument has largely been won, even if consistent implementation is still some way off. Within the generation that has seen Ireland become a predominantly urban society, the pressures of urban life have prompted a desire for privacy and freedom, expressed as a compulsion to drive cars and live in houses with off-street parking and front and back gardens. Consequently, the challenge for this generation of architects has become more complex. Perhaps giving people what they want can be an impetus for new settlement patterns in Ireland? Why not suspend the current unsatisfactory model of 'urban/suburban/sub-rural/rural' in favour of one that offers alternatives to suburban sprawl by favouring a more focused pattern of 'super-urban' and 'super-rural'? One in which the focus on suburban sprawl to square the circle of a widespread desire to live on the land within commuting distance of work in town is shifted to a more sustainable model that provides alternatives, that breaks the cycle of commuting and enshrines a life/work balance where there is time and space for recreation, universal access to nature and the potential for self-sufficiency. A future, achievable within a single generation, where there is a radical shift from Suburban to SuperRural.

