

SundayTribune

Straight Talking Bill Nowlan - Stop blaming planners for the mistakes of their political masters

Whatever might be said about the planning system and property developers, someone has been doing something right

This summer my holidays included a commitment to visit parts of Ireland I had missed in my youth. Apart from filling in gaps of my knowledge of the country, what struck me most forcefully was the growth, prosperity and quality of the towns and villages I passed through. True, it was summer, with trimmed grass and flowers, but our provincial towns and villages have moved from being the poor relation of western Europe to being up there with the best.

There are some awful cases of design and ribbon development (east Galway) and there is the occasional ghost estate but, whatever might be said about the planning system and about developers, somebody has been doing something mostly right; indeed an awful lot of right things have been done. My wife commented on how vibrant and busy rural Ireland was and contrasted it to rural France. We toured the Cognac region some years ago and saw many boarded-up villages and derelict houses.

Back in the office I decided to look at the statistics to see if the growth I saw on my travels was real or imaginary. It was real: the non-Dublin population grew by 16%, or 357,000 people, from 1996 to 2006.

I shudder to think what that growth might have looked like if planning had been based on a laissez-faire arrangement, as in parts of the USA. It would have been ribbon development everywhere, garish advertising hoardings, few of the new bypasses that speed up journey time and, of course huge amounts of pollution, not to mention the visual impact of self-designed houses. Bad and all as planning might be, non-planning would be much worse.

So we have been doing something nearly right, but not perfectly. The 2010 Planning Act will make some improvement by bolting on an "evidence-based system" dimension to the present system, but it will not eliminate the oversupply/ undersupply issue. This is because the planning system was designed fundamentally to control and direct development, not manage its execution. Under our system, initiating development is left to the market, with some small exceptions. Building and selling is left to developers who seek to make a profit by buying land and constructing buildings – and getting their timing right and taking associated risks.

The planning system is not a land management system. The planning authorities could acquire land, zone it, plan it, service it and then pass it on to builders. Such systems exist in other countries such as Holland and Finland. The planning authorities have the power to do this but they don't, for a variety of reasons not least funding. It would also require a new mindset among the planning

authorities (and their political masters) whereby they would identify demand five to 10 years before it arose.

In theory it could work. Each planning authority would become the equivalent of the Dublin Docklands Development Authority or Ballymun Regeneration. In addition to its development plan, each would prepare its land acquisition plan. This would be linked to an infrastructure plan which would be linked to a funding plan which in turn would be linked to an environmental plan. Of course all would be driven by the national spatial strategy and transportation plan – green, of course. It could work like oiled clockwork.

Would it be doable? The answer is 'yes but' and the 'but' is that this is Ireland, with a public administration system designed to manage each council area in accordance with the will of the people via their elected councillors, and a funding system run by the department of finance. This system has lots of political agendas with a scarcity of money and of professionals who understand the property market and can think like developers, not civil servants.

But stand back and imagine what would have happened if we had had such a system between 1996 and 2007? Would such a system have reacted to the sudden property needs of the economy to meet a 10% annual growth in economic activity and more or less satisfied that need? Or would the economic tiger have been stillborn because the plans for new offices, factories and houses were stuck in the department of finance or local government awaiting clearance from a minister, like the Poolbeg incinerator and all the new schools that the department of education was supposed to have built this year?

In reality, if we had such a system, the Celtic Tiger would never have happened. The economic growth of that time needed new buildings fast. Foreign direct investment went mainly into speculative buildings. The Googles and Microsofts and the international banks are nearly all in speculative buildings, along with the supply of housing stock for their workers. Without those new buildings that investment would have gone to another country, one that did not tie its property industry up in red tape and prevent it reacting quickly to market demand. Had we had a land management system focused on supply management by local authorities – the only way to stop the over-building that produced the ghost estates – then we would probably not have had a Celtic Tiger. Take your choice: Celtic Tiger or occasional conspicuous oversupply?

So we have a planning system that fundamentally works but has made mistakes and can only indirectly control supply of new buildings. The primary tool available to planners for managing demand is zoning in the development plan, which is a political function. The second tool is the granting or refusal of planning permission. But if a planning authority refuses permission on land that is zoned and serviced on the grounds that the building may not be needed, they risk a big claim for compensation.

The key tool of land zoning as a means of controlling supply continues to be debased by local political interests. To them, the next local election is more important than the risk of a ghost estate. The new act seeks to rebalance the influence of politicians but not remove it.

So we have a choice: accept and try to improve a human and democratic system that more or less works, or move to a land management system which will almost certainly not work in this country.

Could we please escalate the debate about overbuilding to look at the fundamentals of our system (most of which are good) and stop blaming planners for mistakes made by their political masters by overzoning in the wrong places?

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RURAL BOOM

Population increase in small towns over the past 10 years

Town Name	1996	2006	% increase in population from 1996-2006
Athenry Town, Co Galway	1,614	3,205	98.57
Kilcullen Town , Co Kildare	1,604	2,985	86.0%
Carrick-on-Shannon DED, Co Leitrim	2,148	3,505	63.0%
Charlestown Bellaghy DED Co Sligo.	654	859	31.34%

Source: CSO population figures

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