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In an era when, we are told, cities are now the source of economic dynamism and the focus for innovations in public policy and governance across the world, Ireland presents an anomaly. This was made apparent by the recent rejection of an attempt to introduce a directly elected mayor for Dublin at a time when mayors are lauded as the solution to manifold social and economic problems.

However, when we delve a little deeper, that decision is perhaps unsurprising given the traditional ambivalence in Ireland towards the ‘urban’. Compared with the left-right divide that characterises the traditional European political landscape, the chief schism in Irish politics pivots much more on the urban-rural/national-local. In 2016 pre-general election debates, the discourse was marked by the airing of strongly anti-Dublin sentiment, with the concentration of activity in, and strength of, Dublin’s economy constructed as a ‘problem’. Within this context, creating a directly elected Mayor to enhance the political strength of Dublin, as a city and a region, was unlikely to succeed. Cities may be back, but not in Ireland.
Nonetheless, there is a pressing case for rethinking urban development and how Irish cities, and Dublin in particular, are governed. Although the recent economic crisis in Ireland was in large part the result of complex inter-relationships between real estate, financial, planning and banking interests, concentrated particularly in urban settings, this has done little to focus policy attention on cities. Yet they are key sites within which we could better understand the ‘Celtic Tiger’ boom and its aftermath.

A fundamental cause of the crisis in Ireland was planning and housing policy. The failures of the property sector, and the inadequacy of government policy in steering it appropriately, are perhaps best illustrated in the phenomenon of the unfinished estates that litter parts of rural Ireland. Irish planning outcomes are the product not just of policies but also of the formal and informal exercise of power in the planning system.

The Irish context

The seeds of the so-called ‘Celtic Tiger’ phenomenon – the extraordinary growth of the Irish economy in the 1990s and 2000s – and its ultimate collapse were arguably sown in government responses to the economic crisis of the 1980s, characterised by high unemployment, mass emigration and urban dereliction.

Drawing on experience elsewhere, the Irish Government focused on creating the conditions to attract productive foreign investment, particularly in the technology sector. Low corporation tax rates combined with generous financial incentives and a business-friendly regulatory climate led to rapid economic growth, but by the early 2000s productivity was declining and growth was being driven by speculation in the built environment rather than productive investment. By 2007, construction accounted for 13.3% of all employment and almost 23% of GNP with the state precariously reliant on property-based taxation (see Fig. 1).

Along with a number of other countries in the European periphery, the global financial crisis created the conditions for contraction of the Irish economy; but the intensity and scale of the banking, fiscal and property sector collapse was driven by country-specific factors that included ‘debt-driven development’, poor regulation of the banking sector and the unsustainable tax revenue model. The availability of cheap credit had fuelled an asset bubble, with banks playing a key role in recycling credit into speculative development. The state was implicated directly through a lack of regulation but also indirectly through legislative frameworks and the unnecessary continuation of tax incentives that exacerbated the property bubble.

The collapse of the ‘Irish model’ has generated distinctive new urban, economic and social geographies and policy responses. ‘Ghost estates’ are one material manifestation of the Celtic Tiger collapse, but others include unfinished buildings in
urban centres, as well as the abandonment of large development sites such as Cherrywood, Dublin on the urban fringe.

Such landscapes are visual representations of broader planning failures during the boom and its aftermath that had:
- fuelled inappropriate housebuilding in rural counties where there was no pre-existing or likely demand;
- intensified sprawl and large-scale commercial development on the edge of cities in a ‘race for rates’ by local authorities;
- failed to address a pressing housing problem nationally, and in particular in Dublin; and
- led to severe over-production of commercial space.

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Various government tribunals of inquiry have identified parochialism and low-level corruption as key problems in Ireland, but the (non-)role of planning in the story of the Celtic Tiger boom and bust and the absence of meaningful strategic planning frameworks require more systematic analysis in a context where collaboratively produced non-statutory strategic plans often clash with the corporate requirements of individual local authorities. Since the introduction of the Planning and Development (Amendment) Act 2010, Regional Planning Guidelines now have an enhanced statutory basis, but it is questionable what difference they are making in practice.

These failures are particularly evident in the case of the Dublin city-region, where, despite the existence of Regional Planning Guidelines, fragmented local government, lack of co-ordinated planning or even a desire for it, and weak regional frameworks have led to wasteful local competition and poor planning outcomes. The result during the construction boom was the building of the wrong type of housing in the wrong places and inadequate provision of infrastructure, including public transportation. In the aftermath of the crisis, and particularly in the context of the current housing crisis, implementation of a strong Greater Dublin region strategy is more pressing than ever, but the obstacles to achieving it are as great as ever.

Challenges for the Dublin city-region

In trying to disentangle why planning in the Dublin city-region failed so spectacularly during the Celtic Tiger boom and has struggled to cope with its aftermath, a number of issues become apparent:
- Although Ireland is one of the most highly centralised countries administratively in the European Union, a powerful form of localism at very small geographical scales exists alongside this centralisation. A virulent parish-pump politics, accentuated by the particularities of the proportional representation electoral system and the nature of party politics, has meant that even national politicians are more focused on local issues rather than on issues of major strategic importance. During the 2016 general election media reporting highlighted how this may intensify as the large number of independent TDs (parliamentarians) now elected to the Dáil (the lower house of parliament) are expected to try to do deals with the bigger parties to maximise the gains for their local constituents.

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Within local administration, there is evidence of strong territorality and an aversion to co-operate across county boundaries, even when it is manifestly in mutual interests to do so. Competition undermines the functional relationships between adjacent local authorities.

This is driven in large part by the structure of local government financing in Ireland, dominated by tightly controlled transfers from central government. The only degrees of local freedom are in relation to money raised from development levies or commercial rates, resulting in a ‘race for rates’ and competition for development across county boundaries.

- The publication of the National Spatial Strategy (NSS) in 2001 was one attempt to address the negative externalities of this jurisdictional fragmentation, but few actors in the Irish planning system regard the NSS as having had much impact.

Designed as an attempt to balance regional development and develop counter-magnets to the primacy of Dublin, a series of gateways and hubs were designated across the country. The NSS was immediately politicised by some local and national politicians, who pitched the designations in terms of winners and losers, using such assessments to support a well rehearsed argument that rural Ireland was being discriminated against. A potent lack of political
will to rebuff these arguments and argue for a more strategic approach to planning and development – combined with a plan to decentralise government agencies from Dublin that effectively ignored the NSS – undermined the strategy before it could gather any momentum.

While a gap between spatial planning/policy and its implementation is not unusual, it is particularly acute in Ireland. Even the introduction of Regional Assemblies (comprising representatives from constituent County Councils) and functional planning regions has done little to focus attention on a scale beyond the local, and principally serves the purpose of maximising potential funding from the EU to Ireland.

This lack of spatial imagination and fierce localism in the political culture might help to explain why the resurgent cities debate has not gained momentum in Ireland. Irish politics is heavily localised and binary; any focus on the urban or strategic is interpreted as anti-rural.

- Despite persisting difficulties, there have been attempts to address some of these issues. Revisions to the Regional Planning Guidelines in 2010 moved them from being advisory to binding; Regional Authorities also now have a role in the preparation and revision of local authority Development Plans, but given the composition of Regional Assemblies it is unclear how critical or proactive they can be, or are likely to be.

In the case of the Dublin city-region, a recent proposal to promote a more co-ordinated approach to planning has been focused on the introduction of a London-style city mayor for Greater Dublin. Initially proposed in the Local Government Act 2001, the idea was reintroduced in 2003 but resurrected by the Green Party (then a coalition partner in the Irish Government) in 2008. The Local Government Reform Act 2014 proposed a directly elected Mayor for the capital, but, controversially, the legislation also included a provision that each of the four Dublin local authorities would have to agree prior to any election, essentially providing them with a veto. In March 2014, three of the local authorities supported holding an election, with one council, Fingal, voting against.

In practice, the Minister for the Environment had included an effective veto in the legislation and created the conditions for the proposal to fail. Why would local councillors vote for a new system that would effectively diminish their own limited powers? While it was not entirely clear what powers a directly elected Mayor might have, the primacy of Dublin in the Irish urban system and the installation of a potentially powerful advocate for the city-region had the potential to fundamentally change Irish political culture. In the event, without some significant shift, the lack of co-ordination and wasteful competition within the broader region is set to continue, with major consequences for dealing with pressing issues.

- While the conditions for engaging in effective planning are hardly optimal, the practice and profession of planning in the Dublin city-region faces significant challenges. The lack of requirement of an evidence base, particularly for forward planning, has permitted the development patterns discussed earlier – such as the wrong type of housing in the wrong locations, lack of co-ordinated spatial strategies even where they would be beneficial, and poor public infrastructure provision.

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Management Agency, which was established in 2009 to acquire property development loans from failed Irish banks and which controls 15 large sites), as a tool for marketing its development land to investors. The fast-track planning system here is already proving appealing to international developers but could relatively disadvantage other parts of the city-region. This approach contains the danger of reinventing the piecemeal approach to land use planning characteristic of the Celtic Tiger years and is likely to reinforce the significant disparities that exist between Dublin city and the broader economy – and, paradoxically, exacerbate much of the anti-urban politico-cultural sentiment.

Eight years on from the beginnings of the crisis, Dublin and its city-region face many challenges: some are legacies of the Celtic Tiger boom but others have emerged more recently. At the heart of all of these challenges is the weakness of planning, a poor understanding of the interdependencies between places that shape Irish development, and a failure to develop urban governance mechanisms that can address such problems. Dublin is squeezed between its attempts to become a city of significance globally and an intense localism that shapes the political environment within which it is evolving. There is a pressing case for a major rethinking in Ireland of what planners do, how they do it, and what conditions are necessary to achieve optimal outcomes. Only then will Dublin, and other Irish cities, assert their position in the national psyche and beyond.

Notes

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