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House and Home, Living in Dublin City

Societal ideas about home and domestic space are deeply inculcated. The familiarity, cultural ubiquity and apparently ‘natural’ character of domestic spaces complicates our understanding of them, rendering them ‘invisible’ or transparent, both to their inhabitants and to those who seek to critically understand them. This means that forms of housing are always slow to change, even when the nature of society and households have changed dramatically, and fixed perceptions remain unquestioned. The scale of the current housing crisis in Dublin demands a highly imaginative and thoroughly planned response, a complete re-think of our approach to the provision and design of dwellings. This kind of attempt to reimagine domestic space is inevitably met with strong societal resistance.

One of the fixed ideas that hold us back is the perceived division between houses and apartments. This is deeply ingrained in Dublin society. Our whole perception of housing is structured by this dichotomy; every type of dwelling is characterised as being one or other. This distinction is reinforced by property websites, estate agents, the house-building industry and by development plans and standards. It is easier to sell, finance and regulate dwellings by classifying them, putting them into simple categories. This artificial division is problematic because it makes it difficult to explore and build forms of housing that are neither houses nor apartments, that are perhaps hybrids or combinations of both. In looking towards the future of housing in Dublin it is clear that we are in dire need of new forms of low-rise high-density housing; forms that densely occupy the ground of the city and that enable us to intensify our existing neighbourhoods. Yet our Development Plans and Residential Guidelines constantly reinforce the distinction and make the exploration of these hybrids difficult. We have sets of standards for houses and separate standards for apartments, as though households living in apartments somehow have different needs for private open space and distance from their neighbours than those who live in houses. If we removed this distinction and made a single set of standards for dwellings, we would open up the possibilities for exploring new forms.

Some of the most successful neighbourhoods in the city, such as Stoneybatter, Portobello and Phibsborough, provide excellent examples of low-rise high-density housing that have been easily adapted to cater for the needs of a variety of contemporary households while at the same time making vibrant places. These areas largely comprise one and two storey dwellings that are effectively hybrids of terraced and courtyard houses. Yet if we attempted to replicate these

areas in a new development we would quickly discover that the dwelling sizes would be too small to meet the development standards, the private open space would be too limited and there would be insufficient parking. Part of the reason for this is that the dwellings would be defined as houses (rather than apartments) and would therefore need to meet the more exacting standards required.

We have an urgent need for more varied housing that addresses the changing demographic of Dublin society. The 2006 Censusⁱ recorded the number of households in Ireland as 1,469,521, but of these only 559,720, or 38%, consisted of an opposite-sex couple with children less than 21 years of age. Despite this, our national housing stock consists overwhelmingly of three, four and five bedroom family houses, the majority of which are therefore occupied by household groups for which these dwellings were not designed. We require more diverse and smaller dwellings that cater for single-person households, for people sharing and our elderly population. These can all work better socially if people can live close to the ground with access to small but carefully designed open spaces and gardens. This also ensures the vibrancy of the streets and public spaces, something that is often lost in high-rise development.

It is possible to imagine groups of houses that are like apartment blocks on their sides, or dense mats, or stacked courtyard dwellings. There are extraordinary examples of these types of housing throughout Europe, such as Thalmatt in Berne by Atelier 5 (1967-74), Puchenau Garden City in Linz by Roland Rainer (1962-2000), and Fleet Road in London by Neave Brown/LCC (1967). All of the dwellings in these projects would be hard to classify as either houses or apartments, but they are all very carefully designed, with considerations of light, ventilation, open space, long-term flexibility and social interaction. There is always a delicate balance between the scale of the individual dwelling and the relationship to the neighbourhood or city. There are small isolated examples of these forms built in Ireland, but somehow our ingrained division between the house and the apartment has prevented us from finding the hybrid forms we truly need. New and imaginative forms of housing are desperately required if we are to provide the amount of housing we need without adding to the low density sprawl of Dublin across the surrounding counties. They can also help us to create deeply sustainable places, moving towards “*the world as a garden*”,ⁱⁱ as Roland Rainer described it.

ⁱ Lunn, P. and Fahey, T. (2011) Households and Family Structures in Ireland, ESRI: Dublin, pp.19-23.

ⁱⁱ Roland Rainer (1976) *Die Welt Als Garten – China*, Graz: Akademische Druck-u. Verlagsanstalt.