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Regeneration in the urban centres on the island of Ireland occurred against a background of mainly suburban growth through most of the twentieth century. In international terms, urban regeneration is often associated with post World War II reconstruction, but regeneration in neutral Ireland was related more to urban post-industrial sites, and occurred later in the century.

Directed urban regeneration in Ireland only began in the later part of the twentieth century, driven by a combination of public policy, tax incentives, and pressure to respond to inner-city decay. The term urban regeneration here is taken to mean the conscious project, a publicly directed, area-based initiative to revitalize parts of the city in social, physical and economic terms. Generally this regeneration had a city-wide impact, and key sites or areas came to represent wider changes in how Irish inner cities and towns were perceived, inhabited and developed.

Over much of the twentieth century, the historic urban core of Dublin had been subject to de-tenanting of populations from the centres in favour of lower density public housing in the inner suburbs, (qv slum clearance). Public policy favoured road widenings and demolition of much of the inner city fabric, starting in the mid 1950's. Between 1961 and 1991 the population of the inner city halved, due partly to decline in industrial and port employment, the closure of public facilities like schools, and a move by commercial uses from the centre. General deterioration of the physical fabric of the city was widespread. The RIAI publication *Dublin: A City in Crisis* (1975) indicated the specific problems of urban decay, and proposed regenerative solutions, but to little avail. There was limited public housing provision on inner city sites in the mid-1970s, at sites like the Coombe, but without an overall strategy or plan for regeneration of the area.

In 1986 the Urban Renewal Act was introduced, reducing the financial risks of development for private investors and occupiers, with the first urban renewal areas located in the five major cities. However, the Custom House Docks redevelopment to the east of Dublin city centre turned out to be the single major realized regeneration project of the 1980s in Ireland. The project occupied the most significant land bank adjoining the city centre, a 74-acre stretch directly east of Gandon's Custom House (qv), with largely unused industrial, port and transportation functions. As legislation gave special planning powers to the redevelopment agency, the overall Planning Scheme, prepared in 1986, set the pattern for change, dealing with the extent of development, uses, and the overall design of the area.

The regeneration agency proposed a new quarter on the existing eighteenth-century North Lotts street grid, intending to provide mixes of use, street vitality and waterside amenities. The development of an International Financial Services Centre on part of the site ensured that the area became a significant economic and symbolic benchmark for regeneration nationally. However, by May 1996, when the Custom House Docks represented almost one quarter of the total investment generated in designated areas nationally,

83% of the completed development in the area consisted of high specification office buildings, and little of the projected social mix or urban vitality. Despite this, the Government that year set up the Dublin Docklands Development Authority, which went on to oversee the more comprehensive and sophisticated regeneration of the much larger North and South Docklands area, in total almost one tenth of the size of the city between the two canals.

Urban renewal legislation in the 1980's set the context for later regeneration nationally. In 1988, the Designated Areas Scheme was introduced, offering tax incentives for development in urban areas. The scheme had countrywide application, including the centres of small towns, and by the mid 1990s there were designated areas in 35 urban centres, with innovative early proposals in Limerick the first to benefit from a change in land uses from industrial to living and service economy functions. However, in a study of urban renewal schemes nationally carried out by Murray O'Laoire Associates and others in 1996, commentary was made on poor overall architectural quality of the resulting buildings, and new repetitive and non-responsive urban typologies of blocks and buildings were described.

While the inner city in Dublin suffered from planning blight due to roads proposals, the later abandonment of transport plans had a positive impact of regeneration in some of these areas. The 200-acre Temple Bar Urban Renewal Project (qv) (Phase One 1991- 96) came about as a result of failed plans by CIE, the state transportation provider, announced in 1981, to redevelop the area as a transportation hub. The focus of the Temple Bar Framework Plan of 1991 was on cultural regeneration and refurbishment of the neglected city fabric, and the completed project gained international recognition in architecture and urbanism.

The most extensive regeneration areas of the century in Ireland emerged in the 1990s, in Dublin (HARP, 270 acres) and Docklands, Limerick (Kings Island, 170 acres), and Cork city centre (Cork Urban Pilot Project, 52 acres), where clearly spatially defined city centre areas were actively managed by local authorities to promote physical, social and economic regeneration. Other cities such as Galway and Waterford selected isolated individual sites as designated areas, and suffered from the lack of an overall strategy. Belfast suffered physical, economic and social decline in the second half of the twentieth century, and civil conflict, together with deep segregation of populations, led to physical cordoning of the city centre, and minimal regeneration until the early 1990's, with the setting up of the Laganside Corporation (1989-2007).

The 1998 Urban Renewal Scheme required the preparation of Integrated Area Plans by the Local Authorities for areas that could most benefit from designation, which led, among many others, to the preparation of the 1999 regeneration Masterplan for Ballymun (qv). This former New Town, Ireland's only high rise 1960's public housing estate, became the most significant regeneration area nationally by the start of the twenty-first century.

Given the relatively late adoption by national policymakers of directed regeneration strategies towards inner urban areas, it is perhaps understandable that the overall impact nationally was minimal in scale, though these late initiatives did contribute to the halt in decline of population numbers in inner cities and towns, and assisted in the enhancement, preservation and refurbishment of significant inner urban areas.

Alan Mee, December 2010

Further Reading

M.Gough, *Urban regeneration in Dublin's inner city with particular reference to private residential development* , Occasional Paper Series, No. 2, (Dublin: Department of Regional and Urban Planning, University College Dublin, 1995) ; KPMG & Murray O'Laoire Associates, *Study on the Urban Renewal Schemes*, (Dublin: Department of the Environment, 1996) ; P.Russell, '*Communities & Institutions: involving communities in urban regeneration: case studies of EU co-financed urban renewal in Dublin, Cork and Limerick 1995-1999*', (unpublished doctoral thesis, University College Dublin, 2002) ; B. Williams, '*Fiscal Incentives and Urban Regeneration in Dublin*', Working Paper, (Dublin: Department of Geography, Planning, and Environmental Policy, University College Dublin, 2006)