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Critical Urban Discourse Beyond Pebbledash

A small book which is likely to have a substantial impact, not least in Irish urbanism, '*Beyond Pebbledash'* [1] has just been published. According to its authors, "*Beyond Pebbledash is both a celebration of an overlooked icon of Irish domestic architecture and a design-driven discussion on the future of Dublin urbanism*". The 'icon' is a typical two-storey local authority suburban house, designed and constructed, like thousands of others, in Dublin during and after the 1930's. The publication coincides with an exhibition at Collins Barracks, where a full-size installation of the iconic house façade is temporarily housed in the finest space, Clarke Square. In the biting introduction by Mick Wilson, the motives of the authors as artists are discussed, and it is posited that the museum has offered a 'public space' to them for making claims and counterclaims 'to foment a debate' in relation to urbanism and Dublin. Wilson pointedly hopes that this discussion can 'throw some stones into the thick slurry of contemporary Irish journalism and political commentary'.

Described by the Irish Times as a 'pocketbook version' of their 2010 book, '*Redrawing Dublin'*, by authors Paul Kearns and Motti Ruimy, the new volume is primarily a text driven narrative, unlike its predecessor. Its main argument, that Dublin city centre is underrated and undervalued, and needs the densification of habitation and big improvements in urban quality, had been pressed home previously, so the updating of the text (largely based on 2006 Census figures) with Census 2011 figures is probably the most significant contribution. Another difference this time is a parallel public engagement aim of the project, including the focus on young people and Transition year students, the art installation in Collins Barracks itself, and the attractions of an exhibition and other public events.

Others have reviewed the book in detail[2] so this piece concentrates on how it might relate to contemporary critical urban discourse in Ireland. It is likely to be digested mostly by a non-technical public, ranging from the arts community to cultural hipsters, and there seems to be no common focus point for the themes of the book to emerge in public life. In this respect, the connection to the Arts Council Engaging with Architecture funding at least plants the seeds of interest in future generations. However, no current public discussion of housing for example, seems to want to get to the kernel of apartment size, focused as it is on lack of supply, the rush to own, and homelessness. Many organisations seem to have jurisdiction in this realm simultaneously, but none seem charged with the provision of the debates which might properly throw light on the issues for the public. Some have correctly highlighted the role of the media in Irelands' recent property dramas, but no entity seems confident enough to provide space for critical public discussion at this time.

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[1] The subtitle of the book is…'and the puzzle of Dublin'

[2] ("Who lives in a house like this? ",Graham Hickey, Sunday Times, 210914, and "Looking Behind the Pebbledash", Philip Lawton, www.irelandafternama.wordpress.com, 040914)

As mentioned by Lawton (who also wrote a strident 'critique' of their earlier book in 2011) in his book review, urban discourse itself is enhanced by the appearance of learned contributions concerning the facts and potentials of urban environments in Ireland, and especially when design is seen as centrally related to improvements in spatial quality. However, as well as a low output of publications on Irish urban areas, the literal and metaphorical space of debate seems to be somewhat limited. 'Critical' in the sense used here, is understood in urban theory as including aspects of reflection, not simply criticising, or implying an absence of excellence or pointing out minor factual inaccuracies. Peter Marcuse describes the word as follows : " '*Critical' I take to be, among other things, shorthand for an evaluative attitude towards reality, a questioning rather than an acceptance of the world as it is, a taking apart and examining and attempting to understand the world*." In Irish urban terms, that world is very often small, and the debate tends towards opposition to things in general, rather than the considered debate which could change or open minds.

Irish architectural and urbanism culture has mainly failed to engage in debate which might for example, be carried out in the style of 'Outrage'[3] the scathing commentary on poor design of towns and landscapes in England in the 1950's. Forty years ago exactly, it was left to the same Architectural Review, based in London, to take an overview on some glaring impacts of development of Dublin, focusing on the 'displacing city', 'blight', 'office boom', 'transport', and 'homes', all of which still seem extremely relevant. The www.failedarchitecture.com website, based in Amsterdam, goes a step further to name and shame authors of places which have failed to deliver spatial quality over time. However in Ireland, while much of the discourse has moved to the digital realm, it often fails to intersect with the real world, leaving a gap in the real culture, not least in terms of cataloguing and disseminating the valuable contributions and debates. However, conceived of as an Irish urbanists' hand grenade, this small, affordable book (15 euros, Gandon Editions) just goes ahead and invents its own urgent real, space for debate.

[3] 'Outrage' by Ian Nairn, an issue title of the Architectural Review, appeared in June 1955.