

Blue Collars, “Red Forts,” and Green Fields: Working-Class Housing in Ireland in the Twentieth Century

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Abstract

Planned working-class suburbanization began in Ireland in the early twentieth century, coinciding with a period of labor unrest and serious housing problems. Through a focus on Dublin in the first forty years of the century, this paper illustrates the persistence of debates about the relative merits of central as opposed to suburban housing, which were reflected in the policy oscillation of Dublin Corporation. It also shows an enduring policy bias towards the upper tier of the working class, which led to increasing class and social segregation. While changing policies tended to reflect the influence of political parties in power, the overall political weakness of the working class resulted in a failure to seize control of their own destiny.

In order to understand the nature of working-class suburbanization in early-twentieth century Ireland, it is necessary to recognize the political context of the time, particularly the quest for “Home Rule” which had a considerable bearing on the way in which issues relating to labor and housing were approached.

One of the features which make Ireland somewhat unique in an European context is that the earliest efforts to deal with poor, working-class housing were focused in rural areas. Even in the late nineteenth century Ireland remained predominantly agricultural, experiencing continuing large-scale emigration, rural poverty and unrest. The island of Ireland, still part of the United Kingdom at this time, was ruled directly from London. Attempts to “kill Home Rule by kindness,” under the late British colonial policy of undertaking social and economic reforms, focused largely on rural Ireland. This “Constructive Unionism” included a series of Land Acts and laborers’ housing legislation aimed at placating the agricultural laborer. Thus, by 1914 Ireland’s rural labourers were among the best housed of their class in Western Europe, while little had been done to ease the plight of their urban counterparts.¹

With approximately ninety percent of the Irish population dependent on the land throughout the nineteenth century, it is probably unsurprising that urban housing was slow to become a major political issue.² The two main forces in Irish society at this time, Nationalism and Catholicism, were firmly based in rural Ireland. Urban housing needs failed to win true support or commitment from either group.³

With the exception of the northeast, the industrial revolution had more or less bypassed Ireland. The most rapid nineteenth-century urban growth had

been in Belfast, which by 1901 boasted a population of almost 350,000, fuelled by in-migration of workers employed in shipbuilding and textiles.⁴ Dublin, by contrast, had stagnated for much of the century and by 1901 her position as the most populous city on the island had been usurped by Belfast. About 290,000 people were living within the city boundaries and up to 100,000 in independently-governed suburbs beyond. Cork, which had also experienced nineteenth-century stagnation, was the next largest urban center with approximately 100,000 people (including suburbs).

Working-Class Housing Conditions

At the turn of the twentieth century Ireland's urban working-classes experienced appalling housing conditions. Dublin's squalor in particular had earned it a reputation as one of the most foul and disease-ridden cities of the British Empire. The considerable poverty evident in Dublin city has been linked to industrial decline.⁵ Male manufacturing employment had fallen to just over twenty percent of the workforce by 1911, while a full one-third of the working population comprised unskilled laborers. Heavy dependence on casual sources of income led to chronic underemployment and resulted in low rent-paying capacity which, in turn, was an obstacle to housing improvements. Even skilled tradespeople could have a low earning capacity, and many thousands of families survived on weekly incomes under fifteen shillings.⁶ The bulk of the city's population lived in tenements, the decaying homes of the eighteenth-century aristocracy, now subdivided and let to the poorest families, or in tiny cottages in courts and alleys behind the main streets. Slum dwellers generally had a poor diet which relied heavily on bread and tea, with few vegetables, very occasionally supplemented by pig's feet or boiled bacon.⁷ As late as 1918, many families relied heavily on charity in order to eke out an existence.⁸ Severe overcrowding added to hardship, as families lived in squalid single rooms of tenement houses, sharing a single water supply and toilet in the rear yard.⁹ Death rates in Dublin were higher than those in Calcutta.

Suburbanization in Irish Cities

As in other countries, nineteenth-century suburbanization was associated with the professional and middle classes, often involving developments beyond the city boundaries.¹⁰ Many of the better-off were now living beyond the city limits in independently governed suburbs, termed "townships," which meant that they were no longer paying local taxes, "rates," to the city proper. Dwindling revenue from the rates made it increasingly difficult for the city authorities to support basic services, never mind tackling the worsening working-class housing problem. In Dublin, middle-class suburbanization led to increasing religious and political segregation, as the largely Protestant and Unionist middle-classes moved away, leaving the Catholic and Nationalist-dominated Dublin Corporation to cater to the urban poor. This enabled Unionists to criticize the Corporation's failure to

cope with housing conditions and use it as evidence that Irish nationalists were incapable of self-government.¹¹ In turn, nationalists argued that a lack of political will at government level was hindering their attempts to solve the housing problem, but that in an independent Ireland this would no longer be the case.

Early Provision of Working-Class Housing

There had been a gradual acceptance of the need for intervention to provide sanitary housing for Ireland's urban working-class, much as had been the case in Britain. Slum clearance was enabled by the Artisans' and Labourers' Dwelling Act of 1876 and high density schemes of flat dwellings, as well as some "cottage-style" individual houses, were built by local authorities in central areas. Some philanthropic or semi-philanthropic housing was erected, such as that built by Cork's Improved Dwellings Company¹² or the particularly active Dublin Artisans' Dwellings Company. Such organizations tended to be highly selective in their operations, offering homes to the "respectable," skilled and most securely employed members of the working-classes. Almost all of the working-class housing provided at this time was erected in central areas, apart from some employment-related accommodation, such as tramway cottages close to the depots or housing provided to the south-west of Dublin city at Inchicore, in association with the Great Southern and Western Railway Company's engineering works.

Early Discussion of Suburbanization

By the early twentieth century interest was beginning to be expressed in the provision of working-class housing in suburban locations, largely inspired by the British "garden city" movement and concepts of modern town planning.¹³ Pragmatism also played a part in the move towards suburbanization because, as early as 1900, it was recognized that more distant sites would be needed in order to build new housing on the scale required to tackle Dublin's public health problems.¹⁴ A 1903 conference suggested the desirability of extensive building of self-contained dwellings on the outskirts, served by cheap public transport, which would reduce central congestion and enable the tenement problem to be effectively tackled.¹⁵ Suburbanization was also favored because of its association with the merits of fresh air and open space, the very antithesis of the overcrowded, disease-ridden slums.

It was in the first decade of the twentieth century that Dublin Corporation first built suburban houses. In 1905 the earliest such scheme, to the northeast of the city at Clontarf, was greeted with considerable enthusiasm as "the best method of combating our high death rate and arresting the ravages of consumption and other diseases, in the engendering and spread of which the squalid tenements of Dublin are a potent factor."¹⁶ However, it would appear that many of the workers resisted moving from their homes and communities, with proposals in 1908 to expand the Clontarf scheme abandoned because of the lack of demand.¹⁷

In fact, opposition to working-class suburbanization was both strong and persistent in the early twentieth century, for a number of reasons. It was recognized that many low-income workers needed to live near their workplace, especially given the absence of cheap tram fares for workers. Garden suburb ideas were often seen as too idealistic, given the scale of the housing problem, and it has been suggested that their promotion was confined to a relatively small group of middle-class reformers.¹⁸ Dublin Corporation's Housing Committee was urged not "to delay in chasing ideals . . . you have provided decent dwellings in substitution for kennels not fit to house a dog, whilst others were discussing questions of town planning and garden cities on the basis of wealthy English towns and well-paid English workmen."¹⁹ Residents' organizations often pressed for re-housing in situ.²⁰ The unprecedented scale of suburban development, sometimes requiring land acquisition beyond the municipal boundary, was also seen as problematical.

1913—A Fateful Year

A gradual shift in attitudes with a greater recognition of the need to tackle Ireland's urban slums was evident in the second decade of the twentieth century. The key to understanding these changes lies in a series of events which took place in 1913. Labor organization had been slow to take off in Irish cities, largely due to the casual, unskilled nature of much available work and the huge labor surplus which enabled employers to deal swiftly with "troublesome" union members by replacing them with nonunion workers. Now, however, labor unrest was increasing across Ireland, union membership was on the rise, and the labor cause became associated with the dominant personality of Jim Larkin, leader of the most militant union, the Irish Transport and General Workers Union (ITGWU). In what became almost a personal battle of wills, the Federated Union of Employers, led by William Martin Murphy, who controlled Dublin's tramways as well as the most widely-read newspaper in the country, attempted to break Larkin's union in the autumn of 1913. Beginning with the sacking of ITGWU members employed by the Dublin United Tramways Company, followed by a sympathetic strike and subsequent lock-out of unionized workers in the city, the 1913 Dublin Lockout was a turning point for the history of labor in Ireland and, with it, the "housing question."

On Sunday August 31 1913, police with batons charged a crowd that had gathered for an ITGWU rally on O'Connell Street.²¹ The incident resulted in a laborer's death, and rioting breaking out across Dublin city. Just days later, on September 2, two tenement houses on Church Street collapsed, killing seven people. The coincidence of these two factors, labor unrest and tenement collapse, sparked huge discussion and proved a stimulus to greater action in relation to housing. Union success was increasingly associated with the impoverished conditions of the workers. "Twenty thousand families—one third of the people of Dublin—live in one-room tenements. How many of our federated employers after twelve months of life under such conditions would think of abstract consid-

erations of citizenship or industrial prosperity?"²² Even the conservative Irish Times newspaper acknowledged the appalling social conditions that contributed to Larkin's following among the slum-dwellers. In an editorial following the tenement collapse, it noted that members of the ITGWU lived "for the most part in slums like Church Street" and that "the condition of the Dublin slums is responsible not only for disease and crime but for much of our industrial unrest . . . The workers, whose only escape from these wretched homes lies in the public house, would not be human beings if they did not turn a ready ear to anybody who promises to improve their lot." The writer concluded that "if every unskilled labourer in Dublin were the tenant of a decent cottage of three or even two rooms, the city would not be divided into two hostile camps."²³

A link was clearly being made between the provision of good housing and social order. In a British context, housing reform has been linked to fears of a British Bolshevik revolution and the idea of "better housing as a bulwark against revolution."²⁴ Similarly in Ireland it was really only with the prospect of Home Rule and labor unrest in 1913 that urban housing attained political importance. The association of the housing question with public order was to remain strong in the public mind with the outbreak of violence in Dublin in 1916.²⁵ In 1913 activists from various vantage points argued for improvements to working-class housing. For example, the Catholic church, apparently fearful of rampant socialism and the possibility that strikers' children would be sent to atheist homes in England, was at last prompted to react to working-class problems, arguing that a remedy must be found to the plight of "the multitudes of poverty-stricken men struggling in our cities for standing room in which to breathe."²⁶ Readers of the suffrage newspaper were urged to "use your influence to better the dwellings of the poor . . . Do you honestly think these one-room tenements are a fit habitation for our fellow citizens? Cannot we do something to help and give the poor a chance of leading decent, respectable lives?"²⁷ The links made between decency and respectability, and the concerns for moral, spiritual, and physical welfare of slum-dwellers were not unique to the Irish context, but certainly contributed to the arguments favoring a new form of housing for the working classes in healthy suburban locations.

Housing Inquiry

Following the Church Street tenement collapse and increasing calls for "something to be done," a housing inquiry was established by the Local Government Board for Ireland (ILGB). The report of the inquiry, published in 1914, showed that just under thirty percent of Dublin's population lived in slums. Unlike most other cities, the slums were not in specific, geographically defined areas, but were spread throughout the city.²⁸ Conditions were quite shocking, with over one-fifth of tenements having only one toilet for every twenty to forty people. Over three-quarters of tenement households lived in single rooms. This unhealthy overcrowding was one of the main explanations for the city's high death rates. The Inquiry found that 60,000 people in the city occupied housing which was almost

or actually “unfit for human habitation” and needed to be re-housed. To have condemned and closed these dwellings would, on its own, simply have led to further overcrowding.²⁹ There was nowhere else for the people to go.

The report of the Inquiry suggested that the housing problem was getting worse and that even a massive renovation program would not suffice to solve it.³⁰ A substantial number of new housing units were needed, and one of the main questions raised by the Inquiry was where these 14,000 or so new dwellings should be built. Many influential witnesses to the Inquiry favored suburbanization, including the Dublin City Architect.³¹ The Dublin Citizens’ Association stated that its ideal was “the suburban house for the working man,” although some central housing should be provided for those people “whose work and means will not allow them to live outside.”³² Patrick Geddes also pointed out the “great value of the garden suburb” and argued for a social mix, stating that both economically and morally it was important to combine as many types and sizes of dwelling as practicable in each neighborhood. He paid particular attention to the importance of citizen participation, especially of the poor who were all too often treated “as if they were mere passive creatures to be housed like cattle.”

Overall, the Committee of Inquiry came out strongly in favor of suburban housing.³³ Its findings suggested the need for large-scale perimeter housing developments built with State aid in order to relieve central congestion. Despite considerable support for this suburban preference from planners and architects, the response of many senior Dublin Corporation officials to planned suburbanization remained negative. For the rest of the decade, continuing calls for suburban working-class housing emanated from bodies including the Royal Institute of the Architects of Ireland, the Civics Institute of Ireland, the Citizens Housing League and Dublin Tenants League. It has been shown, however, that Dublin Corporation’s housing strategy still emphasized the provision of cheap dwellings in central areas for unskilled laborers.³⁴ While the ILGB was arguing for suburbanization in a 1918 report, Dublin Corporation’s North City Survey promoted tenement refurbishment and high-density central housing.³⁵ Many councilors continued to prefer an infill approach to the housing problem in order to provide dwellings near people’s workplace, claiming that people would not be willing to move out to suburbs, and that they could not afford the transport costs involved. It was also argued that a policy of suburbanization would neglect the poorest and worst-housed classes as, indeed, turned out to be the case. The standard local authority terraced house, often on a cleared central site, remained the acceptable norm with most politicians until about 1920. From this time on, the lack of availability of central land forced the issue of suburbanization to be addressed, often somewhat reluctantly.

State Intervention and the Promotion of Citizenship

Although labor unrest in part stimulated the increasing recognition of the urban housing problem and calls for a suburban solution, little was done to further the housing cause in the years following the Housing Inquiry. This was largely be-

cause attention became focussed on the World War and on civil unrest in Ireland. Discussion persisted, however, much of which continued to point to the need for good housing to protect social order. For example, in 1915 the Dublin Corporation Housing Committee, arguing for improvements to the appalling condition of the poor in the city, suggested: "if, on humanitarian grounds, their tragic appeal will not be listened to, passions may be aroused of menace to those in happier circumstances who turn a deaf ear to their clamour to be allowed to live under decent conditions." The report continued with a reminder that many Irish volunteers, including some 14,000 from Dublin alone, had gone "to fight the Empire's battle." Reflecting the British "homes fit for heroes" argument, it asked: "Are they to find the Empire's gratitude on their return represented in the refusal of the Government to allow the Corporation to lift their wives and children from the horrors of life in dilapidated tenement houses or cellar dwellings into the atmosphere of light and life in a sanitary, self-contained, comfortable home?" Similarly, an ILGB report on Dublin's housing in 1918 argued that a lasting solution to Dublin's housing problems would be "most valuable measure for the defence of the realm."³⁶ It has been argued that the 1919 Housing (Ireland) Act was specifically targeted at curbing unrest.³⁷

The year 1922 saw the partition of the island of Ireland into two states, Northern Ireland and the Irish Free State. The social order argument for housing reform persisted in the new Free State, with the recognition by President William (W.T.) Cosgrave that until the housing problem was settled "there will be no genuine peace or contentment in the land. For no populace housed as so many of the people of Dublin are, can be good citizens, or loyal and devoted subjects of the State, no matter what the State may be."³⁸ The Irish Free State government recognized its obligation to provide adequate housing for its citizens and was also spurred to intervene in the housing market by a need to do better, and be seen to do better, than its colonial predecessors. As the urban housing shortage was probably the largest and most urgent social problem facing the new Free State government, a grand gesture was deemed necessary. This took the form of a "one million pound grant" which was made available to local authorities erecting urban working-class housing schemes.

Political independence in 1922 saw the replacement of colonial state organization by a new conservatism, favoring the propertied, farming, and middle classes. The "conservative revolutionaries" forming the new government were almost exclusively drawn from the ranks of the middle class, and the 1920s housing policies reflect this in their emphasis on the supply of good middle-class housing. A severe housing shortage in the early 1920s, due to a combination of factors including political turmoil and increased construction costs, affected people of all classes. Legislation introduced to tackle the situation focused on the provision of grants for owner-occupied, middle-class housing, with special allowances for civil servants. Thus Government policy in the 1920s promoted housing for the middle classes and it was not until the 1930s that the emphasis changed back to that of slum clearance.

Home ownership was encouraged in the 1920s through the provision of

building subsidies and cheap loans for owner-occupiers. The policies of the time reflect a dual ideology; the single family house, which was thought to promote stable family life, and home-ownership, which was believed to create responsible citizens and a stable society. Indeed, in 1922 an Irish Builder and Engineer editorial argued that the principle of home ownership should be encouraged and facilitated because “it tends to the stability of the State, and to a sense of good citizenship.”³⁹ The principle of home ownership was extended to the better-off members of the working classes, as suburban “cottage estates” were built by Dublin Corporation for tenant purchase throughout the 1920s. This is perhaps unsurprising, given that the majority of Corporation members were themselves shopkeepers and small-scale businesspeople who would have accepted the desirability of home ownership. The State’s promotion of single-family suburban houses appears to have been endorsed by the Roman Catholic clergy. The stated preference of Monsignor Michael Cronin was for the “one house, one family” ideal, while it was claimed that the clearance of tenements to be replaced by individual houses had resulted in extraordinary transformations with “no more sickness and misery, physical or moral.”⁴⁰ Property ownership was far preferable to the dangers of Communism! “If a Communist organizer wished to lay plans for the development of Communist cells throughout Dublin for the building of ‘red forts’ for revolutionary purposes, could he do better than dot the city over with large barracks of propertyless men?”⁴¹ The same article referred to the “worker’s little estate surrounding his castle . . . the more men you deprive of even the minimum of property represented by a garden and a really private entrance, the more you are weakening throughout the state that clinging to and respect for property that is the expression of man’s desire for liberty.”⁴²

Suburbanization and Tenant Purchase

With the push to promote private property, home ownership and citizenship in the 1920s, the new Irish Free State tended to focus its housing policies on the middle-classes. However, the 1920s also saw a shift in the approach to working-class housing, partly due to the lack of suitable central sites and the increasing urgency of the working-class problem. Suburbanization was now seen as the most practical approach, as in 1922 when the Dublin Corporation Housing Committee came to the conclusion that “the best policy would be to undertake schemes on large virgin soil areas . . . in preference to small schemes here and there throughout the city.”⁴³ Through its recommendation that all housing schemes undertaken for the next number of years should be carried out in suburban areas, the Housing Committee accepted the inevitability of suburbanization as the major approach to working-class housing.⁴⁴ Solutions by means of infill were not seriously considered again until the 1930s.

Even more significant for the shaping of social and political space was the decision to promote a new form of tenure for the high-quality suburban homes built for workers in the 1920s. At about the same time that planned working-class suburbanization was becoming established as the norm, Dublin Corpora-

tion began to offer its self-contained cottages for sale to the occupiers. The policy of selling houses to occupants on a "tenant purchase" basis was an early step towards the trend towards owner occupation which became so prevalent in Ireland by the latter half of the twentieth century. While at the time, the idea of private ownership was seen to enhance civic spirit, the promotion of owner occupation by Dublin Corporation also involved a strong element of pragmatism. The annual losses to the City caused through sale of housing by tenant purchase were lower than those costs incurred by letting the same houses on weekly tenancies at "uneconomic rents" (i.e. the standard rental of 2s. 6d. per room which was charged for all Dublin Corporation suburban dwellings). It was argued that the better houses being built in suburban locations should be sold off to reduce the burden on the ratepayers, leaving further resources free to tackle the problem of housing the "less fortunate sections of the working classes."⁴⁵ In fact, there is little evidence that any serious attempt was made to undertake the latter during the 1920s when Dublin Corporation focused on the provision of "superior" dwellings in tenant purchase schemes, which were beyond the means of the most poverty-stricken slum dwellers.⁴⁶ Over the five year period from 1924 to 1929 almost the entire output of local authority housing in Dublin, some 2436 houses, was sold by tenant purchase.

Although at the time it was suggested that this move to supply housing for tenant purchase was demand driven, and there is certainly some evidence that people were interested in buying out their houses,⁴⁷ the sales policy was not uncontroversial, even at the outset. In 1923 the Irish Labour Party and Trades Union Congress referred to the fact that "the workers are being compelled to purchase these houses, and . . . saddled with the cost of maintenance."⁴⁸ The report of Dublin's second major housing inquiry, published in 1943, was even more critical, suggesting that "many tenants did not want to buy a house, but used the only means at their disposal of getting a house. If similar accommodation could have been got on renting terms most of them would have preferred it."⁴⁹ Clearly, the middle-class policymakers had imposed their values on the working classes.

At the time, it was recognized that only the more well-off members of the working classes could afford to live in the tenant-purchase suburban schemes, and even they often had to struggle to make ends meet. By focusing so heavily on this "better class of dwelling," Dublin Corporation was, in effect, turning its back on the most needy members of society. Even extensive suburban building would not enable any single slum area to be actually cleared, as the majority of the inhabitants were unable to afford the cost of living in the outer areas. This was recognized in a 1928 call for the responsible government minister to consider "the necessity of accommodating more people in central areas."⁵⁰ As early as 1918 it had been suggested that those moved from condemned areas should be re-housed as near as possible to their sources of employment, while the more remote sites would be reserved for the better-paid artisans who could afford to pay the expenses of transit.⁵¹ In this way, the evolving housing policy was des-

tioned to reinforce social segregation, as the wealthier workers would move to suburbs, leaving the poorest people in the decaying core.

Although the new Free State government was attempting to forge a separate identity, links with British housing policy persisted throughout the 1920s, particularly in relation to construction methods and standards, housing style and the application of town planning principles. The idealized working-class garden suburb built at densities of twelve houses to the acre, with private gardens front and rear as well as access to allotments, became the norm in Ireland as well as Britain at this time. Once the principle of suburbanization had been accepted, lower land costs encouraged the development of lower density layouts on the lines advocated by Raymond Unwin and promoted in Britain's Tudor Walters Report.⁵² High densities were associated with the slums, and one of the most potent arguments of the pro-suburban lobby was that, by erecting new houses in central areas the old slums were merely being replaced by new ones.⁵³

As a result, throughout the 1920s the erection of five-roomed tenant-purchased suburban cottages was the most common form of Dublin Corporation housing provision. The scheme at Marino, begun in 1924, was intended from the outset as a model scheme with superior dwellings.⁵⁴ Almost 1300 five-roomed houses were built, using a variety of materials and different construction methods. There was also variation in layout, with groupings of houses around open green areas and culs-de-sac. Another feature to be replicated at all future suburban estates was the reservation of prime sites of building land around the edges of the scheme for lease to private individuals or public utility societies (a form of cooperative housing organization) in order to enable the erection of better-class housing on these sites.⁵⁵ This "reserved areas" policy achieved additional social mix in the Dublin Corporation suburban estates.

In adopting a policy of planned working-class suburbanization, Dublin Corporation practically ceased the erection of city center flats. In fact, the only new flat scheme built in the 1920s was loudly condemned. In a harsh editorial, the *Irish Builder and Engineer* warned of the dangers of reverting to the "bad old flat system," stating that the true solution for Dublin remained "the small, self-contained detached or semi-detached house on virgin sites."⁵⁶ The honorary secretary of the Civics Institute of Ireland, denounced "this last scheme of the Dublin Corporation for 're-housing' the people in inhuman packing-cases, regardless of protest."⁵⁷

Arguments Against Flat Provision

In Ireland, the question of suburbanization had become intertwined with arguments as to the relative merits of flats and self-contained houses, as cottages were now almost exclusively associated with greenfield suburban sites. Opponents of flat building therefore tended to side with those lobbying in favor of suburbanization, despite the recognized fact that the slum dwellers themselves wished to remain in the city center, preferably in houses. In 1921 W.J. Larkin, President of

the Dublin Tenants' Association, argued that "the Corporation must build on 'virgin' sites cottages, not cages or 'warehouses'—they have been forced into recognizing this as the true method of housing."⁵⁸ The belief that flat life was somehow "unnatural" was a frequently used argument. A 1932 article warned of "the moral dangers of the common staircase," echoing the sentiments of many Victorian commentators, and claimed furthermore that the building of large numbers of flats was a "positive menace," as it was in line with the philosophy of Communism. The argument in favor of flats was not advanced by the Corporation's initial forays into public housing provision, which had been decried as creating new slums in place of the old ones.⁵⁹ Manning Robertson also suggested that "life in a flat deprives the family of cohesion and leaves it, so to say, without roots in the soil."⁶⁰

It would appear that the general opposition to flat provision united all classes. Nevertheless, suburban housing was certainly not the ideal for many working-class inhabitants of the central areas who were uprooted from their communities. For them, cottages were preferable to flats, but they wished to remain in the center of the city. Residents referred to the prospect of being "banished" to the outskirts of the city, as the "housing schemes gave them houses, but it stripped away the fabric of their lives."⁶¹ However, accepted practice, by then, was to maintain low housing densities in cottage estates, and to restrict higher density housing to flat schemes. There was, apparently, no room in the modern Free State for the "old-fashioned" high-density central housing which had been so popular with tenants prior to the World War.

A New Push in the 1930s

By 1930, opposition deputies were expressing serious concern that Government housing policies to date had not succeeded in tackling the worst cases of deprivation.⁶² In spite of the number of houses built, in 1930 Dublin's Medical Officer of Health showed that the city now contained more unsanitary dwellings than before. New legislation, combined with a renewed concern for the welfare of the poor in the early 1930s, resulted in a change in Dublin Corporation housing policy. Recognizing that the tenant-purchase policy had done little to solve the slum problem, the former was abandoned in favor of rental schemes, while more flats were built, and in general the emphasis was placed on cost-cutting and the construction of smaller dwellings. Such changes were replicated across the country under the 1932 Housing (Financial and Miscellaneous Provisions) Act, with the main activities of local authorities now devoted to slum clearance and re-housing.

The new attack on the worst slums was associated with a return to central area flat building, although some of the displaced population was also moved to rental housing in suburban estates. In 1934 the Housing Committee of Dublin Corporation called for a 'balanced housing program', suggesting that one suburban cottage should be built for every two central dwellings.⁶³ This proposal was based on calculations which suggested that only one-third of the families to

be housed by Dublin Corporation could afford to live in suburban cottages, while the remaining 12,000 families needed to be accommodated in central areas. Although suburban dwellings were desirable, because of the extremely small means of the people for whom accommodation was to be provided it would be impossible to provide a general housing program for such classes in suburban areas.⁶⁴

While acknowledging the cost and time involved in living away from the wage-earners' place of occupation (the main objections to building "suburban cottages and garden homes"), the Irish Builder and Engineer argued strongly that two compensating factors made working-class suburbanization a better option, namely "the value in hard cash of the gardens' produce, and the increments in health and happiness which are the natural produce of open-air life."⁶⁵ Similarly, the Anglican Archbishop of Dublin emphasized that, while some housing must be provided near the center of employment, "a steadily pursued transference of houses to the outskirts of a city serves to attract factories and workshops to follow the worker to where he lives. The welfare of a city, morally and physically, is bound up closely with the housing of its citizens of every class and with their ready access to fresh air." He further argued that such suburban dwellings had a positive benefit to home life, allowing the occupants "to live healthily and with decency."⁶⁶ Others argued that flats "never can be free from radical social defects" because the children "will be shut away from green land, gardens, privacy, domestic discipline."⁶⁷

One of the unusual features of the Dublin situation was the fact that flats in central areas were let at cheaper rents than those charged for self-contained suburban cottages. Basic Corporation rent was two shillings per room for flats, two shillings and six pence per room for cottages. It was not an economic rent in that it did not meet the costs incurred by the Corporation, and it was far below the rents payable for inferior housing accommodation in private ownership.⁶⁸ Nevertheless, calculations of family incomes in "fairly typical" city housing areas showed that even these low rents presented a heavy burden on the family budget. The principle of erecting flats to be let to workers at cheaper rents than those charged for self-contained dwellings had been accepted before the First World War.⁶⁹ However, because central land was more expensive and flats cost more to build, this left a much greater subsidy to be paid by the city authorities for flat re-housing.⁷⁰ Dublin was rare in this policy of letting out flats at a lesser rent than that of cottages, but this was done on the basis that the "block schemes" were intended to house those who simply could not afford to move to suburbs where the rents were relatively high, and additional transport costs had to be met.⁷¹ This implies a tacit acceptance that social segregation was an inevitable outcome of this policy.

Given these circumstances, it is probably unsurprising that Dublin Corporation favored the erection of large-scale suburban housing schemes for rental in the 1930s. Over six thousand suburban houses were built between 1930 and 1939. Although subsidized, however, rents on the new estates tended to be higher than the accommodation from which the residents came, thus actively dis-

couraging some from accepting tenancies and creating hardship for those who did. A 1944 article explained how “the more affluent tenants have moved to Crumlin or Kimmage. Those who remain are unemployed with large families and simply cannot pay the rent of a Crumlin house.”⁷² The author outlined the circumstances whereby a family with nine children had been offered a house for 10s. 8d. per week, minus bath, heat, and light. As both parents were unemployed, the family income comprised 23s. from the Labour Exchange, plus 13s. a week in food vouchers. They also obtained cheap stew from a nearby food kitchen. With the bigger rent and transport costs, “it would be impossible for the family to exist at all. They must wait for cheaper accommodation; and in the meantime the children must remain in wet, verminous, stinking surroundings.”⁷³

Throughout the period under discussion it was evident that the people living in the slums preferred to be re-housed in inner-city locations rather than suburbs, but disliked flats. However, their preferences were largely overlooked, probably due to the chronic problem of working-class political weakness. To them, the closely-knit fabric of their communities would be unraveled as the people were dispersed to various outlying estates. Author Brendan Behan famously likened his family’s move to suburban Crumlin to going to Siberia!⁷⁴ A lack of amenities in many of the new areas, as well as poor and expensive transport links, led to problems for the new suburban dwellers.⁷⁵ “They were all moved out to places like Ballyfermot and Finglas . . . And none of them wanted to go . . . And it was funny, you could move a man ten miles out and on a Saturday night he’d come back into the old pub for his drink.”⁷⁶ At a meeting of the Civics Institute in 1932, R.M. Gwynn remarked that it seemed to be impossible to induce people to go outside the city (i.e. to newly-built suburban areas), even if dwellings were there for them.⁷⁷

From the 1930s to the New Century

Large-scale development on greenfield sites was characteristic of both Dublin and Cork in the 1930s.⁷⁸ Renting tended to replace tenant purchase until the 1960s, and there was also an increasing physical distinction between the type of accommodation offered by public and private developers from the 1930s onwards. Working-class local authority houses were now smaller and less elaborate than the average speculatively-built houses, while flat provision was almost exclusively associated with the slum clearance program. It could be suggested that these differences in physical appearance and tenure, as well as the focus on accommodating urban slum households, led to increased social differentiation between those in local authority housing and private housing. In practice, however, a broad spectrum of the working class was housed in the suburban schemes, therefore ensuring a degree of social mix.⁷⁹ Although it took some time, the sense of community which had initially been lost in the move to the suburbs was reconstructed in estates such as Crumlin and Ballyfermot, with people eventually developing a sense of pride in their new neighborhoods. It is also notewor-

thy that these working-class suburbs did not have, as yet, a distinctive political identity. From the 1930s, the mainstream Fianna Fáil party, which had focused on slum re-housing while in government, was the strongest political party in the new working-class suburbs.

After World War Two the bulk of working-class housing construction took place in the suburbs, where low-density development following the pattern established in the 1920s contributed to urban sprawl in the 1950s and 1960s. Housing need in Ireland continued to outstrip delivery, so that as late as the 1960s housing legislation was being promoted on the basis of a continued need for slum clearance. The last of Dublin's tenements were finally demolished in the 1970s, although by then, the combined benefits of improved health care and other aspects of the welfare state had done much to reduce mortality rates. The process of working-class suburbanization evolved yet further in the late 1960s and 1970s, when a series of "new towns" was planned on the periphery of Dublin. The increased scale of the undertaking, combined with a "housing first" policy which meant that the provision of services lagged behind the arrival of new residents, contributed to the perceived social failure of these developments. Despite the aim of achieving social balance in the new towns, significant internal patterns of socio-spatial segregation resulted due to the form of planning based on the neighborhood principle. The relocation of populations at the edge of the built up area also served to make the socially excluded less visible. A major change was to occur from the 1980s, as local authority housing become increasingly residualized. This was the result of a significant drop in provision as government began to withdraw from direct involvement in the supply of working-class housing while continuing to promote owner occupation. In particular, problems arose due to the 1984 Surrender Grant which enabled tenants to purchase their own homes in an area of their own choosing,⁸⁰ resulting in increasing marginalization and stigmatization of the remaining tenants.⁸¹ Particularly in the past decade and a half, social housing in Ireland has become housing for the socially excluded, a view which is recognized by the residents themselves.⁸² Studies have illustrated the extent to which increasing risks of poverty are associated with being a local authority tenant, particularly in the large concentrations of urban public housing, which are often poorly serviced and segregated from better-off areas.⁸³ In spite of these hardships, a strong sense of social and communal solidarity persists.

The politicization of the working-class suburbs has been significantly different in Ireland than in other European contexts. Labor was never a strong political force. Difficulties in harnessing the power of the working-class vote were compounded by the way in which electoral boundaries tended to splinter the poorest suburbs, which were often incorporated in the same electoral district as well-off areas.⁸⁴ Most political activism was characterised by community organization, influenced by the 1960's civil rights movement and largely independent of party politics. With the exception of some individual candidates, the residualized suburban estates tended to be ignored by mainstream political parties be-

cause of high voter apathy in such areas.⁸⁵ However, since the late 1980s the Sinn Féin party has actively targeted these voters, taking on a radical socialist role in many working-class communities.

Conclusion

One of the remarkable features of present-day housing in Ireland is the degree to which processes initiated in the 1920s have persisted, particularly in terms of tenure and location. The first large working-class housing estates on the edges of Irish cities were built by local authorities in the 1920s, as at Dublin's Marino, Drumcondra, and Cabra. The combined policies of the State and local authority, bolstered by the support of the Roman Catholic church, sought to promote home ownership and, in pursuing a sales policy during the 1920s, tended to favor the upper end of the working-class market. Both direct and indirect subsidy to house purchasers became, and remain, a feature of Irish housing policy from this time. Indeed, the frequently-noted centrality of the principle of home ownership in Irish society has resulted in a unique tenure pattern, with almost eighty percent of housing stock in owner occupation.⁸⁶ In this context, it is probably unsurprising that radical politics failed to evolve. Homeowners tend to make poor socialists, as the conservatives of the 1930s had predicted. It is only in recent years, as the local authority sector has been increasingly marginalized, that more radical party politics has gained a foothold in such communities. Many factors contributed to the promotion of suburbanization and subsequent privatization of working-class housing by middle-class politicians. It took a long time for the Irish working-classes to overcome their political weakness, by which time spatial patterns of segregation and suburbanization had become entrenched.

NOTES

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1. F.H.A. Aalen, "The Rehousing of Rural Labourers in Ireland under the Labourers (Ireland) Acts, 1883–1919," *Journal of Historical Geography*, 12 (1986), 287–306.

2. Anne Power, *Hovels to High Rise, State Housing in Europe since 1850* (London, 1993), 319. Inaction certainly did not reflect ignorance of the serious problems which beset the cities. In the case of Dublin, inquiries had begun in the 1880s.

3. Mary E. Daly, *Dublin: the Deposed Capital, a social and economic history, 1860–1914* (Cork, 1984).

4. In its nineteenth-century industrial growth, commercial base, and class structure, Belfast was strikingly similar to industrial cities of the United Kingdom, and quite different from other Irish cities.

5. Dublin's industrial and occupational structure is detailed in Daly, *Deposed Capital*, 20–76.

6. C.A. Cameron, *Reminiscences* (Dublin, 1913). The currency referred to is the pre-decimal pound. This was divided into 20 shillings, each shilling containing 12 pence. One shilling equals 5 pence (decimal pound) or 6.3 cent (Euro equivalent).

7. *ibid.*

8. Reports and Printed Documents of the Corporation of Dublin (RPDCD), Report Number 13 (1918).

9. See Jacinta Prunty, *Dublin Slums 1800–1925* (Dublin, 1998).
10. A.M. Fahy, “Place and Class in Cork,” in *Cork History and Society*, Patrick O’Flanagan and Cornelius G. Buttimer ed. (Dublin, 1993), 793–812.
11. Daly, *Deposed Capital*, 317–318.
12. K. Keohane, “Model homes for model(led) citizens,” *Space and Culture*, 5 (2002): 387–404.
13. M.J. Bannon, “The Genesis of Modern Irish Planning,” in *The Emergence of Irish Planning 1880–1920*, M.J. Bannon ed. (1985), 189–260.
14. Report of the Departmental Committee Appointed by the Local Government Board of Ireland to Inquire into the Public Health of the City of Dublin, British Parliamentary Papers, cd 243 (1900), XXXIX.
15. RPDCD 176 (1903), 383–96.
16. *Irish Builder and Engineer*, 46 (1905), 170 (hereafter *IBE*).
17. RPDCD 145 (1909), 585–587
18. Murray Fraser, *John Bull’s Other Homes, State Housing and British Policy in Ireland, 1883–1922* (Liverpool, 1996), 145.
19. RPDCD 18 (1919), 124.
20. RPDCD 82 (1914), 814; RPDCD 84 (1914), 829.
21. Pdraig Yeates, *Lockout, Dublin 1913* (Dublin, 2000).
22. E.A. Aston, letter to the *Irish Times*, September 3, 1913.
23. *Irish Times*, September 4, 1913, 6
24. A.S. Wohl, *The Eternal Slum* (London, 1977) 64; also M. Swenarton, *Homes fit for Heroes* (London, 1981), G. Stedman-Jones, *Outcast London* (Oxford, 1971).
25. P.C. Cowan, *Report on Dublin housing* (Dublin 1918), 31, also Fraser, *John Bull’s other homes* (1996), 154–155.
26. Quoted in Daly, *Deposed Capital*, 115.
27. Alice Stoney, “The Homes of the Poor,” *Irish Citizen* October 4, 1913, 158.
28. Charles A. Cameron, *How the Poor Live* (Dublin, 1904), 2.
29. Report of the Departmental Committee appointed by the Local Government Board for Ireland to Inquire into the Housing Conditions of the Working Classes in the City of Dublin (Dublin, 1914), 18–25 (hereafter Report of Inquiry, 1914).
30. Report of Inquiry, 1914, xix.
31. *Ibid.*, 40.
32. *Ibid.*, 160.
33. *Ibid.*, 31.
34. Fraser, *John Bull’s other homes*, 162.
35. Cowan, *Report* and RPDCD, 13 (1918).
36. Cowan, *Report*, 31.
37. Power, *Hovels to High Rise*, 327.
38. quoted in *IBE*, 65 (1924), 169.
39. *IBE*, 63 (1922), 5.
40. F. McGrath, “The Sweep and the Slums,” *Studies*, 20 (1931), 544.
41. F. McGrath, “Homes for the people,” *Studies*, 21 (1932), 272.
42. *Ibid.*, 271.
43. RPDCD 62 (1922), 95.
44. RPDCD 309 (1922).
45. RPDCD 38 (1931), 252.
46. Prices for new local authority houses in 1927 ranged from £330 to £460. RPDCD 97 (1927).
47. Department of Local Government and Public Health, *Annual Report* (Dublin, 1929), 76.
48. Reported *IBE*, 64 (1923), 643.
49. Report of the Inquiry into the Housing of the Working Classes of the City of Dublin, 1939–43 (Dublin, 1943), 183.
50. Dáil Debates, 27, 586
51. RPDCD 13 (1918).
52. Report of the Committee appointed by the President of the Local Government Board and the Secretary for Scotland to Consider Questions of Building Construction in Connection with the Provision of Dwellings for the Working Classes in England, Wales and Scotland (London, 1918).

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54. RPDCD, 14 (1923).
55. Ruth McManus, *Dublin 1910–1940, Shaping the city and suburbs* (Dublin, 2002), 235–304; Ruth McManus, "Public Utility Societies, Dublin Corporation and the development of Dublin, 1920–1940," *Irish Geography*, 29 (1996), 27–37.
56. IBE, 63 (1922), 549.
57. *Ibid.*, 578.
58. quoted in IBE, 62 (1921), 317.
59. R.M. Butler in IBE, 62 (1921), 118.
60. IBE, 73 (1932), 110.
61. Máirín Johnston, *Around the banks of Pimlico* (Dublin, 1985), 94.
62. *Dáil Debates*, 33, 1653.
63. RPDCD 16 (1934).
64. RPDCD 28 (1934).
65. IBE, 75 (1934), 331.
66. Most Rev. John A. F. Gregg, D.D., in IBE, 75 (1934), 316–317.
67. Aodh de Blacam in IBE, 75 (1934), 310.
68. RPDCD 38 (1931).
69. RPDCD 51 (1912), RPDCD 82 (1914).
70. RPDCD 82 (1914), RPDCD 13 (1918).
71. Report of Inquiry 1939–43, 122.
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73. *ibid.*
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