



Imposing Tenure Mix on Residential Neighbourhoods: A Review of Actions to Address Unfinished Housing Estates in the Republic of Ireland

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Abstract: *The 'Celtic Tiger' years (1995-2007) saw prosperous economic growth in the Republic of Ireland and an intense period of housing construction and urban development. In 2008 Ireland entered into recession, which resulted in a collapse of the property market and the construction industry. This collapse left just over 2,000 housing developments unfinished across the country. Since 2008, the Irish Government, in conjunction with local authorities, has been developing strategies and plans to finalise these unfinished estates. This paper reports on the current practices for resolving issues in unfinished housing estates in the Republic of Ireland, with a particular focus on the plans to utilise empty housing for social housing purposes. The paper critiques the ways in which this imposed tenure mix threaten housing policy objectives for sustainable and balanced communities. It is the contention of this paper that this housing practice needs urgent review, as the recent hasty reversal of housing policies in Ireland, without due consideration for the consequences, has had a detrimental effect on neighbourhood cohesion.*

Keywords: Housing policy; affordable housing; social housing; unfinished housing estates; tenure mix; austerity.



Introduction

The issue of unfinished housing estates in Ireland has been a dominant feature of public and political debate in Ireland since 2008. Ghost or unfinished housing estates are those residential developments that were left incomplete at the time of financial collapse in Ireland in 2008 (see Kitchin *et al.*, 2010). Given the scale of the problem, the Irish Government Department of Environment, Community and Local Government (DECLG) conducted a survey in 2011 of all unfinished housing estates across the country. The survey work involved the inspection of a total of 2,876 housing development sites of two or more dwellings and documented the extent of work completed, or unfinished, as well as the situation in terms of the presence of a property developer. Following the completion of the survey, 701 housing developments were recorded as complete (though not all houses were occupied) and a further 109 developments were sites where work had not commenced at all (DECLG, 2012). Overall, the survey concluded that there were a total of 2,066 unfinished housing estate developments in Ireland (DECLG, 2012). Of these developments, there were varying degrees of further work to be conducted to finalise construction work. For some developments there was infrastructural work to complete (e.g. roads, fencing, landscaping), while for others housing development had ceased mid-construction leaving houses unfinished. The DECLG developed a series of actions to address the issue of unfinished housing estates. One such action was to prioritise the works needed on 128 developments to improve public safety (DECLG, 2012). This was critical as a number of housing developments were left in dangerous and unsafe conditions. In other cases, local authorities took responsibility for the land in question to begin to rectify the issues of unfinished housing developments.

The number of empty houses within the unfinished estates runs into the hundreds of thousands across the country (Kitchin *et al.*, 2010). One of the actions for resolving the issue of empty houses in unfinished housing estates is to allocate the homes for social housing needs within local authority areas. According to the Irish Government's DECLG there are approximately 3,200 homes in unfinished housing estates that can be utilised for social housing purposes (DECLG, 2012). Indeed, in many cases, local authorities have purchased housing within these residential estates in bulk from NAMA (National Asset Management Authority) to be used for this purpose. NAMA was established to manage the infrastructure and property left unfinished after the economic crisis hit (see Kitchin *et al.*, 2010 for further elaboration). The proposal to use empty houses within unfinished housing estates across the country is the focus of this paper whereby a case study is used to critically review this action. Prior to examining this action in detail, the paper outlines recent trends in housing policy and development in Ireland over the last 10 to 15 years to contextualise this current housing practice. Indeed, it is the rapid reversal of the policies discussed below that this paper critiques.

Housing development and housing policy trends in Ireland

The development of new residential dwellings in Ireland has been the subject of debate around ghost estates and unfinished housing estates. Scheme houses – those residential properties that are developed within a larger residential estate (e.g. master planned estate) – were a dominant form of residential development in Ireland since 2005 (see Table 1; DECLG, 2011). The popularity of these residential estates sees around half of all residential construction in Ireland taking this form from 2005-2011. The popularity of these master



planned estates was at its peak from 2005-2008. The data commences from 2005 as prior to this period ‘scheme houses’ was not a residential category for the Department. The move away from approvals of individual dwellings, to those found in residential estates, highlights that residential development in Ireland moved very much in line with international trends in terms of master planned estates being a popular form of residential delivery (see McGuirk and Dowling, 2009). This is highly evident in the residential landscape of Irish cities. With the housing market crash there was a return to development of individual dwellings being the most popular form of residential delivery. However, it is the construction, and subsequent legacies of the master planned estates that are the focus of this paper, together with the hasty decisions to reverse housing policies that now prescribe today’s housing realities in Irish neighbourhoods.

Table 1: New Housing Development, Republic of Ireland, 2005-2011

Year	Individual House		Scheme House		Apartments		TOTAL
	#	%	#	%	#	%	
2005	20,362	25.3	42,160	52.3	18,035	22.4	80,557
2006	22,806	24.5	50,267	54	19,946	21.4	93,019
2007	19,663	25.3	39,273	50.6	18,691	24.1	77,627
2008	17,386	33.9	21,127	41.2	12,811	25	51,324
2009	12,065	45.7	9,207	34.8	5,148	19.5	26,420
2010	7,914	54.2	4,600	31.5	2,088	14.3	14,602
2011*	3,107	58.3	1,425	26.8	725	14.9	5,327
TOTAL	103,303	29.6	168,059	48.2	77,444	22.2	348,876

Source: DECLG, 2011 (*Figures available for first 6 months only)

Master planned estates internationally have used notions of community, social sustainability and mixed or balanced communities as key marketing tools to sell the developments to would-be residents (Kenna and Dunn, 2009). The reality, however, is something very different, with concerns for residential segregation at the fore of debates about new private and exclusive residential development (see Glasze *et al.*, 2006). Unlike the development of private master planned estates in other countries, new residential development in Ireland had a much stronger focus on provisions for the inclusion of a social and affordable housing component. This emphasis on diverse housing tenures departs from the planning of master planned estates internationally where the focus has been on the potential for social exclusion and segregation that can result from the concentration of affluent households (see Kenna, 2007). This difference in emphasis for the development of new housing estates in Ireland occurred due to a series of housing policy directions, some with legislative weight. In part this tenure mix is being increasingly encouraged due to the marginalisation that can occur between areas of different housing tenure when mixing is not prioritised. As Hourigan (2011, p. 12) noted: ‘segregation of households according to tenure and social class has had long term negative consequences for social cohesion ... and has contributed in recent years to increasing marginalization of certain areas’. This is particularly true for neighbourhood areas with large tracts of public housing (see Hourigan 2011).

Ireland’s Planning and Development Act (2000) introduced a provision under Part V for the inclusion of affordable housing into new residential development. Part V allows a local authority to require developers to set aside up to 20% of new developments of five or more



houses for social or affordable housing, at a 25/75 split (i.e. 25% social housing; 75% affordable housing). The local authority decides how much (if any) of the 20% will be social, voluntary or affordable housing (Planning and Development Act 2000). The local authority was given the discretion to decide which homes should be designated affordable or social, and where the homes should be located within a residential estates (e.g. clustered together or randomly allocated throughout the estate; see Planning and Development Act 2000). In addition to this, some housing developers opted to include an affordable housing component above the required twenty percent.

Affordable housing schemes in Ireland were then introduced in the early 2000s and these schemes targeted lower-income earners by assisting them to purchase their own property. The schemes were aimed primarily at first-time buyers, offering them a chance to purchase a newly constructed home or apartment at prices significantly less than their market value (Citizens Information, 2014). Mortgages were available from local authorities and some banks also provided mortgages for affordable homes and repayments were to be no more than 35% of the household's net income after tax (Citizens Information, 2014). Unfortunately, however, the affordable housing scheme was stood down in June 2011 due to the financial crisis.

These policies and schemes combined originally sought to create balanced neighbourhoods – something to which policy makers internationally continue to aspire. However, the hasty reversal of these policies in the last three years, as means to offer a quick solution to a significant housing problem in Ireland (i.e. oversupply and empty/unfinished housing), has generated a series of legacies for the housing market in Irish cities and has played a significant role in shaping neighbourhood relations (many negative) across the residential landscape of the country. Some of the consequences are discussed further in the following section.

Housing strategies: A case study of Cork city and county

Cork city is the Republic of Ireland's second largest city located in the south of the country with a population of around 120,000, while the wider county of Cork has a population of approximately 400,000 (CSO, 2014). For the purpose of this paper, examples from Cork city and county will be used to illustrate the outcomes of current housing practice in Ireland in relation to unfinished housing estates.

Following the introduction of the Planning and Development Act (2000), local authorities were required to produce housing strategies to address the new legal requirements about tenure mix and the need for greater housing affordability. Part V of the Planning and Development Act (2000) requires that all planning authorities prepare housing strategies and incorporate these into their development plans. Cork City and County Councils combined to draft the 'Joint Housing Strategy' for Cork (2009-2015). The aim of the Joint Housing Strategy is 'to have available to every household a good quality affordable dwelling suited to its needs in sustainable neighbourhoods with easy access to a range of community facilities, amenities and local services' (Cork City Council, 2009, p.1). Further, the strategy advocates the development of multi-tenure *cohesive* developments, the maintenance and enhancement of existing residential areas and the development of a high quality private rented sector. The objectives and direction of the strategy set out the clear goals of ensuring diversity of housing types and of tenure mixes, particularly catering to those in need of social and affordable housing.



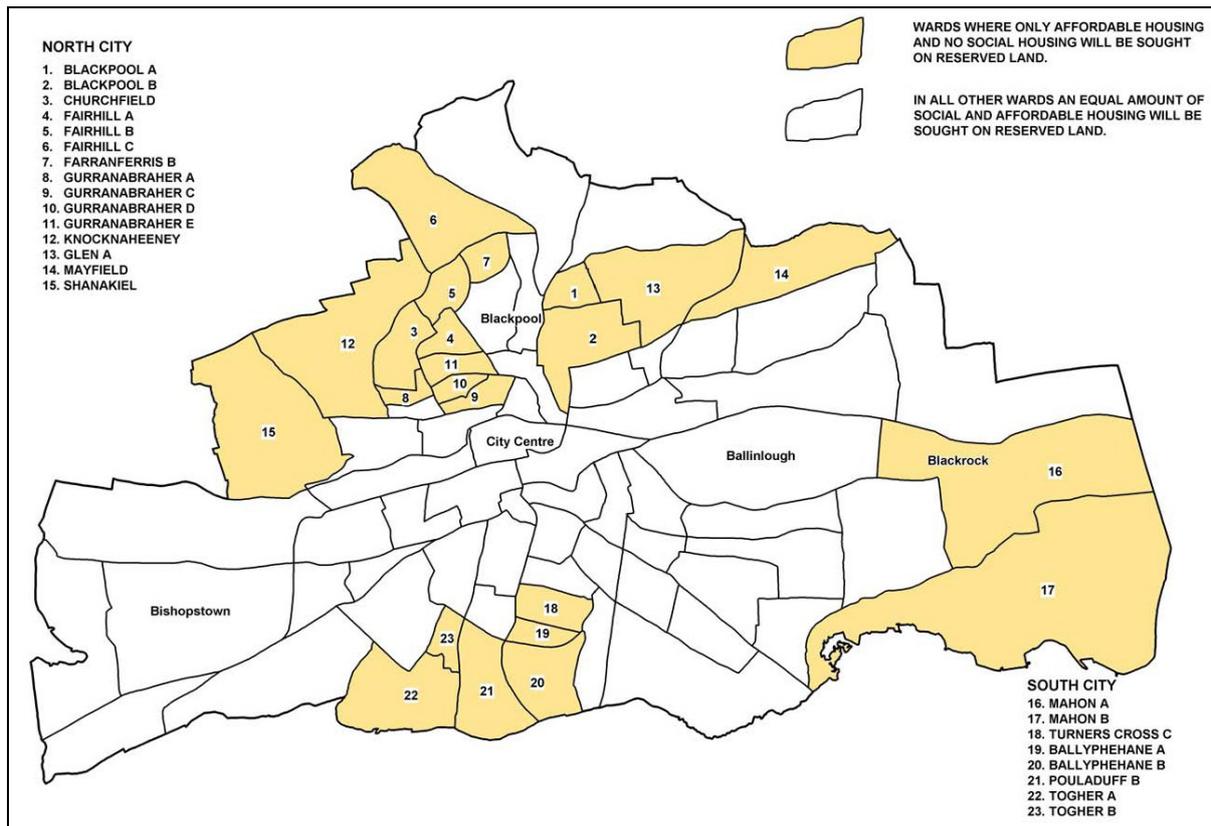
Within the ‘Joint Housing Strategy’ (2009-2015) there are a number of policy objectives that are worthy of noting. The first is in relation to housing mix. Policy 6.4 in the strategy notes: ‘It is the policy of Cork City Council to encourage the establishment of sustainable residential communities by ensuring that a mix of housing and apartment types, sizes and tenures is provided within the city.’ Here the emphasis of this policy objective is to create sustainable residential neighbourhoods through tenure mix.

Improvement of existing housing stock is a further noteworthy policy objective in the housing strategy. Policy 6.10 notes: ‘The City Council will continue to improve the physical condition of the housing stock by the implementation of regeneration, refurbishment and enhancement schemes and through continuing commitment to its estate management function will work towards ongoing improvement in the living environment in our estates.’ As mentioned above, this specifically looks to assist the regeneration of social housing estates that have been devoid of investment for a significant length of time resulting in declining infrastructure and a decline in the overall quality of the neighbourhood areas.

A final policy in the housing strategy for Cork that is worth stating is one for social housing integration. Cork city and county councils aim to: ‘provide integrated and mixed housing schemes, including provision for affordable and social housing, throughout the city having regard to counteracting social segregation and to improving social and economic balance.’ (Policy 6.13) The core aim here is to reduce residential and social segregation.

It is clear from the Joint Housing Strategy (2009-2015) that one of the core objectives overall is to promote balanced and sustainable communities through regeneration, tenure mixing and reducing segregation. These policies and associated objectives are encouraging and indeed highlight the desire of Irish housing policy to create balance and equity. Part of the rationale for this is that Cork city has one of the highest concentrations of social housing in the country, so much so that the objectives to create tenure mix are to: ‘counteract undue segregation between persons of different social backgrounds and to ensure there is an appropriate balance between social, affordable and mainstream provision within communities’ (p. 51). Due to this concentration of social housing in certain neighbourhoods of Cork city, the housing strategy identified neighbourhood areas, or suburbs, that would not be allocated any new social housing due to the already high concentration of social housing in these areas. Figure 1 highlights these areas. The numbered residential wards in Figure 1 correspond with the areas of the city where no new social housing would be required to be developed within new residential developments, given the already high concentration of social housing in these regions of the city. Here, only affordable housing was required to be included in any new development. The remaining areas are those where an even balance between social and affordable housing was required by developers constructing new residential developments.

Figure 1: Residential wards in Cork City, divided into two categories with the numbered (yellow) areas those where no new social housing would be developed, and the remaining residential wards would be areas where any new housing development must include an even balance between social and affordable housing



Source: Joint Housing Strategy 2009-2015.

Overall, housing policy for Cork city and county was aimed at promoting balanced cohesive communities. The policy also identified areas with excessive amounts of social housing. These areas are those where no further social housing is to be allocated. This is deemed to aid balance and cohesion across the residential landscape. These policies match with housing policy ambitions internationally. The process of designing these policies was considered, researched, lengthy. The process of reversal of these policies was hasty and reactive – a quick-fix solution to an unwanted problem. This is discussed further in the case study below.

Case study: Ard Sionnach Estate, Shanakiel, Cork city

To illustrate the impacts of the current housing practice of using empty housing in unfinished housing estates across Ireland for social housing purposes, and the contradiction of housing policy objectives, this paper turns to a case study of neighbouring suburban areas in Cork city to document the outcomes of these housing actions. Ard Sionnach Estate (ASE) is a new residential development in the northern suburb of Shanakiel in Cork city. The estate was developed during the ‘boom’ period of housing construction in Ireland (during the early 2000s) by Fleming Construction Company. ASE was one of the estates that had lands reserved for affordable housing. Due to its close proximity to areas of high social housing concentration, ASE was exempt from providing any social housing in the development (see Figure 1). This is in line with the requirements as set out in Part V of the Planning and Development Act (2000) and with the policy objectives in the Joint Housing Strategy for Cork (2009-2015), as outlined above. This absence of social housing, but inclusion of affordable housing was to encourage balanced and mixed communities and ensure the provision of affordable housing. In fact, ASE included an affordable housing component over



the required twenty percent such that the entire estate was to be an affordable housing estate. Any residents buying into ASE were thus of an understanding that the development was an affordable private housing estate. In effect the developers used this as a marketing angle for the new estate and the strong focus on affordable housing was noted in a marketing brochure by the developer that identified ASE as ‘an affordable housing scheme with Cork City Council’ (Fleming Construction Company, n.d.).

With the onset of recession in 2008, construction of the estate ceased and the developer withdrew from any activities. At this time, approximately 70% of construction was complete within the estate. There were 54 affordable housing units still remaining at this point. CCC decided to attempt to sell these properties, and if they remained unsold, they would convert to social housing. This differs from the original agreement regarding the inclusion of social housing. Further to the issues of unfinished development that confronted residents already residing in the estate, the affordable housing scheme ceased in 2011 due to the property market collapse. This ultimately meant that houses allocated for affordable housing would no longer be allocated for this purpose and would be used for social housing instead. In addition, in November 2011 Cork city council adopted the ‘Cork city northwest regeneration master plan and implementation report’. The plan included provisions for the regeneration of older housing estates – in line with policy objective 6.10 in the joint housing strategy – for the improvement of existing housing stock and to address issues of social exclusion and disadvantage in neighbourhoods. Part of this plan led to the regeneration of Knocknaheeny, a neighbouring suburb to ASE with a high concentration of social housing and social deprivation (see Cork City Council, 2011).

In 2012, Cork City Council received an allocation of €12 million under the National Regeneration Programme. These funds were to finance the ‘completion of the works at Ard Sionnach housing estate as replacement social housing stock for units to be demolished as part of the regeneration programme’ (Kildare Street, 2012). By December 2012, 68 families had been relocated as part of the demolition of social housing in neighbouring Knocknaheeny and had been relocated to ASE (Kildare Street, 2012). This move was also in line with the action by DECLG to use empty houses within unfinished housing estates for social housing. By adopting this strategy, CCC reversed policy decisions on the amount of social housing to be included in neighbourhoods within areas of the city. This reversal now presents the neighbourhood with broken promises and a range of social consequences. Not enough thought was given to the impacts and implications of these reversals. All ambitions for equitable communities were discarded. For major housing policy changes to take place it is imperative that they are considered and researched and that all possible consequences are reviewed. This also includes improving communication and participation for local residents, rather than making such profound decisions without appropriate consideration of local residents.

As a result of these housing policy actions in Cork city, residential areas that were promised no social housing have now had it imposed. ASE is a case in point. The development consists of 194 housing units and is a medium-density housing estate of modern terrace-style housing. Residents who bought privately paid between €200,000 and €300,000 for their home depending on the type of property and number of bedrooms. In purchasing property since the collapse of the property market and the cessation of the affordable housing scheme, CCC communicated to residents that a maximum of 15% of the empty houses that the council had bought would be used for social housing. For residents of this estate, no social housing was originally to be added to the estate. However, CCC bought houses beyond that 15% and now



40% of the estate is social housing. In other words, 78 out of 194 properties in ASE are now social housing. The above-mentioned reversal of housing policy promises has created this imposed tenure mix in residential neighbourhoods. The notion of tenure mix is laudable, however, the imposition of a significant amount of social housing on a neighbourhood that was promised no social housing has generated considerable tensions within the neighbourhood and both this practice, and the failure to consult residents and involve them in decision making processes, needs to be reviewed.

A survey was conducted in January 2013 with residents of all housing tenures in ASE to gather opinions and experiences from the residents about recent changes within the estate. Data revealed a series of problems have emerged within this estate as a result of imposed tenure mix. Firstly, 82% of residents who were already residing in the estate prior to the introduction of social housing tenants stated that there was no consultation with them regarding the changes. Anti-social behaviour was noted as increasing, particularly damage to property and gatherings in public spaces of the estate. Further, 60% of private housing residents noted this rise in anti-social behaviour to be linked to the increase in social housing residents. The reality of this is unknown. Nevertheless, the imposition of tenure mix within the residential estate has created significant tensions between residents in the housing estate. The following quotes are indicative of wider responses on this theme:

‘I am now very wary of my property as I had a vehicle stolen and have seen numerous acts of vandalism, it is an area which I am not proud to live in anymore.’ (Private Resident 9)

‘We are not happy living here, we are fearful of what may happen in the next few years concerning drugs.’ (Private Resident 10)

‘I hate leaving my wife and new-born daughter on their own when I work or go out at night, we don’t feel safe living in this estate anymore.’ (Private Resident 15)

One of the social housing residents noted:

‘I came from an area where antisocial behaviour and vandalism were rife and I fear that it is simply starting all over again here.’ (Social Resident 1)

What appears to be occurring within the estate is an exclusion of both groups, social and private housing residents. Private housing tenants are scared and fearful of the changes and diverse demographics, while social housing tenants are also experiencing anti-social behaviour and their presence in the estate is being blamed for all associated problems. The result of limited consultation with residents, and the imposition of social housing on a residential area where social housing was not to be incorporated, is social segregation on a localised scale. This is a major consequence of fast, reactive changes to housing policies in Ireland.

Further to the issues and tensions, residents in ASE are in negative equity. Homes that were originally purchased for up to €300,000 are now worth less than €200,000. The collapse of the property market and the recession has decreased the value of residential properties and many residents are unable to sell their houses so feel trapped in a neighbourhood that is fast becoming something they did not agree to when originally purchasing property in the estate. This is generating an additional layer of strain on an already tense situation.

Through the use of a case study in Cork city, it is evident that the practice of imposing tenure mix in unfinished housing estates is generating localised social segregation and social



tensions amongst residents. As tenure mix is imposed on residents, and past promises and policies have been broken by the council, the result is tense, unbalanced communities. This is not a desirable outcome and thus the practice, which is still in its infancy, but has plans to continue into the future, needs urgent review. To create new policy decisions for housing developments in knee-jerk, reactive ways generates a series of uneven outcomes. This is not what public local authorities are meant to achieve and works against efforts to create neighbourhood cohesion.

Conclusions

In theory, the notion that tenure mix that would create balanced communities and avoid concentration of disadvantage in certain neighbourhoods is one to be encouraged. However, for this to be a success, all groups need to be consulted about such changes, and an open and transparent process needs to unfold. The Irish Government's decision to impose tenure mix on neighbourhoods, which have already been negatively affected by economic conditions, presents urban communities with significant social problems and generates tension and divisions within neighbourhoods, not balanced, harmonious and sustainable communities.

Policy decisions being made in relation to unfinished housing estates in Ireland need urgent review, as do the processes through which Councils relocate social housing residents. We must acknowledge the complexity of the housing situation in Ireland – social, unfinished, regeneration schemes – to ensure balanced and sustainable communities. A failure to see these issues is resulting in unbalanced communities, which is highly problematic and not desirable for the city or its residents. The imposition of social housing on neighbourhoods is detrimental to the policy objective for balanced and sustainable community and so reflection on community consultation and public participation is vital to ensure a more open and transparent future for housing development and residential neighbourhoods in Ireland, as is a review of policies that impose tenure mix. The hasty and reactive decisions by governments in Ireland, attempting to quickly fix a major housing problem, has imposed tenure mix, alienated residents through lack of consultation and, generated tense, unbalanced communities.

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