

Communities of ‘Limited Liability’

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In late 2005 the first residents moved into their new homes in Fatima Mansions in the southwest inner city of Dublin. An ambitious regeneration plan that had gotten under way in 2001 was finally coming to fruition. Dublin City Council entered into a public–private partnership with a developer, selected through a tendering process, to demolish the existing blocks of flats and redevelop the eleven-acre site abutting the LUAS Red Line. The first new residents, Mr and Mrs Brophy, received the keys to their new home from Taoiseach Bertie Ahern, who was on hand to launch the redevelopment. Nailing his neoliberal (as opposed to socialist!) credentials to the mast, Ahern described the public–private partnership responsible for the redevelopment as ‘a pioneering flagship project for the housing sector’. Indeed, he expressed his pleasure that the template for redevelopment undertaken at Fatima Mansions was being applied elsewhere in the city. He assured the residents that ‘the regeneration project will transform the area beyond recognition and that any negative associations we once had with this area will remain well and truly in the past’.¹

¹ B. Ahern, ‘Speech marking the first tenants moving into Fatima Mansions flat complex in Dublin’, 3 October 2005, available at www.taoiseach.gov.ie (accessed January 2008).

Earlier, in February 2005, the Taoiseach was at Adamstown, near Lucan in County Dublin, to lay a foundation stone and launch the official ceremony to mark the beginning of the Adamstown development. The Adamstown development on a greenfield site is the first Strategy Development Zone (SDZ) in the country. The SDZ entered the lexicon in Part IX of the Planning and Development Act 2000. It was introduced to facilitate specified development of economic or social importance to the state. A designated SDZ requires the creation of a detailed planning scheme, to be overseen by a designated agency or local authority, which ensures that development is delivered in a timely fashion and that all necessary community and infrastructural facilities are delivered in tandem with the housing. South Dublin County Council is overseeing the privately funded development that is taking place in Adamstown. The project enabled the frontloading of infrastructure so that schools, roads and public transport were in place before the first homes were occupied. In early 2006, when the housing boom was at its zenith, the first homes to go on the market at Adamstown sold like hotcakes. Buyers queued for two days before the launch. Gunne New Homes sold 330 homes at Adamstown Castle in two days and an additional 300 in the following two weeks.² The majority of those purchasers were first-time buyers and almost 70 per cent were under forty years of age.³

Putting Fatima and Adamstown on the map

What is so significant about these two developments and how are they linked? In both cases, they represent – in the now hackneyed term of planners and politicians – ‘flagship projects’ intended to mark a dramatic departure from the legacy of ‘bad’ planning that had gone before. In the case of Fatima, the story is one of redemption and renewal for a

² *The Sunday Tribune*, 18 February 2007.

³ *The Irish Times*, 7 December 2006.

community formerly ghettoised and a housing complex widely viewed as a sink estate. In the case of Adamstown, a high-density development with integrated infrastructure, mixed housing types and public transport represents a significant move away from the developer-led, car-driven, suburban sprawl that has come to characterise much of the countryside around Ireland's major cities. Positive media coverage has helped to keep Fatima and Adamstown on the public radar, and both have assumed a presence in the public domain as templates for future urban and suburban development.

The first issue I want to address here is the role of the state in housing development. The Fatima and Adamstown projects are, I believe, the outcome of a 'sociological turn' within state-sponsored planning and development in the early years of the twenty-first century. From the state's perspective, the major concerns of both of these projects are with place-making, provision of integrated planning and the development of sustainable communities, all of which have long been identified as sociologically desirable. But Fatima and Adamstown are also part of a wider project attempting to create a new political and cultural economy of (sub)urban development. Under the conditions of late capitalism, there has been a proliferation of place marketing and place development, which are institutionally oriented towards select zones.⁴ From the developers' perspective, Fatima and Adamstown are fundamentally about turning a profit, and if that requires getting into bed with the state – through public-private partnerships or SDZs – then that is what they will do. The state, I will argue, has made itself a prominent player again in the housing sector. Unlike in the past, however, its new role is one of 'limited liability'. It is not in the housing arena as an autonomous player but as an

⁴ N. Brenner, 'State/space and the political economy of capitalism: Rethinking social-spatiality', paper delivered at a Department of Sociology seminar, National University of Ireland, Maynooth, 15 May 2006.

agent whose primary task is to smooth the path of the private developer.

The second issue that I will address relates to the notion of 'building communities'. Community is a notoriously difficult concept to define. Fatima constituted a community – albeit one under immense pressure – before it was regenerated. Adamstown is in the process of creating one. While it is possible to customise a place by filling it with homes and infrastructure, it is more of a challenge to plan for and support the community that will live there over the long term. Communities cannot be socially engineered. So how might a sense of community be generated and reproduced? In attempting to address this question it is useful to revisit the work of Gerald Suttles and Morris Janowitz, who developed and elaborated the notion of communities of 'limited liability'. Their work on US communities in the mid-twentieth century may have something useful to say to Ireland in the twenty-first century.

The production of housing in urban Ireland

It can be argued that the housing agenda in Ireland, particularly in the second half of the twentieth century, was integral to the wider national project of modernisation. The country, steeped in rural traditions and self-identifying as rural, changed direction in the 1960s. Along with the opening of the Irish economy to international investment, there was a self-conscious attempt to promote a modernist project across several spheres of Irish life. Housing trends reflected the general modernising thrust in the economy and resulted in the bulldozing of many parts of the built heritage of inner cities to make way for drab, modernist office blocks. Land speculation on the perimeters of the cities transformed farmland and open countryside into corn rows of suburban housing. Ballymun rose on the northern fringe of Dublin, visible proof of Ireland's modernity for visitors flying into Dublin Airport.

Fatima Mansions predated this modernist thrust. Built between 1949 and 1951 as a relatively low-density complex in the heart of south inner-city Dublin and adjacent to several important manufacturing outlets, the flats offered spacious accommodation and indoor toilets to a largely grateful inner-city working class. But even in its earliest incarnation, Fatima had a bad reputation. It was defined in opposition to the private housing that surrounded it in the neighbourhood of Rialto. Suttles has suggested that 'residential groups gain their identity by their most apparent differences from one another'.⁵ People in Fatima knew that they did not form part of the wider Rialto community, and that knowledge reinforced their sense of isolation and eventual ghettoisation. They occupied social space within Rialto but to all intents and purposes they were cut off from the surrounding locality. By the 1970s, with the local authority experiencing a fiscal crisis, services were cut back, a decision that had a deleterious effect on the management and maintenance of the estate. Many of the local factories and services closed or relocated to new greenfield sites in the outer suburbs. Upwardly mobile residents moved out.

It was in the 1970s, when Fatima and other inner-city flat complexes were facing into a spiral of decline, that suburban growth on the perimeter of Dublin was taking off. Vast private housing and local authority housing estates were springing up in a haphazard way, with virtually no infrastructure provided by developers. Local authority members routinely contravened their own planning frameworks, allowing agricultural land to be rezoned and setting in motion a form of 'willy-nilly' development.

The costs of poor planning were brought home to local authorities in the 1980s with the breakdown of social order in many inner-city and suburban social housing estates. Attempts to engage in limited physical refurbishments were doomed to failure, as these estates had effectively entered a

⁵ G. Suttles, *The Social Construction of Community*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972, p. 51.

structural crisis. Cosmetic solutions could not address their problems. The local authority in Dublin began divesting itself of its housing responsibility by selling off its housing stock to tenants, and by handing over troubled estates (or parts of them) to housing associations whose job it is to redevelop, manage and maintain formerly local authority stock. It seemed as if the state had embarked on a gradual withdrawal from the housing arena.

Meanwhile, voluntary efforts on the part of suburbanites who had bought homes in new suburban estates on the outskirts of the city were bearing fruit. The suburban 'pioneers' of the 1970s and 1980s put their time and energy into developing parish structures, schools and GAA clubs and other sports facilities in their localities that would help to cement and sustain their communities over time. But as suburbia has continued to expand and grow, the limits to social growth have become increasingly apparent. Local authorities continued to be criticised for contravening their own development plans, for failing to provide necessary infrastructure in new suburban localities and for allowing developers to default on completing works on their building sites.

By the turn of the twenty-first century the Fatima Mansions complex, and others of its ilk, had come to be seen as unsustainable in their current form. And there was a growing awareness that the outward seepage of suburban housing beyond the city limits was creating new problems for suburbanites trying to access work, services and resources.⁶ These appeared to be two intractable problems requiring visionary and innovative solutions.

Bringing the (local) state back in

The re-emergence of the state as a prominent player in (sub)urban development must be seen against the backdrop

⁶ See, for example, S. Quilley, 'The house that Jack built', in M. P. Corcoran and M. Peillon (eds.), *Ireland Unbound: A Turn of the Century Chronicle*, Dublin: IPA, 2002, pp. 88–102.

of a number of key factors including: the growing knowledge and awareness of how cities and neighbourhoods are managed in other European countries; the turn towards partnership at all institutional levels from the EU level to national and local levels requiring a multi-player approach to problem-solving; the lure of the idea of public-private partnership as a means of delivering infrastructural projects in a timely fashion; and the impact of modernising management systems within the local authorities themselves.⁷ The volte-face on the part of the state must also be seen as a (somewhat belated) response to the relentless critique emanating from civil society that has given ample voice to all that was wrong-headed about Irish urban planning and development. The conjunction of these factors with the rise of the Celtic Tiger economy, which was generating both resources and also new housing demands, made it possible for local authorities to begin 'to think outside the box'.

Against a national and international backdrop emphasising the importance of good planning in order to create sustainable communities, local authorities became more receptive to the idea of change. The principles of urban planning took on a new salience, as the failure of simple bricks-and-mortar solutions became apparent. Local authorities began to sign up to the idea that housing provision needs to be integrated with wider policies that address the social, economic, cultural and environmental aspects of everyday life. The planning approach taken within the Fatima and Adamstown developments reflects a new 'sociological turn' in local authority policy. Having effectively abandoned Fatima Mansions and played little or no part in the management and regulation of suburban development since the 1970s, the state had finally come back in. In both Fatima and Adamstown it is the local state – Dublin City

⁷ M. P. Corcoran, 'Urban partnership and community development: A European perspective', *Economic and Social Review*, vol. 37, no. 3, Winter 2006, pp. 399–422.

Council (DCC) and South Dublin County Council (SDCC) respectively – that has assumed the driving instructor’s seat (with the private sector in the driving seat) in guiding the development of both an inner-city social housing complex and an outer-city greenfield suburb. After decades in the planning wilderness, the local state has emerged as a player, working in conjunction with private developers, to bring high-quality housing to the inner and outer city of Dublin.

In the case of both Fatima and Adamstown, the state has assumed the role of catalyst, but crucially it is the private sector that will deliver, and ultimately it is the private sector that will benefit from the projects. In Fatima, the redevelopment is based on a public–private partnership, whereby in exchange for the land (owned by DCC) a private developer has built 396 private housing units, 70 affordable housing units and 150 social housing units. According to Michael Punch, public–private partnerships represent the hidden face of power because they entail disposal of public-owned lands in the private interest, producing symbolic if not overt segregation.⁸ In Adamstown, the state is overseeing private development on private land. But by working with the state’s blueprint for development, the Adamstown developers can add ‘unique selling points’ to their product in a very crowded marketplace. Hence, by teaming up with SDCC, the developers have added value to their product and differentiated that product from all others in the sector. The local authority will remain responsible for the management of only a fraction of units at Fatima. The private development there and the developments at Adamstown will be run by private management companies, which are not as accountable as their public counterparts. In effect the state, while coming back in as a ‘housing’

⁸ M. Punch, ‘The inequities underpinning the Irish housing system’, paper delivered at a joint Department of Sociology and National Institute for Regional and Spatial Analysis seminar, National University of Ireland, Maynooth, 12 March 2007.

player, has adopted an arm's-length or limited liability role in relation to both developments.

Dreaming of community

In the cases of Fatima and Adamstown, two templates of development have been produced, employing the same language but tailored to the specific needs of different housing classes. People in Fatima wanted low-rise housing with front and back gardens as a means of defining their personal space or territory within the estate. This is important to them because when the estate was in decline poor management meant that most of the public spaces were colonised by undesirables. In Adamstown, in contrast, there is a big emphasis on generating communal space. There are no front and back gardens in the conventional sense. Presumably, prospective residents will be too busy working and enjoying their leisure time locally to contend with gardening. Residents, however, will have to pay management fees for the general upkeep of their apartment buildings and the surrounding environs, and will also have to bear the responsibility of ensuring that the management companies actually do their job.

The plan guiding regeneration in Fatima maintains a dual commitment to both the physical and social needs of the area. The regeneration programme is guided by three aims: to deliver new standards in quality of public housing and community facilities; to undertake innovative actions aimed at breaking the cycle of poverty on the estate; and to foster effective social integration and measures that promote and safeguard community participation in developing and sustaining the new Fatima.⁹ Plans include the provision of enterprise units, leisure facilities and a neighbourhood centre on site.

⁹ Dublin City Council, *Regeneration/Next Generation: Looking Forward to a New Future for Fatima*, Dublin: DCC, 2001.

Under the terms of the SDZ, Adamstown aims to create sustainable communities rather than housing developments. The plan adopts an holistic approach that integrates such principles of best practice as: creating an urban place with a strong sense of identity and that is safe and secure; and creating a model of living that allows for both mixed land use, enabling the community to work, shop and recreate locally, and varied housing types so that people can remain in the neighbourhood (though perhaps in different units) across the lifecycle. Landscape, heritage and public transport are also integral to the development strategy.¹⁰ The logic behind the plan is to create distinct neighbourhoods based around existing parklands as features or points of orientation. It is envisioned that 90 per cent of residents will be within a five-minute walk of a shop, and within a ten-minute walk of a bigger centre housing a range of facilities including a library, a youth café and community space.¹¹

Both plans are attempting to generate templates of excellence and models for urban living. Both have been the focus of intense interest, nationally and internationally. Fatima challenges its community to 'Dream, Dare, Do'.¹² Adamstown promises its new population that the 'Dream Takes Shape'.¹³

Communities are frequently forged through adversity. Back in 1998 Fatima was a terrible place to live, although many residents remained resilient because of the strong sense of community that pervaded the estate. Extreme adversity prompted the process of dreaming and kick-started an activist approach to regeneration. In recent years

¹⁰ South Dublin County Council, *Strategic Development Zone Planning Scheme*, Dublin: Planning Department, SDCC, 2003.

¹¹ Information provided by Paul Hogan, Planning Department, SDCC on a site visit to Adamstown, 2 April 2007.

¹² J. Donoghue, *Dream, Dare, Do. A Regeneration Manual*, Dublin: Fatima Groups United, 2006.

¹³ Castlethorn Construction brochure for Adamstown Square, available at www.castlethorn.ie (accessed February 2008).

Fatima has moved from desperation to aspiration. But over the years many people moved on and the community is now much reduced in size and must share its space with newcomers.

Research on suburban communities in and around Dublin has identified the important role played by a core group of pioneers or activists in the community who frequently help to mobilise people in order to improve local conditions and amenities. This raises two very pertinent questions. If there is nothing to fight for – because all the necessary services and facilities are provided on site according to a planning blueprint – how will a sense of community be inculcated and sustained? Can the reinvented Fatima and the spanking new Adamstown produce sustainable communities?

Communities of limited liability

In trying to answer these questions, it is useful to reflect on some recent sociological research in this area as well as the work of two earlier urban sociologists, Suttles and Janowitz. A study of contemporary suburban living in the Dublin region identifies a number of conditions that must be satisfied if a community is to be sustainable in the long term: residents must have a rapport with the place, they must have a sense of orientation to place; residents must enjoy access (in the locality or nearby) to a range of amenities and services without which life becomes difficult; residents must be connected with other residents through reciprocal relations of informal helping and formal social participation; and residents should be able to address whatever problems they collectively face. Residents must, in other words, form some kind of collective entity, however inchoate or fragmented it may be.¹⁴

¹⁴ M. P. Corcoran, J. Gray and M. Peillon, *Suburban Affiliations*, forthcoming.

This work resonates with that of Suttles who, several decades ago, argued that we need to move beyond reified notions of 'natural' communities and try to come up with more practical and workable understandings of community in practice. He rejects, for example, the assumption that a community needs the allegiance or recognition of all or most of its members in order to function as a socially cohesive unit.¹⁵ Janowitz similarly claims that communities can be sustained by a disparate set of secondary and voluntary associations which aim to 'aggregate public opinion across many social boundaries for the purpose of self help, self regulation and negotiation with the wider community'.¹⁶ He identifies the community press as an instrument that can act as the custodian of a community by maintaining a sense of its integrity, boundaries, rights and responsibilities. A community that is able to cohere through such an instrument, and at the same time remain loose and non-committal, constitutes a community of limited liability. The concept of the community of limited liability emphasises the intentional, voluntary and especially the partial and differentiated involvement of residents in local communities.¹⁷

If it is the case that an instrument of cohesion (such as the community press) is what is needed to sustain a sense of community, then what instruments might be available in Fatima and Adamstown? A community of limited liability is one where not all are involved, but there is sufficient involvement to produce a nominal collectivity. In Fatima, that role has been played and continues to be played by an advocacy group – Fatima Groups United (FGU) – which provides the thread of unity from the days of the old Fatima through to the new. It has become a crucial instrument of

¹⁵ Suttles, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

¹⁶ M. Janowitz, *On Social Organisation and Social Control*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991, p. 263.

¹⁷ Suttles, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

community agency. A small number of influential advocates working through the FGU have helped to steer the course of the community and its negotiation of the terms of the regeneration plan with DCC and the developer. In the process they have helped to keep the idea of a Fatima community alive. Their communication strategy has ensured that there is visual, musical and documentary evidence of the ups and downs of the community and its role in the regeneration process. Effectively, the FGU acted and continues to act as the key instrument of community cohesion in Fatima.

Adamstown is at a much earlier stage of community formation. It is not as clearly defined a place as Fatima. It has no history. So the residents are less likely to have as strong a sense of place orientation as their Fatima counterparts. At the same time, a range of facilities and services are in place so there is no pressing need for a resident-driven mobilisation. Nevertheless, it can be argued that the idea of an 'Adamstown community' is being realised though the website www.neighbourhood.ie, which is linked to both SDCC's Adamstown website and the developer's website. According to the local planner, the first residents saw each other as 'pioneers', and set up the website, which acts as a sounding board for residents in their dealings with SDCC, the developer, management companies and services.

On the Adamstown thread one finds many different discussion groups where current and prospective homeowners trade information on a range of different topics. People swap stories about delays in getting a moving-in day, discuss the latest phases of the development, advise how to go about accessing particular services and so on. They also use the site to let people know about new initiatives in the area such as the establishment of the local Adamstown GAA and cycling clubs. Given the newness of Adamstown, and its essentially blank canvas in terms of place identity, the website has the potential to function as the custodian of the community. It acts as an interactive community noticeboard, largely performing the role that

Janowitz saw being played by the community press in mid-twentieth-century US suburban communities. The website's role as an instrument of communication segues into that of an instrument of community.

Conclusion

Communities are as much constituted by outside forces as they are by their memberships. Indeed, Suttles points out that folk and sociological representations of urban community frequently underestimate the roles of external organisations and populations in the definition and solidarity of residential groups.¹⁸ The most elementary features of the urban community area or neighbourhood are its identity and its boundaries. Residential collectivities come into existence with the aid of adversaries and advocates.¹⁹ Sometimes these adversaries and advocates are built into the structure of urban life. They require no plan or intentional activity on the part of government or business. At other times, residential identities seem to have depended very much on either current or past activities or very intentional and self-conscious efforts to create a sense of community. Fatima and Adamstown are currently the products of governmental intentionality, both promoted as examples of how the state can work in the interests of its citizens. But while the local authorities have helped to make both developments happen, they have also relinquished ultimate control to the developers. Ultimately, both projects are owned and delivered by private-sector interests, with the state sitting on the sidelines.

In its original incarnation Fatima's identity as a community was very much defined from without. It was widely viewed as a sink estate, as an ungovernable and indefensible space. DCC was seen as the prime adversary. For the new Fatima to come into existence DCC had to move

¹⁸ Suttles, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

¹⁹ Suttles, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

from a position of adversary to that of advocate, prompted by the FGU. Adamstown, on the other hand, has no history or clearly demarcated boundaries; these are in the process of being constructed, primarily by the planners from without. Place signifiers will help to configure the new neighbourhoods, and a range of services and facilities will be delivered on site. The task of creating a sense of community, however, will be the responsibility of the residents. The sociological evidence suggests that communities can flourish as long as minimum conditions of 'community' are met. As long as some in the community are actively involved then a community of limited liability exists. In the case of Fatima, the instrument of community has long been a local activist group; in Adamstown, a sense of communality is currently produced through an interactive neighbourhood website.