

## The Making of the Dublin Conurbation

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With the publication of the *National Spatial Strategy for Ireland 2002-2020*, urban development has come to the fore as a policy issue. It is proposed that the existing urban space will be used more systematically and a higher density encouraged: this will happen through the consolidation of existing settlements, the redevelopment of central urban areas and the re-allocation of under-utilised land and buildings. The addition of an anticipated half a million dwellings over the period 2002 to 2020 will involve the growth and development of areas surrounding cities and towns, particularly Dublin.

The document does not refer to suburbs as such. It states that the creation of completely new cities or towns is not required and that the strategy also aims to minimise 'urban sprawl'. Urban sprawl is a codeword for the kind of suburban and peri-urban development that has taken place around the main cities in Ireland in the recent past. Peripheral suburban development (or the emergence of commuter towns) is not considered to be desirable or even sustainable:

Housing pressures in the Greater Dublin Area and the improvements in the road and rail network radiating from

Dublin, have encouraged extensive commuter based development at some considerable distance from the Greater Dublin Area. As a by-product of unbalanced spatial development, this long distance commuter based development is generally unsustainable. Building up critical mass in other regions, to complement Dublin, is central to countering this trend.<sup>1</sup>

The National Spatial Strategy (NSS) argues that the midlands should not become a dormitory for Dublin-based workers and that surrounding counties should not be subsumed into the urban sprawl of a greater Dublin. The balance in urban development will come from the designation of strategically placed urban centres, labelled hubs and gateways.

#### *Dispersed city*

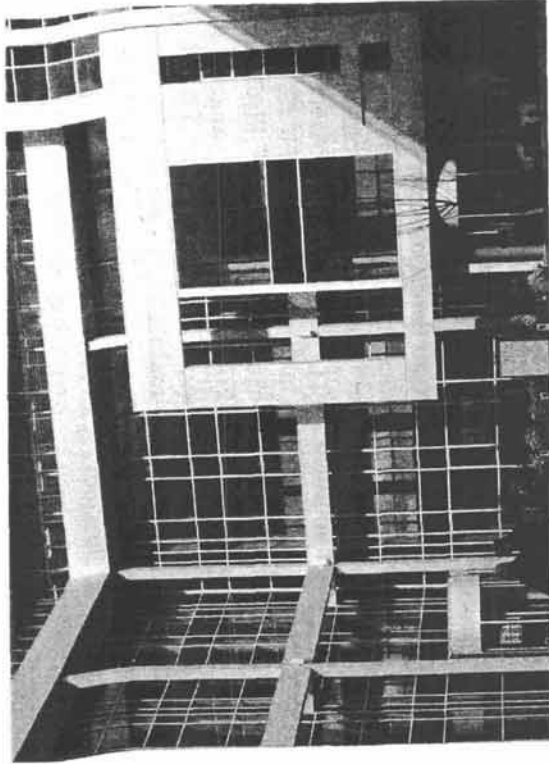
The NSS makes reference to the tendency of Dublin to become a dispersed city, and it talks about hi-tech industries locating at the city's edge:

There is strong evidence that Dublin is becoming a 'Dispersed City' demonstrated by the fact that the hi-tech industries located around the city's edges are drawing their workforces from places up to and beyond 80 kilometres away, but within an hour's drive of people's workplaces. New hotels, major industrial parks, technology campuses, out-of-town shopping centres, suburban business and office parks, improved roads, relatively low road fuel prices, higher car ownership and availability and use of certain commuter train services have created an increasingly dispersed form of growth in the [Greater Dublin Area] and beyond.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of the Environment and Local Government, *National Spatial Strategy for Ireland 2002-2020: People, Places and Potential*, Dublin: Government Publications, 2002, p. 44.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 22.

This kind of vocabulary – dispersion, edge – assumes a classical model of the metropolis, with its downtown centre, and then suburban and peripheral areas that depend on the centre for the provision of a wide range of services. This is, etymologically, what is meant by sub-urb: not fully urban because it is located at a distance from the core. Dispersal occurs when services and urban development move away from the urban centre on which they depend. The NSS is an attempt to contain this dispersal in metropolitan growth by developing urban centres that counterbalance the impact of the metropolis or other large cities. But the 'dispersion' of Dublin may actually point to a very different kind of urban development: not as a metropolis gone mad, not as a regional balancing of urban centres, but as what has been referred to as a poly-nucleated conurbation.<sup>3</sup>



*Ex-centred urban design*

<sup>3</sup> M. Gottdiener, *The Social Production of Urban Space*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994.

*Beyond suburbia*

Since the mid-1990s, suburban development has taken place in locations that can only be characterised as rural. This kind of peripheral suburban development is well illustrated by Ratoath in County Meath, which was the focus of a recent survey.<sup>4</sup> A very small place until the mid-1980s, Ratoath has since increased its population tenfold. It provides a good example of a peripheral development, not very far from central Dublin, but nonetheless 'beyond suburbia', as one advertisement for new housing in Ratoath put it.

Respondents in the survey were asked a question about where they went to avail of a range of services: shopping, banking, recreation, socialising etc. Their replies are summarised in Table 1. Availing of a wide range of services is quite clearly patterned in a spatial way. Some services are availed of locally: post office, church, pub, primary school, doctor. Quite unexpectedly, two further activities also take place predominantly in Ratoath: sporting activities and eating out. The neighbouring towns of Ashbourne and Dunshaughlin are relied upon for shopping and banking. These services were not available in Ratoath at the time of the survey; a small supermarket has opened since. But a substantial number of Ratoath residents also go to these towns for medical services and, to a lesser extent, for school and sporting activities. The commercial centre at Blanchardstown represents a powerful attraction for shopping and going to the cinema, with some use of the banks there. Dublin, which never seems central to the life of Ratoath residents, rates high only for music venues and banking (probably close to work for some). One would expect Dublin to play a more significant role in relation to recreation (such as cinema going) or socialising (such as

<sup>4</sup> This information was obtained as part of the New Urban Living Study, conducted by Mary P. Corcoran, Jane Gray and Michel Peillon. The first phase of the study involved a survey of Ratoath residents.

**Table 1.** Locations where Ratoath residents avail of services (%), 2002

Activity	Within Ratoath	Neighbouring towns	Blanchards-town	Dublin	Others*
Post office	88	-	1	1	10
Church	68	1	-	-	30
Pub	73	1	-	4.5	21.5
Sporting activities	33	6	6	7.5	47.5
Restaurant	57	1.5	-	9.5	32
Doctor	69	16	-	6.5	8.5
School	42	4	-	4	50
Shopping (supermarket)	3	27	41	3	26
Bank	-	39	12	24	25
Cinema	-	-	68	6	26
Music (concerts etc.)	4	-	1	41	54

\* Some respondents did not avail of particular services.

pubs and restaurants), but the contribution of Dublin in this respect remains quite limited.

An important aspect is missing in the figures in Table 1: work. A question was asked about how long it took people to travel to work. It would normally take, at peak times, 45 minutes to an hour to travel to, or from, Dublin. Roughly 44 per cent of respondents for whom the question was relevant faced a journey of between half an hour and one hour. Among these 44 per cent, it remains difficult to estimate the proportion of those who actually work in central Dublin. The high number of Ratoath respondents employed in the information technology sector would suggest that a significant proportion travel to places on the periphery of Dublin (such as Swords or Leixlip). One can tentatively estimate that one-third of working respondents travel to Dublin for work.



*A night out at the edge*

*A conurbation in the making*

If we leave out of our consideration the location of work for Ratoath residents, the emergence of Ratoath as a residential location is not necessarily best understood in terms of suburbanisation, which assumes a dependence on an urban centre such as Dublin. It makes sense in terms of another form of urban development that Dublin may be experiencing, that of a diffuse conurbation: 'these poly-nucleated regions are no longer organized by the sociospatial activities of the historic city center. Words, such as "urban" and "rural", which were once used to categorize places have now lost their analytical value'.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> M. Gottdiener, *The Social Production of Urban Space*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994, p. 8.

This has a resonance for a place like Ratoath, which is defined by residents as country-like, or having a country feel, while of course becoming less and less rural. The low reliance of Ratoath residents on Dublin and the selective use, along very functional lines, of proximate centres – either neighbouring towns or large peripheral commercial centres (and probably working in similar peripheral industrial estates) – point to the organisation of the daily life of Ratoath residents around several 'centres', which are treated as preferable alternatives to Dublin. The life of Ratoath residents, although fully part of an urban setting, is certainly 'poly-centred'. Such residents already belong to a conurbation that does not conform, at least for them, to a metropolis. If the mode of inclusion of Ratoath residents in the Dublin urban texture is typical of things to come, then it could be realistically contended that Dublin is moving away from the metropolitan model and transforming itself into a conurbation.

The NSS appears anxious to avoid such a development, and the proposed midlands gateway linking Athlone, Mullingar and Tullamore is thought to be located far enough from Dublin to counterbalance it – rather than being absorbed into one large, poly-centred, eastern conurbation. But this strategy remains risky, as an urban centre such as Mullingar is already becoming part of the commuter belt. The NSS could easily experience a slippage and promote, as an unintended consequence, the development of a poly-nucleated conurbation on the east coast that would draw on urban centres in the midlands.

An urban fabric linking several towns constitutes one version of multi-centred urban development. A multiplication of small centres offers a more realistic scenario for Dublin. These emergent centres have been referred to, in another context, as 'edge cities'.<sup>6</sup> Edge cities are not located in town centres, and they are no longer suburbs. They

<sup>6</sup> J. Garreau, *Edge City. Life on the New Frontier*, New York: Anchor Books Doubleday, 1992.



*It's all there*

appear in often unexpected locations, sometimes simply at strategic traffic junctions. As industrial campuses, they create jobs and attract headquarters of corporations. Their extensive shopping malls function as new marketplaces. The presence of cinemas, restaurants and bars, as well as spacious hotels, transform them into entertainment places. With the provision of various administrative services, they may even become civic centres in their own right. People may stroll in the parks and congregate in the plazas that are sometimes included in their design. A conurbation is dotted with such ex-centred urban crystallisations. The label of edge city could easily mislead: suggesting as it does a model of centre and periphery, which it is meant to overcome. In fact, when these urban cores have multiplied, the edge of the city has really disappeared.

Greater Dublin has grown according to a model of suburbanisation in which shopping malls opened at peripheral locations and industrial firms settled in remote but usually convenient locations. The functions of such spaces were specialised. But their character changed slowly: industrial estates became marketplaces for a range of retail trades. Shopping centres turned into places of entertainment, with cinemas and restaurants. Hotels and lounges moved close by or located within. Many civic and cultural

agencies (library, galleries, theatres) set up store there. New (and possibly ex-centred) town centres have been designed and built around the accumulation of such urban functions.

Dublin possesses a very low, traditional skyline, dominated by church spires. For many years, only Liberty Hall and the Central Bank, which have long been viewed with distaste and disapproval, competed with them. Recently, a few high-rise buildings have been allowed on both sides of the Docks. The Spire (see Chapter 12) is effective only because of the low profile of its surroundings. But many of the new tall buildings are not rising at the centre of Dublin. They are being erected in large business campuses and in new multi-functional spaces. If a city is characterised by its height, the urban feel has moved away from the centre of Dublin.

### *Post-industrial metropolises*

Gottdiener explicitly links the emergence of a poly-centred conurbation with the development of a post-industrial capitalism: 'According to my perspective, the multicentred metropolitan region is the phenomenal socio-spatial form of late capitalism'.<sup>7</sup> Garreau too accounts for the emergence of edge cities in terms of the information society. But the contrary argument has also been put forward.

Sassen argues that the post-industrial economy 'requires the massive concentration of human and telecommunication resources we find in major cities'.<sup>8</sup> Global cities, that is cities which enjoy a strategic position within the global economy, concentrate administrative functions and offer specialised producer services: financial, legal, design,

<sup>7</sup> M. Gottdiener, *The Social Production of Urban Space*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994, p. x.

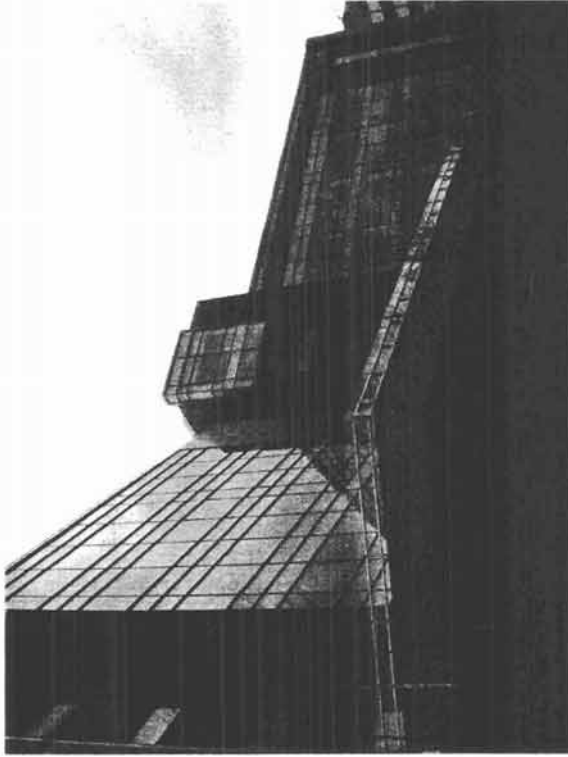
<sup>8</sup> S. Sassen, 'Cities in the Global Economy', in G. Browning, A. Halcli and F. Webster (eds.), *Understanding Contemporary Society. Theories of the Present*, London: Sage, 1999, p. 269.



communication etc. Sassen contends that such services must be located within the city, and that they must converge at its centre. This concentration within the city centre occurs for two main reasons. It has to do, first of all, with the need for a very dense infrastructure that, even in the age of global information flows, is neither flexible nor mobile. The performance of firms in the post-industrial economy is also helped by the geographical concentration of the relevant labour force. The latter facilitates a close interaction between those involved in specialised fields. This proximity encourages a sociability, which promotes the exchange of ideas and generates useful networks.

This approach seems to have motivated major projects in the recent development of Dublin. The International Financial Services Centre, at the very heart of Dublin, now employs around 10,000 people, most of them in skilled occupations. It operates as a kind of offshore financial centre. Also in the city centre, Temple Bar has been developed as Dublin's cultural centre and as a touristic attraction. In the process, it has become the main entertainment area of Dublin, with many bars, restaurants and discos. In 2000, the development of two digital hubs was announced in a sustained effort to promote the multimedia industry: one in the Liberties in central Dublin and the other at Citywest in the suburbs of Dublin. Such a choice demonstrates the flexibility of this kind of industry. It could easily be located in the Liberties, a highly symbolic part of the old Dublin close to the city centre and its cultural/entertainment district. But it could also be moved away from this core.

The labour force in many of these post-industrial sectors of activity is both young and highly educated. Unwilling to reside in the suburbs and anxious to satisfy their cultural and social needs, they choose to live at the centre. Highly mobile, they seek places of employment which offer a lifestyle that suits them. They have given an impetus to the regeneration of many areas close to the city centre. They also have been associated with apartment living in Dublin



*Headquarters in the business campus*

and with what has been referred to as its gentrification. The post-industrial, global economy has, after all, strengthened the metropolis.

### *Conclusion*

The three scenarios of urban development that have been identified in this chapter are all observed in the context of Dublin. The apparent suburbanisation of Dublin is turning into something quite different. It is absorbing towns that functioned as urban centres in their own right. The urban fabric that is slowly woven in and around Dublin includes many such centres. Meanwhile Dublin's historic core may be losing some of its functions. Many Ratoath residents live their lives in a way that does not involve Dublin centre, relying instead on a range of proximate centres. This pattern of development involves the emergence of new centres that increasingly fulfil the functions of the city: they

provide employment, function as new marketplaces and offer a range of entertainment facilities. Administrative and cultural services increasingly gravitate around these 'edge cities'. If employment, trade and entertainment are moving away from central Dublin, the latter simply ceases to be the centre of Dublin. Yet, for some categories of residents, the metropolitan core of Dublin has been strengthened in many ways.

These three patterns of urban development have each been linked with the late-capitalist or post-industrial economy. It would appear that post-industrial growth is compatible with various urban forms, at least in the Dublin context. The formation of a 'poly-centred conurbation', the emergence of edge cities and the strengthening of the metropolitan core are occurring simultaneously. 'As usual, it's all ad hoc: we're making this up as we go along'.<sup>9</sup> Although it clearly retains relevance for Dublin, this comment does not bemoan the lack of anticipation and planning in public decision-making in Ireland, but relates to the American experience of urban development.

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<sup>9</sup> J. Garreau, *Edge City. Life on the New Frontier*, New York: Anchor Books Doubleday, 1992, p. xx.