

THE DEVELOPMENT OF PLANNING SYSTEMS IN NORTHERN IRELAND 1900 - 1975

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INTRODUCTION

Understanding of planning in Northern Ireland requires an insight into the history of the province. It could be argued that the present, the future and the past are rooted in the complex history of Northern Ireland's planning strategy. Socially, culturally and economically, the present tapestry has been woven from the plantation period. The plantation period established demographic patterns, which are still observable today. With the plantation came the revolutionary transformer of the landscape — the town; which was to change not only settlement patterns but the minds of the indigenous and the settlers alike.

Initially, Roman Catholics were excluded, by law, from the fortified towns of the planters. Eventually, for economic reasons chiefly, they were allowed into the town, their function being to perform the lower status jobs in a dynamic society that was then evolving. It was as early as this that residential segregation was written into Northern Ireland's history. Today, this phenomenon of residential segregation is apparent and carved deeply into the collective minds of the dwellers of this province. Craigavon is an example of this spatial polarisation obsession that has resulted in residential segregation, characteristic to Northern Ireland today. Northern Ireland evolved into a "class conscience and religious conscience industrial society" with its "working classes" living in ghettos (Burton, Frank. *The Politics of Legitimacy*, 1974). These ghettos were separately inhabited by their divided religious communities. In many aspects, the division between Roman Catholics and Protestants can be compared to the divisions between the blacks and the whites in Harlem, New York (Dr. Martello, *Ulster*, 1985). These two communities have developed strong kinship and ideological social forms. Anthropologists, like Elliot Leyton, have documented this phenomenon in local studies of religious segregation in different parts of Northern Ireland.

are complex and interwoven with ideas about "private and public territoriality" (McDonagh, T., 1984). Each community has its own particular mental maps through their "lens of perception" (Buttimer, A. *Values*, 1978) they created a complex, conflicting violent, society. Northern Ireland is a product of industrialism, capitalism, Catholicism and Protestantism. All of these manifest themselves on the landscape and most importantly in the people who occupy the 5,240 square miles of Northern Ireland.

The evolution of planning, in Northern Ireland was comparatively slow and a recent phenomenon in the history of regional and urban planning in Northern Ireland. Regional and urban planning can be divided into four phases, each influenced, though not determined, by English ideas on planning. The first phase, in the 1930's, saw the introduction of a rudimentary administrative structure, based on the planning and housing Act (N.I.) 1931.

The second phase was one of opposition and delay. It was a reaction to the very positive proposals of the Planning Commission and Advisory Board during the period 1940 - 1959.

The third phase, 1960 - 1970, was a more encouraging phase in Northern Ireland's planning history. During this period there was enthusiasm and activity, at all levels, which led to the adaptation of plans prepared by British consultants to suit Northern Ireland's condition.

The fourth phase began with the planning (N.I.) Order of 1972 and other local government reforms. Planning in Northern Ireland up to the 1970's can thus be seen as a particle suspended in a solution of bureaucracy, discrimination, political expediency and administrative procedures. These have pre-cast many of the problems that face planners in Northern Ireland today.

Phase 1 started with the Planning and Housing Act of 1931, which was the twin of the 1932 Housing Act in Britain. The main fault of the Housing Act 1931 (N.I.) was that its powers were permissive and not mandatory. Due to the social and economic atmosphere of the time, this Act was not adopted, but was instead resisted at local level throughout Northern Ireland, except in Londonderry and Belfast where the Act was adopted. One result of the non-implementation of the Act is that no development plans have been published in the North by the time of the Second World War. During this first phase two other Acts were enacted, both focusing on the needs to attract new industries to the North. These were the New Industries Development Acts of 1932 and 1937. Both were important,

because they created the mould for later developments in Urban and Regional Planning. Towards the close of the first phase, therefore, one can perceive the evolution of regional development planning, for which the Government at Stormont was primarily responsible. It is important in the light of socio-economic and cultural cleavages between the North of Ireland and the Free State at that time to recognise that regional industrial development was part of the complex machinery of government at the disposal of the Stormont regime. Northern Ireland's industrial policy went hand in hand with that of the United Kingdom. This was also a period which saw Urban and Regional Planning coming into its own. In mainland Britain, with the publication of the Barlow report on Industrial Location, Scott's report on Industrial and Agricultural Location, and other reports on local planning.

The second phase of Northern Ireland's planning history, 1940 - 1959, very much reflects what was happening in Britain at that time. The emphasis in British and Northern Irish was on development and land use planning; e.g. 1944 Interim Development Act (N.I.). It was interrupted by the war years which could be categorised as the enlightenment period in Northern Ireland's planning history. Then, in 1942, the government employed W. R. Davidge as a consultant to consider the scope of planning in Northern Ireland. Following Davidge's advice, the Planning Commission and Planning Advisory Board was set up. In its foundation was the first step in the creation of vibrant and dynamic planning system. This was to materialise in phase 3, 1960 - 1970. It was during this second phase that the philosophy behind planning in Northern Ireland was articulated. This philosophy predominated to the present day. The instrument behind it was the Planning Advisory Board. The latter published nine reports. Unfortunately, members of the Board could not change planning in the North "with the power of their will" (Kavanagh, Patrick "Pursuit of an Ideal"). Like Kavanagh, they were in pursuit of an ideal, but unlike Kavanagh's ideal "that went stale within my satchel" (Kavanagh, Patrick), the Board's reports continued to influence planning authorities right up to the late 1960's. The chief recommendations of the Board were the following:

1. The setting up of the planning authority.
2. Centralise the imbalance of industry and population.
3. Decentralisation of population and manufacturing jobs from the Belfast area.

In drawing attention to the needs of Belfast, the Board's reports acknowledged the need for infra-structured improvement to attract new industrial investment to the smaller towns in the province, an issue which was to become the dominant theme of regional planning strategies in the 1970's. In respect of the Belfast area itself, the Planning Advisory Board called for the control of growth, co-ordination of the transportation system, the diversion of new industry to areas outside Belfast and the re-development of areas with high densities of substandard housing. The major recommendation was for the centralisation of control over local government services in the province. In 1948 the water supply and sewerage report recommended that the eighty authorities should be reduced to four. The Board recommended that road departments should also be reduced. These recommendations were only implemented with the re-organisation of Local Government in the early 1970's. In W. R. Davidge's preliminary report on Reconstruction and Planning, 1944, he stressed the need for a comprehensive plan to be prepared by a central planning authority. This recommendation was not implemented for a further two decades. Between this period, the province saw the introduction of an important Act, The Housing Act (N.I.) 1946, providing subsidies for both housing authorities and private developers. Hence, Northern Ireland entered phase 3 of the development of her planning system, minus the Planning Advisory Board. Before the Belfast Regional Plan is discussed, it is important to note that in 1965 Northern Ireland finally resolved the problem of compulsory purchase of land and compensation.

The Planning Commission and Planning Advisory Board described the problem confronting Urban and Regional Planning.

"We would again stress the impossibility of carrying out any real positive planning, so long as the planning authorities are restricted by the present inadequate legislation with its associated compensation difficulties."

(Hendry, Dr., 'Planning in Northern Ireland', p. 25, 1984)

The compensation to which the above extract refers to was required because of the uncertainty regarding the liabilities of local councils following any refusal of applicants' development rights. In the absence of any legislation similar to the Town & County Planning Act of 1949 (Britain),

entitlement to compensation in Northern Ireland was clouded by an interpretation of the Government of Ireland Act 1920, which safeguarded individuals against interference with their interest in land. Hence, councils were hesitant to refuse any application which might lead to compensation and set off a chain reaction among speculators of the Land Development Value (Compensation Act) N.I. 1965.

Belfast Regional Plan 1963 marked the beginning of the third phase in the evolution of planning in Northern Ireland. The early 1960's was the only time in the history of the province where there emerged a lobby with sufficient influence and power to carry through planning reforms. In 1960 Sir Robert Matthew was commissioned to prepare an advisory plan for the Belfast region. The report was published in 1963. However, Matthew's brief was not extended to the whole of Ulster and was confined to the Belfast region alone. The dominant themes were the social, economic and environmental problems arising from the uncontrolled growth of Belfast.

The 1965 programme for economic development for the period 1965 - 1970 contained a foreword written by Sir Thomas Wilson. Wilson's recommendations reinforced the Matthew proposals for a growth centre policy. Another consultative plan was prepared by the Travers-Morgan group for Belfast. This dealt with massive proposals for motorways constructed in the greater Belfast area. As expected, motorways were designated for areas of the city where land values were lowest and this meant cutting through community ghettos. As expected, the Travers-Morgan Plan met with severe public resistance and the plan was eventually scrapped. Whether it was scrapped because of economic reasons, or out of military considerations, is still unclear, but the former seems the more likely. By 1972 Northern Ireland, as with the rest of Europe, was experiencing economic decline. Hence it could be argued that in keeping with the tradition of planning in Northern Ireland, to shelve the motorway scheme was for economic reasons rather than out of consideration for the welfare of the working class. Commonsense would suggest the occupants of the area would have suffered more if the development went ahead. Under the given circumstances Belfast faced the prospect of having half the population of the province (i.e. three-quarters of a million people) by 1980, providing the trends of the 1960's were to continue. Matthew made three recommendations. Firstly, stop line was to limit the physical expansion of the city and to ensure the implementation of this stop line the 1965 Amenity Inlands Act (N.I.) was passed. This provided for preservation of areas of amenity and recreation immediately beyond Belfast's green belt.

Secondly, pressures for further development in and around Belfast were to be satisfied by the establishment of a new town at Craigavon. The latter was to have a population of 100,000 inhabitants by 1981.

Thirdly, seven other growth centres were designated in the Belfast region and six "key centres" were selected for the rest of the province. The new city of Craigavon was to act as a regional centre under the New Towns Act (N.I.) 1965. It was made up of the twin towns of Lurgan and Portadown which then had a combined population of 30,000 and Craigavon was to act as a counter-magnet to absorb the overflow of population and new industry from Belfast. Antrim was also designated a growth centre in 1966 followed by Ballymena in 1967. A Development Commission was to be set up in each of these areas to prepare and administer future development plans.

Matthew's programme was an attempt to reproduce the apparently successful British New Towns and Town Expansion Schemes, without considering the true nature of local problems confronting industrial and regional phenomenon in Northern Ireland. The Matthew report suffered from a number of defects:

- (a) There was no evaluation of the suitability of the U.K. New Towns system to the situation in Northern Ireland.
- (b) The legal framework did not exist to ensure that the planning recommendations were carried out.
- (c) The restructuring of residential areas was based on religious rather than social considerations.
- (d) Insufficient provision was made for the movement of the overspill population of Belfast to Craigavon and the seven selected towns.

There has been one attempt to break down segregation patterns in Northern Ireland and this was in Craigavon. The results were disappointing and brought about only an increase in "segregation patterns".

In the area of employment, the Catholic minority have traditionally been excluded in the private sector, except for the most menial tasks and for State and Local Authority jobs. This was achieved by blatant discrimination or a notorious oath test, which Planning Officers are advised to take! Even while Lord O'Neill was in office, a survey on four hundred Civil Servants, who were earning £4,000 per annum, showed that only one was a Catholic.

It was against a strong background of discrimination against Catholics that calls were made in the late '60's for radical change in industrial and regional planning in Northern Ireland. Indeed, the failure to implement the paper plans of the 1960's pointed to the remarkable resilience within the local government authority to accept any change in their status and their influence over local affairs. It was also the accusation of minority discrimination that led to definite changes in phase four of the evolution of planning in Northern Ireland between 1970 and 1975.

By 1972, the reformist lobby had gained such strength that a local government reconstruction was inevitable. However, the path to government reform was far from smooth. A Ministry of Development was established despite widespread objections from Unionist leaders. The Local Government Reform Act of 1973 abolished thirty-eight local authorities and placed them under the Department of the Environment. Control over new housing developments were placed in the hands of the Housing Executive. The Housing Executive saw fit to insulate the allocation of housing from local political pressure and created a body which would function efficiently, using available resources to resolve the widespread problems of sub-standard policy in the North.

The N.I.H.E. inherited a re-development programme based on large-scale clearance which was opposed by many community representatives. It also inherited a regional housing stock, 19% of which was considered unfit for human habitation. This latter problem was not solved until the Housing (N.I.) Order 1976, which was to introduce the concept of gradual renewal and which had been established in England and Wales by the Housing Act of 1974.

Sir Robert Matthew and Professor Wilson were commissioned to prepare a revised policy on development which was published by the government of Northern Ireland Development Programme, 1970 - 1975. This acknowledged the spread of the Belfast Urban Area to include the inner ring of growth towns and designated Ballymena and Londonderry as centres of vibrant growth. It also retained the idea of key centres to be distributed throughout the rest of the province. This strategy for the first time showed some awareness of the problems faced in rural areas. Having extended the scope of physical planning to cover the whole of Northern Ireland and faced with widespread criticism of the operation of its policies, the government decided to obtain support from as wide a cross-section of public opinion as possible. Accordingly, in February 1975, a discussion paper was published which set out six possible strategies which could be adopted. Each was based on a different degree of population and resource dispersal, ranging from total diffusion to concentration of all growth in Belfast and the Lagan Valley corridor.

CONCLUSION

The development of planning in Northern Ireland can be divided into four phases, each of which overlaps. Centralisation policy was the major flaw that flowed throughout the four phases of planning in Northern Ireland. Basically, the problem with planning in Northern Ireland was that, it lacked sensitivity to the needs of the province and its people. The reason why planning has managed to evade its responsibilities is that there was no accountability at local level. The N.I.H.E. often surrogated local plan-makers under doubtful powers, hence many issues are never publically debated but are included in area plans as province wide policy or as subject to further studies.

From the partition to the late 1950's, planning was practically non-existent in Northern Ireland. This reflected the polarisation of political opinion in the province reflected a disinterested attitude on the part of the government, to break down the ethnic barrier separating the two religious groups. The 1960's saw a reversal to the anti-planning ethos. The Matthew Plan was the first expression of regional planning in the province and set the precedent for the traditional division between the economic and the physical in industrial and agricultural planning.

The late 1960's and early 1970's saw the unclinking of sectarianism. The civil disturbance can be attributed to the abuse of the powers of the Local Government, which was dominated by Unionists. The Cameron Commission of 1968-69 was critical of the local authorities. Directly resulting from the mis-use of power the local powers were centralised in government with the establishment of the Ministry of Development.

The situation today is that Planners in Ulster have to face problems which are directly attributed to centralisation.

Chiefly, the major problem in the planning system of Ulster is that it suffers from the neo-colonial syndrome. Northern Irish planning has adopted features of the British system without asking the question are they suitable to the province as a whole and what context should they be implemented? It is important to note that British legislation and planning practice have evolved through a series of tests. However, in the case of Northern Ireland there has been no transition from a state of relatively little planning to a sophisticated planning system.

Planning in the 1980's seems to be taking a unique turn, instigated by Britain, in that it is developing the security city and hence planning is as much concerned with security issues as with issues of social welfare, such as job creation. It would be beneficial to all if planning authorities in Northern Ireland would concentrate on generating a more flexible, more responsive to local needs and more aware of the social and cultural context that makes Northern Ireland unique, and hence demands a home-grown planning system.