
Key Points

Take Back the City: Architecture

30th April 2020

Online Webinar

Speakers:

Clare Mulholland - QUB & City Repairo

Dr Nuala Flood - QUB

Fran Bradshaw - Anne Thorne Architects (London)

Pádraig Flynn - Self Organised Architects (Dublin)

Attendance:

45 participants

“Don’t underestimate the impact of a vision of what something could look like – or even multiple visions for a site. It gets conversations going, provoking debate.”

“The sense that you can influence the environment where you live changes people, gives them confidence that spills over into other areas of their lives... it’s not just producing homes, though that’s the goal. The process can influence how people live in the world.”

Purpose:

The Take Back the City webinar series (four in total) aims to provide opportunities for the exchange of ideas on how to bring forward public housing across the City of Belfast. Our rapidly changing world means that there is now more than ever a need to ensure equity in access to housing which addresses at its core the key issues of climate change and sustainability (social, ecological and financial).

#BuildHomesNow will use the information gathered from these webinars to launch a public initiative aimed at crowdsourcing ideas on developing plans for the Mackie’s site which can act as an exemplar and model for other developments to learn from and build upon. This public initiative is being supported by the New York based Dunn Development Corporation and the Community Preservation Corporation in the summer of 2020.

Local context:

Clare Mulholland shared particular challenges and opportunities faced by the people of Belfast and stressed the need for new planning models allowing for both reconciliation and regeneration in an open, shared society.

A loss of industry in Belfast has left areas with no economic base. The result is places – often small enclaves - facing multiple types of deprivation, where mixing and contact with other communities is problematic. These areas have been disproportionately affected by the conflict. They experience a disproportionate level of legacy problems (e.g. paramilitary activity) as well as related social and economic inequality.



Due to the conflict, planning decisions have been repeatedly made which put buffer zones - such as business parks - between working class communities to keep them apart (e.g. Castle Court, Duncairn Business Park). Belfast's road network imposes other barriers between communities (e.g. the Westlink, cul-de-sacs) deliberately reducing connectivity. This is not simply a legacy issue either, as more recent developments – such as the Gasworks, Titanic Quarter and Laganside - have been built in isolation, socially and physically detached from adjacent working-class communities. Whatever the intention, these decisions have served to deepen segregation and economic inequality.

Belfast Local Development Plan aims and targets have the potential to transform the city but these are dependent on allocating sufficient land over the next 15 years for 46,000 additional jobs, 66,000 new residents (bringing the population to 400,000 by 2035) and 31,000 new homes. To achieve these targets, the city centre needs to develop high-density residential units, while the inner-city needs to maximise existing brownfield sites for medium density, connected and shared communities.

Key characteristics of architectural approaches discussed:

Co-design: Some developers cynically use what is termed 'co-living.' This is not a genuine co-design model, which is democratic and participatory, giving people agency. Europe has a much stronger, much longer history of co-design. England has officially recognised community-led housing and community land trust models, which embed co-design principles, making it much easier to secure finance for initiatives. Some elected officials are actively promoting it in places (e.g. under Mayor of London Sadiq Khan, London boroughs have financed Resource Advice Hubs for practical technical guidance to groups). Pádraig Flynn explained how Cloughjordan in Co. Tipperary is a great example of an eco-village, but generally there is a lack of a prototype to provide inspiration and an evidence base on the island. Financiers are reluctant to get involved as there is no tangible evidence of a successful initiative guaranteeing a return on investments. Self-Organised Architects are working on a roadmap for groups.

Sustainability: NI contributes to the UK greenhouse gas emission reduction targets but does not have its own targets. Consequently, our emissions decrease has been much lower than England, Wales and Scotland. Belfast is low lying and 2018 models by UK Met Office show that even with a low 11cm rise in sea levels by 2100, large parts of Belfast city centre will be under water. We know the built environment is a huge consumer of energy – 30-40% of global energy is used in buildings (transport, use, embodied energy). We must curb emissions through careful design.

Key international examples:

Elemental Housing, Chile - houses with open spaces for people to design and build themselves.

Eco-hub, London – participatory community-based design for a contested space.

Cannock Mill Co-Housing, Colchester – co-design for the specific needs of residents for active aging (owner-owned, Passivhaus standard).

Carlton Chapel House – retrofit of housing cooperative guided by residents' knowledge of the building (retrofit potentially significant in Belfast, especially to preserve the built heritage).

Angell Town, Lambeth – five residential buildings. Example of how genuine participation in a build process changes people.

[Angela Carter Close, South London](#) – backland site, for large family dwelling social housing. Building biology approach – natural, low embodied energy materials,

[Spreefeld housing co-op, Berlin](#) – zoned for commercial development by city authorities. Residents resisted and eventually got it rezoned to residential. Each building was designed by different architects, with a different group of residents, and a 4th firm doing the project management/setting the design parameters. Hybrid cooperative ownership model with co-working spaces and shared living spaces. Homes are changeable and shared workshop space available so tenants can finish their own homes as they want.

[La Borda, Barcelona](#) – old industrial site earmarked for housing in the 70s but the authorities did nothing. Local people threatened to squat in the buildings unless works were begun, co-housing project was built, featuring the tallest timber frame in Spain (6 storeys). Size of flats can be changed over time (easily removable walls) if neighbours agree. Some industrial buildings left for community art/cultural uses.

Key messages to take away:

On design generally:

- Housing provision can be too focused on ‘delivery of housing units’ – ideas about building neighbourhoods and communities gets lost and a change of focus is needed.
- Building for sustainable standards (e.g. Passivhaus) does not have to be more expensive if you design for it from the beginning, using the services of good quantity surveyors, thoughtful material choices and smart procurement. You just have to plan more, be innovative, flexible and committed. It is as affordable as building with cheaper materials but you have to plan for it from the very start. “Plastic is always cheaper but you can use things in a slightly different way ... it’s good design. It can be done.” [AECB website](#) has guidance.
- Land is always the most expensive part of a project. Look for innovative ways to unlock land – donations, zoning with public sector support to meet sustainability standards, innovative forms of financing.

On co-design:

- Good buildings come out of collective input and good teamwork. It is important that people have agency in the process. Co-design is about participation, democracy and building community before the homes are built. The process of building is itself transformative for people and how they see themselves – they get more out of it than just a building.
- It is important to give scope for people to personalise and adjust their surroundings to suit themselves (spaces left open/empty etc.) and to change their surroundings over time (easily removable walls etc.).
- Engagement with local residents’ perceptions about the site and the potential project from the beginning is essential.
- It is important to ensure future residents are involved in the whole process. This can be challenging in the current framework of social housing, where future tenants are drawn from the waiting list at the time of project completion.
- Co-design is one way of addressing the ecological crisis – using collective learning and understanding of how to make sustainable living spaces.

On Mackie’s

- Do not be intimidated by the scale of the Mackie’s site or the challenge generally. Think about prototypes and small scale first steps. Fran Bradshaw stated that, “Just starting is really important... doing it and showing it can be done really helps,” when it comes to bringing in potential financiers, public sector, political representatives and the broader community.

- It is important to address local residents' thoughts and feelings about the site, and the potential project from the beginning - including their fears. If this is not done people will not come on board, which would jeopardise the scheme's progression.

How to progress from here

- Find a political champion (or several!) to help break ground on this idea, given the lack of any precedent on the island.
- Given all the health, homelessness, and climate imperatives, we can no longer tolerate sectarianism in our planning processes. It must be called out, and there has to be a demand for high standards of transparency and accountability.
- Listen to people and be open. Just 'getting stuck in' convinces people in itself – lead through positive action and a prototype.
- Provide a vision of what is possible. The power of a vision or of multiple visions is critical in sparking debate and interest.