MODERN PLANNING IN IRELAND - AN OVERVIEW

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Abstract. Many aspects of geography studied by second level students involve change and development in Ireland. The planning system is a crucial aspect of the process of guiding and controlling the geography of environmental change. In many respects, planning is a form of applied geography as it seeks to shape the geography of the future. This article gives an overview of modern planning. As such, it is concerned to convey the logic that underpins the planning process by describing its purpose and function as a government activity. Later articles will describe the evolution of the planning system and examine how it operates in practice in contemporary Ireland.

THE NATURE OF MODERN TOWN PLANNING

Planning is a distinctly *human activity* - it involves the application of human forethought to action for the purpose of moulding the future. Humans are unique amongst species in the world in being able to engage in this type of activity. Most species act out of biological instincts when engaging with their environment but human beings tend to draw upon their culture and a whole range of institutional and behavioural repertoires to enable them to live in a forward-thinking manner. Humans transcend the biological model of living. They live a self-improving lifestyle which is based on a forward-looking culture as opposed to being content with simply eking out an existence in the here and now. In this respect planning is about *avoiding uncertainty* by charting and selecting the direction of our future destinies. It seeks to eliminate doubts and impose order on chaos by establishing 'control' over the future through deliberate actions designed to achieve desired futures.

Of course, planning is also a personal *daily activity* for most of us and it is implicit in many of our personal choices from what clothes to wear to what career to pursue. The whole process of daily living in human societies involves making decisions about our future and following up on them through appropriate actions. Planning is, therefore, an intrinsic aspect of our everyday lives from the time we get up in the morning and choose to have breakfast before going to school or work to the time we decide to go to bed. In this sense we can describe planning as a generic activity. However, it has also become an *institutionalised procedure* (a systematic legal activity) for shaping the future environment of our communities. Formal planning is the ability to control the future consciously through current actions by devising *plans* and implementing them. As such, it involves the design of a desired future and of effective ways of bringing this about. As the practice of modern town and country planning it is concerned with the deliberate transformation of physical landscapes. It is, therefore, a form of *applied (practical) geography* in that it is concerned with actively creating *geographies of the future*. It envisages an end result (e.g. a sprawling low-density town or a high-density compact town) and a formalised process of bringing it about.

This process of *shaping the environment* can apply at many scales, from local plans for local communities to plans for whole towns and their wider regions - and in some instances plans can prepared for a whole country. In this sense it is about places and the physical dimensions of the world. However, because modern planning is also about people making decisions about the geography of their communities as places in which they will live in the future, it is also has a social and a political dimension. Moreover, in the modern world where economic activities and work (for profits and wages) are prominent features of our lives, planning is also intricately bound up with organising and connecting (through transport linkages) the changing landscapes of production (agriculture and manufacturing) and consumption (retailing and leisure). Planning, therefore, is about the conscious and deliberate creation of the future landscapes in which people will live, work and play.

Through planning the environment supplied to meet the future housing and other needs (or demands) of the community is deliberately selected and created - it does not result from blind or unconscious actions. This brings us to another issue in planning - it is a conscious decision-making process about the use of *resources*. Insofar as planning is concerned with the landscape, it is fundamentally about two of our most precious resources - land and people. The challenge for planning is to use these resources as wisely as possible, to provide as much of our needs between now and the future as is reasonable

without compromising the ability of those resources to continue to sustain future generations. Planning, therefore, attempts to achieve a balance between *development and conservation*. Development involves the creation of new living and built environments and conservation is about maximising the use of existing infrastructure. The essence of sustainable planning is to keep the best of what we have and add to it without compromising our future. It is important to develop or build to satisfy the needs of people now and in the future but this must not be done at any cost and, more importantly, we should not destroy that which already provides a valuable contribution to our resource bases. Reconciling the supply side and the demand side to accommodate changes between now and the future is intrinsic to notions of *sustainability* in planning.

There is one other fundamental aspect of planning that needs to be considered briefly before examining how it operates in practice - the aspect of *change*. Planning is about directing or controlling change to achieve the desired future to which we aspire. It is through the effective management of change that we create order and establish certainty and achieve the optimum use of our resources. Change is a fundamental element of human social life. The world is continually undergoing change - physically, socially and economically. As human beings we endeavour to cope with change by not letting it control us and by striving instead to make it work for us. Modern societies have done this by establishing formal procedures for planning and incorporating them into the way they organise their social and economic systems. Planning is obliged to engage with these changes in co-ordinated and constructive ways that avoid ad-hoc confusion, policy contradictions and wasteful overlaps. Planning is also incorporated into government activities where it is adopted as a democratic process of policy-formulation and decision-making.

To reiterate what we have said so far, planning is about the future and involves the creation of future geographies at many scales. It is about avoiding uncertainty and imposing order on potential chaos by applying our ability for advanced thinking to the world in which we live. It has physical, social, political and economic aspects. It is also about making the best use of our resources (Table 1).

PLANNING AS A PROCESS

We plan the future from the vantage-point of the present. It is, therefore, important to determine clearly where we are now because this is the baseline

**Table 1: Dimensions and Features of Modern Planning**

Dimensions	Features
Thought	Applied, conscious forethought to decisions and actions
Behaviour	Self-conscious, future-oriented actions and procedures
Future	Specified time-horizon and desired outcome
Environment	Shaping the evolution of geographic environments
Change	Control through current management and direction
Sustainability	Balanced use of resources including people and land
Scope	Physical, social, and economic development and conservation
Scales	Multiple - informal personal to local to formal public (state)

or departure point for all our forecasts and projections into the future. We must be clear about where we stand in terms of current population and infrastructure provision before we can project or estimate future needs for housing, transport, water supply and so forth. To answer the question of where we are now involves a whole series of *surveys*. It means making an inventory of all the information that will help us to summarise the current state of our world. The type of surveys used by planners to do this include socio-economic surveys of public behaviour and attitudes, environmental surveys of air, land and water quality, transport surveys of traffic patterns and mobility and access needs, engineering surveys of infrastructure availability and use, and a host of other enquiries. The information collected from these investigations must then be integrated in a co-ordinated way so that it can be analysed thoroughly and holistically.

A wide range of techniques may be used to analyse the information collected in our surveys. Favoured techniques of *analysis* include the use of maps, computers and mathematical models to sort, categorise and manipulate information in useful ways, forecast trends and estimate likely shortfalls based on existing patterns. The use of other logical techniques allow us to carry out S.W.O.T (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analyses and to create planning balance sheets to distinguish between what is good and bad in the environment. So it is the co-ordination and combined analysis of the survey information that allows us to produce informed plans for the future. This process is often

summarised as the S.A.P. (survey-analysis-plan) process (Figure 1 and Table 2). Again, it is important to point out that plans can be devised for different scales so that we can produce plans on a very large scale such as a whole country or a whole range of smaller scales, whether it be region, county or community level.
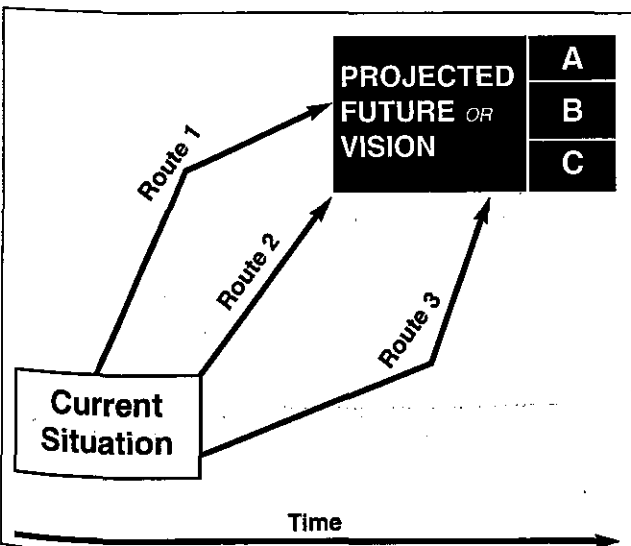
Figure 1: The Planning Process
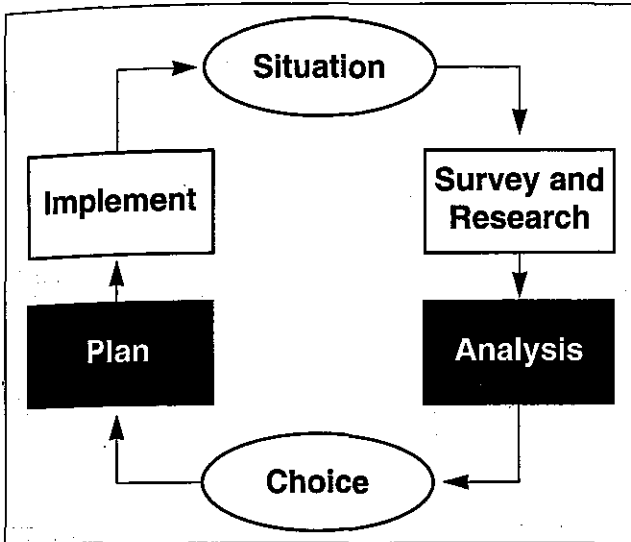
Planning as an environmental activity, at whatever scale, involves identifying in detail where we are now, painting a picture of where we would like to be at some time in the future - say five, ten or twenty years from now - and selecting and identifying ways of working towards that future. It involves three fundamental questions:

- where are we now?
- where do we want to go?
- how do we get there?

Planning seeks to provide a clear statement of these questions as well as clear answers. The three basic elements of all *plans* are illustrated in Figure 2. The information required to answer the question about where we are now is normally straightforward and can be provided by detailed surveys and analysis. However, the choices of future destinations, and routes to those destinations, are usually not so clear-cut. Past experience has shown that excessively rigid plans can be counter-productive. Accordingly, modern plans tend to be flexible enough to allow for alternative points of arrival, and for different paths to be selected in the light of experience and changing circumstances. Indeed, it is also usual now to modify planning targets and trajectories as part of an ongoing process of monitoring and reviewing of the selected plan. In the past many development plans were 'trend plans' - that is, they simply extrapolated future land use needs on the basis of population projections or forecasts and produced a plan that would satisfy the anticipated pattern(s). Increasingly, there is a move away from this 'reactive' approach towards a more creative and proactive approach that sets out envisioned targets. This latter approach is usually more ambitious than the trend plan style of planning insofar as it seeks to identify an alternative destiny (i.e. vision) for the planned area rather than settle for a continuing drift in the direction of an apparently pre-set course - even if the 'drift' is guided in a rational, co-ordinated (i.e. planned) way. Vision statements are usually, but not always, growth oriented - visions can entail objectives to secure conservation rather than growth, reduction or consolidation in preference to expansion, and so on. The selected plan destination and route is usually chosen from a range of alternative options, so deciding where we want to go, and what path we should follow to get there, involves evaluation based on 'preferences' as well as the analysis of available information.

Figure 2: Basic Elements of Plans

Table 2: Elements of the Modern Planning Process

| Survey	Analysis	Plan
• demographic	• maps	• trend plans
• socio-economic attitudes	• computers	• vision plans
• environmental	• mathematical models	
• land-use / activities	• logical techniques	
• traffic surveys	- S.W.O.T.	
• engineering surveys	- balance sheets	
• other	• other	

The issue of 'preferences' in relation to plans raises the question of who actually makes a plan and implements it. The planning about which we are speaking here is *public planning*; it is about plans made by, and on behalf of, the public. These plans claim to enshrine the wishes of the public about the future environment in which they will live. As such, a development plan constitutes a statement of the vision and aspirations of the public for its future geography. It is a major statement about the selected future environment in which the public (community) intends to live at some time in the future. In short, the plan provides the policy context for all subsequent decisions and actions about resource uses required to achieve the desired outcome - namely, the desired future society and environment selected by the community.

The scope for *public participation* is another salient feature of modern planning. As stated earlier, to some extent we all plan on an individual personal basis. However we are concerned here with a formal process of planning. This operates on a much larger scale and applies to communities (general public) which negotiate the destinations, decisions and actions involved in the collective shaping of their future world. In the contemporary world this shared or collective dimension operates on more democratic principles than applied in the past. In previous eras small élite groups tended to make decisions on behalf of the wider communities, which were effectively disenfranchised by the autocratic decision-making systems which then prevailed. In the modern democratic world provision is made for greater participation by the community in the decision making processes which affect their lives. We are very familiar with one such means of involvement, namely the indirect form of democratic participation that involves appointing political representatives to make decisions on our behalf through the electoral system. Politicians, as the indirect representatives of the public, are involved in the public planning process and so also are the technical and administrative bureaucrats employed to help prepare and implement plans. However, the planning system in the modern era also makes provision for direct involvement of the public, for example in the form of objections to planning proposals or submissions on development plans. Thus, planning is one of the main arenas where the public is provided with both direct and indirect participation opportunities in the decision making process which shapes the future environment of the community.

THE PLANNING PROCESS IN IRELAND

The way planning is carried out as a process and implemented varies from country to country. The context provided by the legal and political systems of each country influences the exact nature of planning as it is experienced. Figure 3 illustrates the different legal and political 'families' in western Europe and places Ireland within the British dual-politics system which has no statutory third tier (regional level) of government. Thus, town and country planning in Ireland is essentially a state decision-making process. In Ireland it is the local authorities which are given the job of preparing and adopting plans for the future geographies of their areas of jurisdiction. This does not have to be the case - separate, independent bodies such as semi-state companies or statutory regional planning agencies could be established to discharge the planning function. However, this has not happened and the framework for planning in Ireland is accordingly provided by local government. The Irish modern planning system was introduced in the early 1960s when the Local Government (Planning and Development) Act 1963 was passed by central government. This Act provided for the orderly planning and development of the country on a local government basis with local authorities also designated as *planning authorities*.

Figure 3: The Legal and Adminstrative 'Families' of Europe
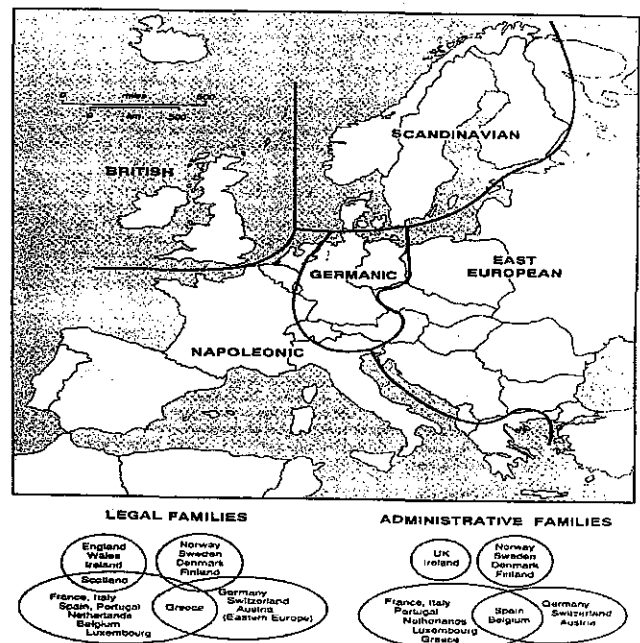
(Source: Newman & Thornley, 1996)

The system introduced in Ireland has three main functions (Figure 4). The first function is the preparation and adoption of a *development plan* to represent the wishes of the people about the future geography of the area over a five-year time horizon.

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The development plan consists of a statement of aims and intentions in written and map form. It sets out the aspirations or broad aims of the plan in a policy section. A second section of the plan specifies concrete actions or objectives to be pursued by the planning authority. The objectives section is often shorter than the policy section because it contains only those actions that the planning authority can itself realistically pursue within the constraints of the legal powers and resources available to it. The policy section can be more extensive because it contains a 'wish list' of what the planning authority would like other agencies (such as central government departments, the public transport companies, etc.) to do during the life of the plan. These are often matters over which the planning authority has no legal or financial control (e.g. the operation of the bus companies). A final section provides guidelines and standards to be applied

Figure 4: Planning System Main Functions

when processing planning applications. This section contains definitions and the allowable limits to be applied when implementing the plan (e.g. building heights, density standards, car parking limits, zoning definitions).

The second major function is called *development control* and is concerned with regulating the direct actions that shape and reshape the landscape through building construction works and land use changes. Development plans are implemented through the development control system. The development plan is applied by vetting and checking all submitted development proposals ('planning applications') to ensure that they conform to, and are consistent with, the aims and objectives contained in the development plan. Those proposals which are in agreement with the development plan (which represents the wishes of the wider community) are granted planning permission. Those which are not in accordance are refused consent or modified to secure conformity with the policies and objectives specified in the development plan. At this stage, it is worth noting that under Irish law all changes relating to land or buildings constitute development and are, therefore, subject to development control. Basically, every change requires planning permission. This is because the development rights of all land, including that which is privately owned, have been nationalised (i.e. the right to develop the land, but not the ownership of the land itself, has been appropriated by the state on behalf of the community). However, in practice it is not necessary to apply for planning permission for many changes because they are granted *exempted development* status. In short, these changes (listed in the planning legislation) are deemed to have been granted automatic planning permission. Examples of exempted development range from painting the inside of a building to the construction of a small extension to a dwelling house. Thus, the starting position for any person who wishes to alter land in any way, is to assume that planning permission is required in conformity with the local development plan. They are then obliged to apply for planning permission unless they already have deemed consent for their alteration through the exempted development legislation.

A third key function of the planning system consists of *enforcement* procedures. In effect this is the policing aspect of planning. It involves checking that all development actions, whether they are building works or changes of activity (called land use
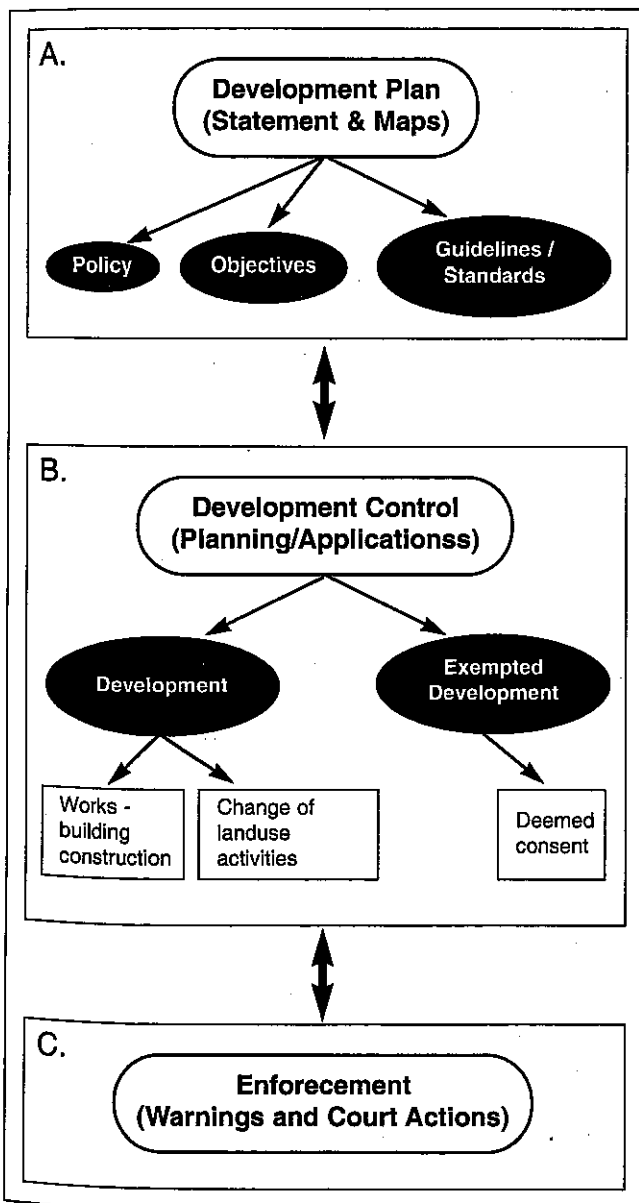
changes by planners - e. g. changing the use of a building from a grocery shop to a bank) have obtained planning permission and are, therefore, legal or authorised. The intention of this policing aspect of planning is to ensure that the development plan in particular, and the planning process generally, is taken seriously and properly observed by the public.

At this stage it is worth pointing out that the making

Table 3:Roles of Planning Authority and Public in Irish Planning

Aspect	Planning Authority - Primary Role	Role of Public
Development Plan	Politicians (Reserved function)	Consultation - public must be consulted before the plan is adopted
Development Control	Manager (Executive function)	Objections and appeals - individuals are entitled to disagree with development proposals at planning application stage
Enforcement	Manager (Executive function)	Objections - individuals can notify the local authority about, or take action through the courts against, unauthorised development

or preparation and adoption of a development plan is a function of the politicians who have been elected to the local authority by the public. However, the development control and enforcement functions are discharged by the manager and the officials employed by the planning authority. In other words, the power in relation to these different elements of planning is split between the policy making or strategic element of planning (i.e. making the development plan) and its execution (implementation) on a day-to-day basis through the development control system. The politicians have priority when it comes to making the plan but the manager and his appointed staff take precedence in relation to the implementation of the plan on a day-to-day basis. Of course, the public has a role to play at all stages of the planning processes. Modern planning, as we have already indicated, is one of the few areas in which provision is made to allow

members of the public to become directly involved in all stages of making and implementing the development plan. The public must be consulted directly when plans are being prepared and every person has a right to object to any specific planning proposal. Table 3 summarises the roles of the planning authority (politicians and officials) and the public in relation to the three main planning functions.

In conclusion, we have provided a brief overview of the planning system. We presented a summary account of the definition, purpose and operating logic of planning. A short description of the main functions and dimensions of planning was also provided. We saw that planning is a process with targets, tasks, and a time horizon. It is also both a technical exercise (plans are drawn up on our behalf by 'technocratic experts') and a political activity insofar as plans constitute the 'will of the people' and are adopted by the public through their elected representatives. The Irish planning system provides political accountability through the electoral system and by direct provision for community participation in the adoption and implementation of plans.

A future article will examine the emergence and evolution of government planning as a response to the problems and challenges of the modern era. A further article will explore in detail the operation and problems of planning in Ireland. We will return to the issue of public participation rights in both of these articles.

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