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Pat Dargan

Technological University Dublin, pat.dargan@tudublin.ie

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**Spatial Aspects of Housing in Ireland – Municipal
Developments: 1930-2000**

Pat Dargan

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Spatial Aspects of Housing in Ireland - Municipal Developments: 1930 to 2000

INTRODUCTION

This is the first of two papers that set out to trace the development of suburban housing in Ireland during the twentieth century. This paper focuses on the form of municipal housing between 1930 and the end of the millennium, particularly in regard to layout and spatial quality. The research material for the study has been drawn from a range of sources including published works, Ordnance Survey maps and on-site fieldwork.

FOLLOWING the establishment of the Free State government in 1922, it was not until the closing years of that decade that the lack of municipal housing in Ireland was addressed in any significant form. By that period, Dublin consisted of two main morphological zones: the central Georgian core, which lay between the rings of the canals and outside of this the network of surrounding Victorian suburban townships such as Pembroke and Rathgar on the south and Clontarf on the north. With the exception of areas around Fitzwilliam Square, Merrion Square and Saint Stephen's Green, the fabric of the Georgian core had, by this period, mostly degenerated into areas of substandard slums with chronically poor housing and living conditions. In an attempt to eliminate these conditions, the Corporation of Dublin embarked on an extensive programme of new house building, as a result of which a range of municipal housing projects, such as Marino, Crumlin, Ballyfermot, and Drimnagh, were laid out within a circular band that extended around and outside of the city's Victorian townships (Fig.1).

would build and rent houses to families who wished to move from the city centre slums - leaving the Corporation free to pursue a long-term programme of inner-city slum clearance.

The form of the new municipal housing projects was greatly influenced by the design practices developed earlier in the century by London County Council in centres like Dagenham and Eltham. In White Heart Lane, for example, the council layout was made up of a combination of gridiron and radial street elements, into which were inserted rows of terraced blocks of uniform cottages (Fig.2). Small areas of public open space were distributed around the development and each cottage was supplied with a small front garden and a more spacious one at the rear.

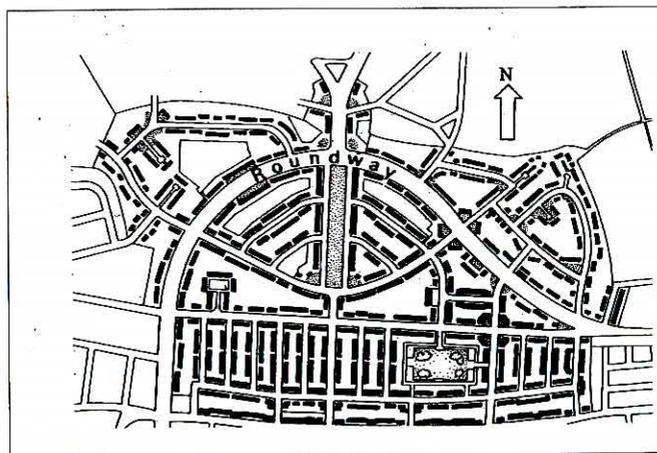


Figure 2. London County Council Housing, White Heart Lane c.1914 (Quiney, 1986)

MUNICIPAL HOUSING, MARINO

In 1927 Dublin Corporation started work on the first of their large-scale suburban housing developments at Marino, on the northeast side of the city. Here, the site consisted of a diamond shaped holding into which the Corporation fitted a radial grid plan. The development site was located on Fairview Road directly opposite the new Fairview Park. Unfortunately, very little effort went into establishing any kind of relationship with the park, or any of the surrounding topography. The layout consisted of a series of large circular and oval open spaces, placed within a network of axial and radial streets, in a form reminiscent of the White Heart Lane development (Fig.3). The streets were the essential component of the project. They were linear in form and consisted of narrow carriageways flanked by footpaths,

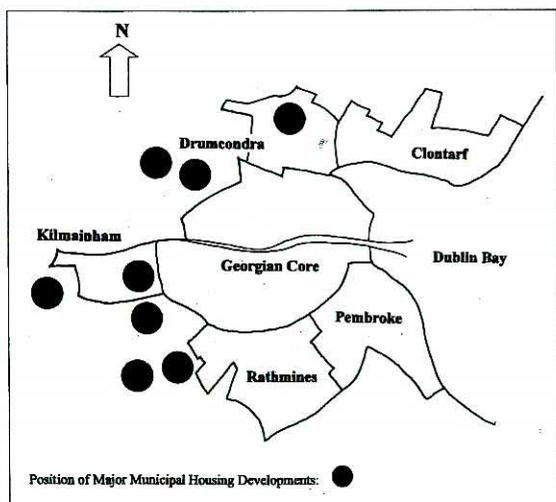


Figure 1. Distribution of Large-Scale Municipal Housing Projects, Dublin c.1950

The programme began with a series of modest inner city developments, such as that at Mount Brown and Maryland, which were built near the then western edge of the City. This modest beginning was soon followed by the creation of a band of large-scale local authority suburban housing projects that traced an arc around the landward perimeter of the city. The idea that lay behind this type of development was that the local authority

and lined with tightly packed terraces of small uniform houses. The houses themselves had a very restrained Art and Crafts styling, shallow front gardens and a larger one at the rear. In addition, plain metal railings enclosed the front gardens, while post and wire fencing separated those at the rear. Initially a series of allotments were laid out in the centre of the grid blocks, but these were subsequently incorporated in the house gardens. Services for the new community was provided for by the existing school and shopping around the Fairview area, in addition to which a parade of new retail units was laid out along the Fairview Road edge of the site. In terms of accommodation, the development at Marino satisfied the urgent requirements of the Corporation, in providing a large body of houses within a short space of time and within limited economic constraints. However, the design of the layout was not without its drawbacks in terms of spatial quality and landscaping provisions.

The Marino layout seems to have been inspired by the geometric techniques of the drawing board rather than by the features of the site itself. In other words, the layout was essentially an exercise in graphics: a diagonal grid of long straight roads with circular nodes positioned where the roads intersected. Consequently, the spatial quality of the long unbroken streets is one of dullness and monotony, exacerbated by the relentlessly consistent building lines and the uniform architecture of the houses. No thought, or consideration, seems to have been given to the integration of the site into the established topographical features of the area such as Fairview Park, the dramatic curve of Marino Crescent, or the adjacent Dublin Bay.

Community open spaces played a significant part in the geometric layout of the streets, but beyond the fact

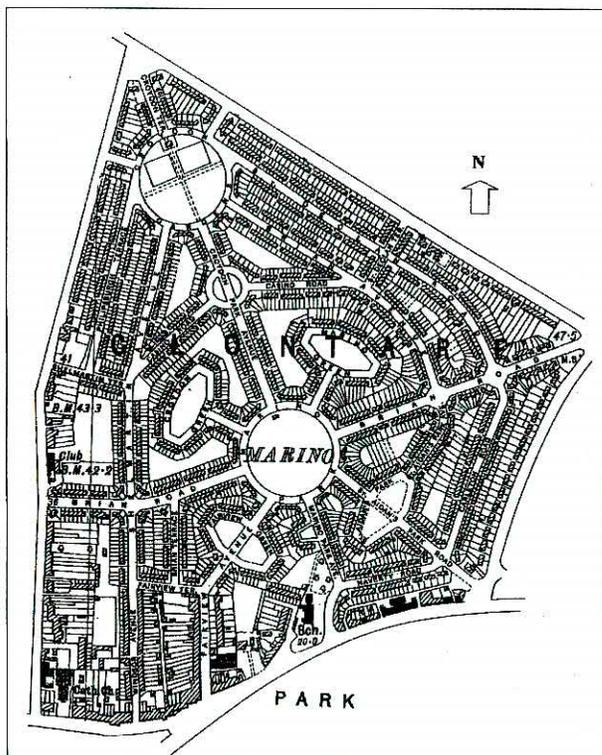


Figure 3. Housing Layout, Marino, Dublin 1944
(Based on Ordnance Survey Map: Sheet, Dublin 18)

that they offered a range of circular grassed lawns, they played little part in serving the requirements of the community. No integral landscaping features, such as trees, seating areas or water features were provided. Consequently, the open spaces are, for the most part, unimaginative and often windswept. These limitations were, however, considered unimportant at the time and the Marino layout became the accepted template for the layout for the greater bulk of further municipal housing projects, both in Dublin and in the regional centres, for some considerable time. In almost every instance that followed, municipal housing was characterised by geometric street patterns, uniform street-scapes, and ubiquitous rows of terraced housing with front and back gardens. In Dublin, developments in Cabra, Crumlin, Drimnagh, Finglas, and Ballyfermot closely followed the Marino model. Unfortunately, as time went on, even the limited spatial quality achieved in Marino was reduced by the simplification of the layout pattern and the reduction of the public open space.

For example, the development at Drimnagh consisted of terraced blocks packed tightly into the site, with only a token provision of public open spaces. In addition, the Drimnagh site offered considerable potential in environmental terms. On one side lay the Cammack Valley and on the other the Grand Canal. Unfortunately, both features were ignored in the design of the layout and in the case of the Cammack Valley, in particular, the houses back on to this outstanding natural feature. In Bulfin, the tightly packed terraced houses were fitted into a canal-side site – the aspect of which was again ignored. No public open space was provided and some of the streets were laid out without the benefit of footpaths (Fig.4). The result was a layout that grossly maximised the density potential of the site at the expense of environmental and spatial quality.



Figure 4. Bulfin, Dublin c.1950
(Based on Ordnance Survey Map, Sheet: Dublin 18)

As had been the case in Marino, the needs of the new communities were catered for through a range of small shopping parades, schools and church facilities. The largest and most concentrated of these service units is to be found in Ballyfermot where a long shopping parade, a large Roman Catholic Church, a presbytery, and a cluster of schools, form a linear core along the major Ballyfermot Road axis.

Elsewhere around the country, other urban local authorities were facing similar problems as the capital in relation to housing shortages. Pressure for the supply of new municipal housing emanated from poor housing conditions, slum clearance and population growth. In response to these requirements, most local authorities initiated their own house building programmes. The layout of these were, for the most part, based on the Marino model with varying levels of scale and intensity, depending on available resources and the extent of the requirements. A number of individual projects were, for example, laid out around the perimeter of the larger centres such as Cork, Galway and Limerick, while elsewhere municipal housing developments were often limited to a single modest project. Four examples offer a flavour of the scales of development and some of the results achieved: Cork, Limerick, Wicklow, and Sligo.

The development pattern of municipal housing in Cork and Limerick followed the example of Dublin and consisted of a series of large-scale developments on green-field sites, which were positioned on the rim of their respective cities. These included Fairhill, Spangle Hill, Gurranebraher, Capwell, Turners Cross, and Ballyphehane in Cork (Fig.5); while similar developments in Limerick included Kileely and St Mary's Park on the north side, Pennywell and Fairgreen on the east, and Janesboro and Prospect on the south. Generally, the design of the individual layouts throughout the country followed the Marino practice with uniform linear streets, very often laid out on a basic grid, and little attention given to any form of integrated open space or spatial considerations.

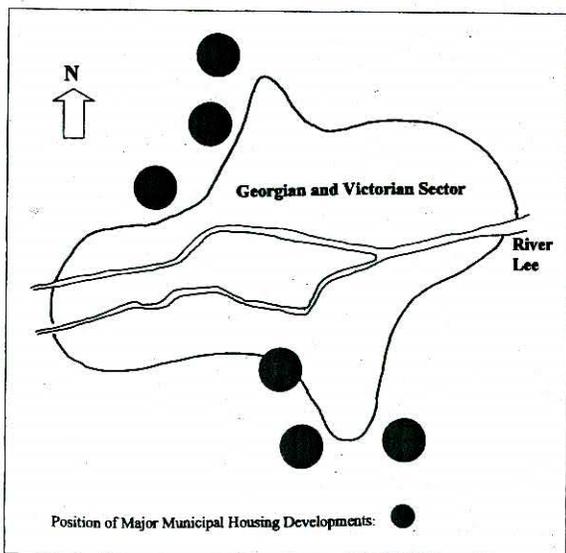


Figure 5. Distribution of Large-Scale Housing Projects, Cork c.1950

KILMANTIN ROAD, WICKLOW

The Kilmantin Road development in Wicklow offers a typical example of this elementary and commonly used layout. This site was located on the south side of the town and consisted of a sloping terrain that offered extensive views over the town and beyond. Unfortunately, the design of the layout failed to respond in any imaginative way to the splendid topography and what emerged was a basic rectangular street pattern of linear roads, flanked by footpaths and front gardens. The housing was arranged in blocks of terraces that were distributed along fixed building lines and the development was given no open space whatsoever – the entire concept reminiscent of the Goldenbridge complex (Fig.6). Despite this, the development is not an unattractive one. The density is not excessive, the gardens and the spaces between the blocks are generous and the housing blocks seem to be set into the sloping ground in a series of progressive steps.

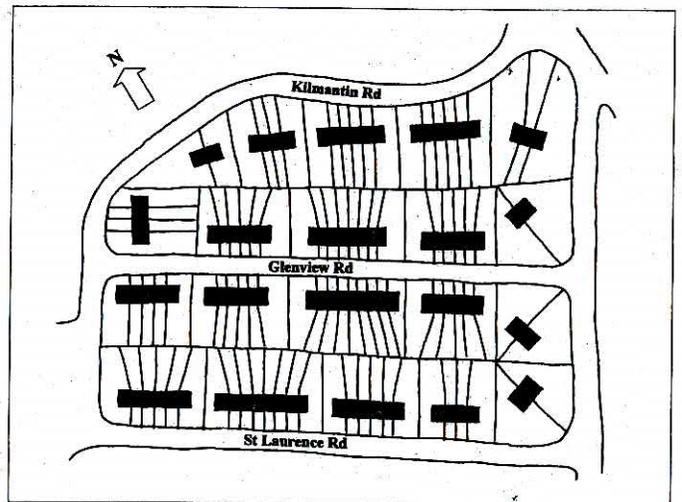


Figure 6. Kilmantin Road, Wicklow c.1950

ST MARY'S PARK, LIMERICK

St Mary's Park in Limerick is a large-scale development that illustrates the policy of cramming the maximum amount of housing into a given site, while making some gesture to the adjoining topography. Here, the site consisted of a vast area of marshy ground located at the northern tip of King's Island. The development was positioned in the middle of the site so that it was surrounded by extensive natural wetlands and outside of this, the loop of the river.

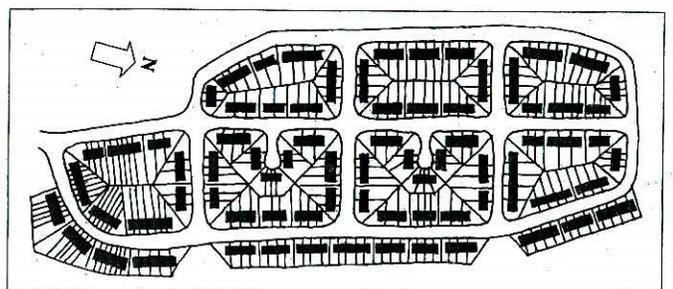


Figure 7. St Mary's Park, Limerick c.1950

The layout chosen was a basic grid of three linear streets, four cross streets, and two small cul-de-sacs. Within this matrix, the street pattern followed the Marino format, with narrow carriageways, flanking footpaths, shallow front gardens, and long terraces of uniform housing (Fig.7). The layout addressed its environmental context better than most as a large number of the houses were arranged facing the surrounding landscape. In addition, the ends of the cross streets were cleverly opened up to offer views of the surrounding topography.

GARAVOGUE, SLIGO

Garavogue Villas, in Sligo, is another, but more modest, example of the use of the Marino layout model. The site was an irregular one that lay on a rise on the south bank of the River Garavogue overlooking the river. Unfortunately, the layout failed to address the river aspect to any great degree. Nevertheless, an interesting variation of the Marino plan type was slotted into the site during the nineteen forties. This consisted of a cruciform street arrangement with a circular open space positioned at the intersection of the major and minor axes. West of the circle, the line of the main axis was extended and incorporated a second open space - this time semi-circular in form. Elsewhere, small turning circles were placed at the extremities of the minor cross streets (Fig.8). A small number of houses were laid out facing the river and a narrow carriageway, without the benefit of a footpath, serviced these. Elsewhere, the Garavogue roadways were of a standard width and houses were laid out in blocks of terraces with front and rear gardens. One of the interesting features of the layout is the way in which the spatial qualities of the development were successfully articulated within the site. This was achieved by arranging the blocks into clusters around the open spaces and by staggering the building line in a rhythmic fashion along the extended major axis.

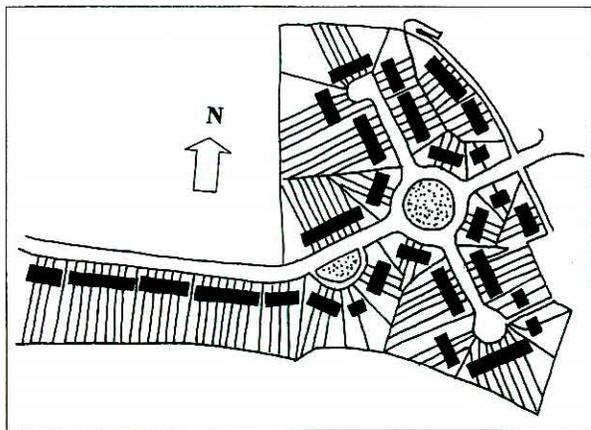


Figure 8. Garavogue Villas, Sligo c. 1950.

Up to and beyond the mid point in the twentieth century, municipal housing development were characterised by a range of standard features. These included the use of the grid layout, uniform linear streets, limited open space provisions, and the use of high-density terraced housing. The result was a range

of housing projects that were often monotonous, dull and windswept. This lack of environmental and spatial quality became particularly acute in later schemes, when densities were increased further and open spaces were often reduced to a token. However, well into the second half of the century, the layout concepts of municipal housing underwent a change as local authorities became more conscious of the importance of spatial and environmental qualities. The absolute rigidity of the Marino format was gradually abandoned and replaced with elements that reflected a more enlightened approach to spatial planning and environmental quality. These included curvilinear road patterns, intimate building clusters, integrated open spaces, formal landscape, and traffic segregation – all very often successfully blended together. Three examples will demonstrate the effectiveness of these fresh approaches: Laragh in County Wicklow, Drumalee in Dublin, and Shanganagh Park in Dun Laoghaire.

LARAGH

Wicklow County Council were one of the first authorities to break from the rigidity of the Marino model, when they laid out a small development in Laragh, in the nineteen fifties. This consisted of a group of six detached cottages laid out in such a way as to acknowledge the surrounding environment (Fig.9).

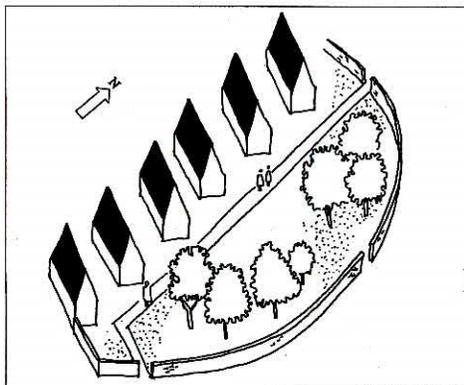


Figure 9. Municipal Housing, Laragh, County Wicklow

The six cottages were laid out in a stepped arrangement, with an open space between the house-fronts and the carriageway. The cottages were given tall steeply pitched roofs, which blended into the surrounding mountain landscape. In addition, the landscaping of the site itself was unusually well considered and consisted of three integrated elements: an open lawn which was positioned between the houses and the road, a group of trees which extended across the open space, and a low stone-built boundary wall, that stretched along the curved edge of the site, so as to separate it from the carriageway. In this way, the County Council had taken advantage of, and drawn on, the availability of local materials: wood, stone and natural vegetation. A narrow pathway, which stretched along the frontage of the cottages, provided access to the houses and a service lane at the rear of the development supplemented this. The success was achieved here by the careful integration of the houses, gardens, open space, and traditional building materials.

DRUMALEE

When Dublin Corporation laid out their housing development at Drumalee, on the North Circular Road, the terraced housing blocks were retained, but the massing of the individual blocks was varied by the use of stepped front building lines (Fig.10). In addition, the blocks were clustered around car-parking bays that provided access to the rear of the houses. In addition, the road network was supplemented by a system of pedestrian passageways that linked the clusters together. The roadway followed a curved circuit around the housing blocks and outside of this a continuous belt of landscaping was laid out. The use of two and single storey blocks also articulated the massing of the housing – a feature that was enhanced by eliminating front boundary walls and incorporating open-aspect front gardens. In other words, no front garden boundary walls were used.

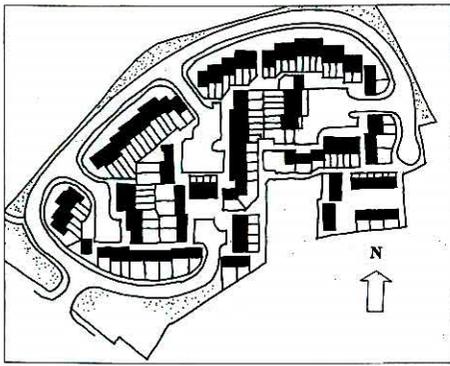


Figure 10. Drumalee, Dublin

RATHSALLAGH PARK

The Corporation of Dun Laoghaire adopted a particularly bold approach to the integration of layout and landscape when they laid out Rathsaltagh Park, Killiney in the nineteen seventies. This consisted of three concentric elements: a central open landscaped area surrounded by housing, outside of which lay an outer perimeter band of landscaping – the entire fitted into a rectangular site (Fig.11). The road network followed the conventional Marino principal and consisted of a grid of curved linear streets, many of which terminated in cul-de-sacs. The layout of the houses was also conventional and consisted of long blocks of terraced houses laid out parallel to the road lines.

The outstanding feature of the development was, however, the way in which the public open spaces and the housing was integrated. The central space was by far the largest landscaped area and from this three narrower spaces extended outwards - two following the edge of the main distribution roads. These links provided access to the perimeter open space both physically and visually. In addition, all of the open spaces were linked by a system of interconnecting paths which, in turn, linked up with a continuous perimeter path that encircled the site. So skilfully was the arrangement of the open spaces and the housing blocks that virtually every house in the development had an un-interrupted view of at least one section of landscaped open space.

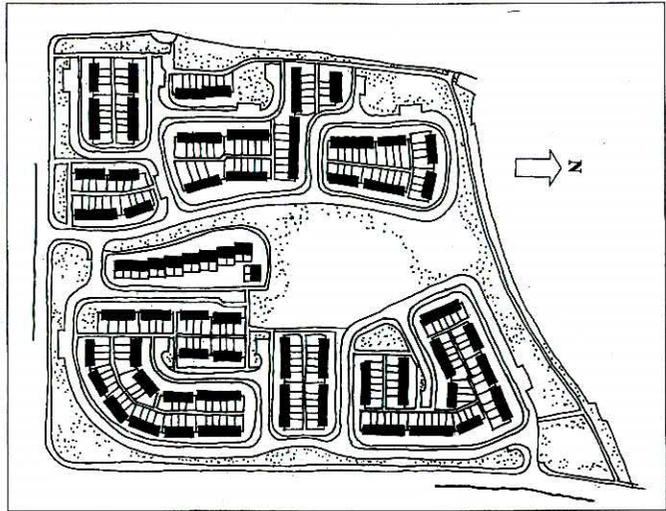


Figure 11. Rathsaltagh Park, Dun Laoghaire

CONCLUSION

The twentieth century was a period of large-scale municipal housing development in Ireland, during which time individual housing projects were completed in virtually every urban area in the country. The layouts used were initially elementary in their design, with basic grid street patterns, long uniform terraces of houses, and limited landscape and open space. In the last quarter of the century, more considered approaches to layout-design were initiated and this resulted in more imaginative layouts, increased spatial qualities and integrated landscape features. The overall impact of these developments on Irish urbanisation was considerable, particularly in the larger centres, where these new suburban housing projects helped to push city and town boundaries outwards, further and further. This urban expansion was of course also heavily influenced by the forces of extensive private house-building activities - forces and activities that will be considered in the next paper in this series.

Pat Dargan

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