Urban Design and Residential Environments

Derry O’Connell

Introduction

Circumstances are right for positive development in housing design. Internationally and nationally, the core aim of planning policies is to achieve sustainable development. While this is sometimes seen as a fairly loose and vague concept, with respect to planning it is clear that at the very least it means that planners should attempt to use land efficiently and create places which are liveable. In Ireland, through the national policy on Sustainable Development and the National Spatial Strategy, planning policy seeks to achieve environmental sustainability and to produce a spatial settlement pattern which is likewise sustainable (Government of Ireland, 1997b; Department of the Environment and Local Government, 2002). In terms of urban and regional planning, for example, one of the key aims is to generate a more compact urban form, which in turn means building housing at higher densities than we have done historically. This turnabout in policy presents many challenges to planners, developers and consumers alike, both at the macro level of city planning but also at the micro level of urban design. This chapter reviews and assesses the changes in the design of residential areas arising from these policy changes.

Increasing Residential Density

The need for higher residential densities has now been clearly outlined in Government policy (Department of the Environment and Local Government, 1998b, 1999d). While this will facilitate more sustainable urban infrastructure and support higher populations, it will also favour the design of quality environments. It is easier to create good urban place at higher densities (Carmona, 2001; Gehl, 1996). With a greater quantity of building mass it is easier to enclose external space with buildings, and also easier to sub-divide space.
using buildings. With more covered floor space per area of land, buildings can be
taller and therefore more easily address space. In the twenty years up to 1998
most urban expansion in Ireland yielded densities of six to ten houses per acre
(Bacon and Associates, 1998). As an increase on this, many local authorities are
now prescribing thirteen units per acre, with much higher in areas like Dublin.
Such densities are, however, still well below those sought elsewhere in urban
Europe. A recent study in the UK recommended that densities there should be
increased from the current average of twenty to twenty-five dwellings per hectare
to thirty-five to forty dwellings per hectare in order to secure basic levels of
infrastructural sustainability (Llewelyn-Davies, 1998, 2000). Indeed, many of
the most sought-after quarters of European cities have densities of 100-200
dwellings per hectare – density levels that current development controls would
not permit (Urban Task Force, 1999). Measurement of density by number of
units per area of ground can, however, be an imprecise measurement of urban
form. In urban design terms it is more appropriate for proposed density to be
decided case by case by an assessment of surrounding circumstances (United
Kingdom, Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions and
Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment, 2000). Many UK local
authorities are now either prescribing minimum density levels or abandoning
prescribed density control altogether (United Kingdom, Department of the

It is important to dispel the misplaced association between high-density and
high-rise. Schemes that contain tower blocks in an open setting, such as did
Ballymun in Dublin or Rahoon in Galway, actually represent quite a low density
when one calculates the open space between the blocks in addition to the
enclosed floor space. Areas such as Portobello in Dublin or Shandon in Cork
would contain a much higher density with streets of two and three-storey houses.
Densities here are of 30 units per acre (McCabe et al, 1999). One has to concede,
however, that at any building height, high density with poor design has produced
poor living environments. In low-density housing, privacy can be achieved by
distance between dwellings but when density increases, households are brought
closer together and the position of each relative to others demands more careful
assembly. The creation of good high-density neighbourhoods requires sensitive
design, in which space is maximised and the influence and orientation of each
element of a house, internal and external, is calculated to protect privacy and
security while at the same time developing domestic amenity.

Design Innovation

New demands have emerged which encourage better residential environments.
Household types have expanded in range, calling for a corresponding diversity in
housing form. In social housing, the expanded variety of tenure types further