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# **An alternative vision of Ireland in contrast with the current spatial development mantra**

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## 1. Introduction

To a casual visitor departing Dublin City centre, as the rows of Georgian and Victorian homes give way to the monotony of suburbia, the imagery of Green Ireland slowly recedes into the memory of the tourist brochures. Dominated by the ageing stock of standardized housing, the typically provincial 1960s Northern English architecture is reinterpreted in bricked and pebble-dashed rows of homes haphazardly snaking across the landscape. The entire architectural language of Irish suburbia can be compressed to just two expressions—a dormer bungalow and a pitch-roofed box. The social order that abhors any attempt at transgression makes certain that nothing passing the local planner's desk disturbs its aesthetic tedium.

On the urban margins, strings of relatively concentrated developments radiate from the M50 ring road—beads of towns/villages with occasional awkwardly protruding blocks of apartments threaded on the thin needles of the main motorways. Staring into the confines of a solitary public square, an average Irish town usually avoids waterways and other natural features as focal points of orientation. A local pub forming the main point of attraction is an apt reflection of a country psyche still inclined to measure the cost of living in pints. Premium aesthetic goods like the view and identifying features of the landscape fail to inform the architectural patterns. New plain-faced four or five-storied buildings—the symbols of high-rise modernity in a townfolk view—often compete for light and air with decaying factory walls or the corrugated rust of adjoining farm yards. Walkways lack breadth and trees. Street corners rarely contain an element of surprise, such as a sudden square or a remnant of past public space. Sculpture and architectural detailing are either non-existent or mimic past decades, as if past-their-prime artists have descended en masse on Irish provincial

towns to leave their lasting mark on Earth. Even recently completed buildings prefer to cut into elevated sites instead of using the contours of the naturally diverse and rich Irish terrain to their positioning advantage.

*In this space  
One drowns without  
So much as a trace,  
Or a record of a loss...*

It is hard to find a less human attitude to landscape than that presented by the extra-urban Ireland. In constantly 'blending' land to suit the needs of agricultural production and suburban expansion, Irish countryside adjoining the larger cities has been reduced to an unimaginative utilitarian spread of featureless ground. Only older estates retain mature trees, fruit orchards and well-maintained streams or ponds.

Stretching beyond the extra-urban belt lies the world of abandoned heaps of concrete rubble and rusting skips of smaller roads—the rural space of one-off housing. Here a juxtaposing of traditional and modern is reflected in the physical positioning of the buildings. With the exception of historical estates, the older dwellings and the layout of the established countryside conform to the geophysical features of the landscape.

*Sprinkles of bungalows, flat to the ground. Fences  
Built to contain the guts of wisteria turning.  
One's speech here grows slower, coarser, wetter, hollow.  
Chances are, the thoughts will follow...*

Single-road towns, with gas stations' convenience stores increasingly serving as focal points of local economic activity, are rarely distinguished by anything resembling a unique character. Just as with the larger extra-urban towns, the Irish countryside is based on the 19th century view of land as a productive unit, unimportant from the point of view of its aesthetic value.

In contrast, buildings completed since the mid-1990s represent a departure from their surroundings. Often imposing in size and ostentatiously decorated, they achieve greater visibility and prominence in the landscape. This effect is only exaggerated by the pervasive lack of vegetation around the new builds, the ubiquitous plaques with ostentatious names of the dwellings, often executed in a tombstone fashion, and imposing stone walls. In an attempt to stamp a mark on their surroundings, the newer structures appear garish and loud. The majority of the decorative elements that are supposed to inform the architectural vocabulary arrive from a limited number of sources—the new Irish countryside resembles a badly arranged quilt of DIY-styled façades. Lines of faux balconies with galvanized railings are punctuated by Doric columns and neoclassical porticoes, and a national obsession with Velux replaces the ubiquitous window lace of the past.

Exiting the rural zones, one is transported into the landscape of private agriculture—the ultra-rural space. Here, open vistas are rarely public and access to the land, with its often unparalleled, aesthetic attributes—views, geophysical features and locations – is severely restricted. With the exception of a handful of scenic routes, the majority of rural roads are submerged below the line of sight by hedges and walls. Roadways commonly follow artificial farm boundaries, passing through geophysical locations selected for the lowest quality of agricultural land. Narrow and blank-walled bridges obscure rivers and valleys. Wading through salmon and trout streams—the sacrosanct subjects of Fáilte Ireland brochures—one routinely encounters farm run-offs and mudslides along the shore, abandoned barbwire fences hanging across the water, construction debris, and livestock and machinery tracks running through the shallow areas. The precious few public-access fisheries and hiking

trails are severely restricted by adjoining private lands.

The only exceptions to this rule can be found on the grounds of larger estates, often converted into golf courses with auxiliary functions of providing access to private fishing and hiking. Over the years, in these estates, concentrated ownership of land allowed for more heterogeneous development and land management, including the use of land for entertainment and aesthetic enjoyment.

Thus, without leaving the car, a traveler is immediately introduced to the main feature of Ireland—the lack of access to its natural and geophysical store of riches. Irish culture does not treat land as a resource capable of supporting diversified services or as an aesthetic good, preferring to use it as a utilitarian input into basic agro-industrial production. This attitude over the years has informed governments' approach to development. In a succession of various development plans, the State treated rural areas as simultaneously unique preserves of undefined 'Irish heritage', and regional underperformers in need of accelerated development.

This is surprising given the prominence of the Irish tourism industry in rural employment and the mythology of the island as a land rich in cultural heritage intertwined with nature. In reality, while Ireland's economic success translated into revitalizing the country's urban make up, the tight grip of agriculture and local politics on Ireland's rural areas has led to a continued decline in rural tourism. Over the last few years, virtually every international tourist survey of Ireland found that our countryside is lacking distinctive features worth visiting and offers little in terms of high-quality recreational amenities.

This essay outlines the state of Irish spatial policies, stressing the apparent failure of national development strategies to reverse the organic urbanization brought about by the accelerated economic development of the last 15 years.

We conclude by proposing an alternative vision of Ireland in which urban and suburban areas are encouraged to further increase population density. If Ireland were to pursue this organic growth, the process of separation of rural areas from urban zones will continue. The result will be a transformation of Ireland into a high-growth and high-density island with five core locations of economic and social activity which will support a set of large recreational zones similar to the state and federal parks in the US. This process will coincide with continued reduction in the economic diversification of peripheral rural locations to the point of rural areas emerging as publicly accessible forestry and parklands with developed recreational infrastructure.

## **2. Tunnel vision in development planning**

In Ireland, the organic evolutionary process of continued separation of rural periphery from the urban centres is being undermined by a host of state and local initiatives.

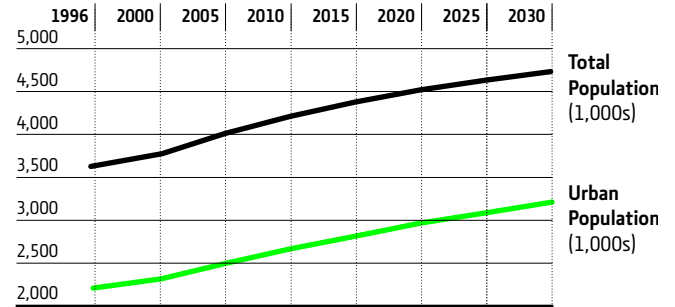
According to the National Spatial Strategy (NSS, 2001), Irish rural areas experienced a strong decline in population even in the boom years of the mid 1990s. However, there was little concerted effort to develop declining areas with a focus on recreation, natural habitat preservation and restoration. Instead, the regional development plans, the NSS and the National Development Plan (NDP) insisted on the feasibility of mixed development, with industry and auxiliary services coinciding with the recreational use of land and high value-added tourism.

The NSS (2001) explicitly stated that ‘One of the objectives of the NSS should be to shift the current gravitational forces in Ireland westwards. If centres too close to Cork/Dublin are selected as gateways/hubs, they will simply become commuter towns.’ The NDP 2000-2006 envisioned ‘the promotion of a small number of additional regional gateways (urban growth centres)... [and] positive discrimination in favour of regions lagging behind in relation to support for new enterprise and the productive sector in general.’ This approach hardly made sense in reality:

- Since the beginning of the 1990s, the majority of economic development and jobs creation took place within the five urban areas of Dublin, Cork, Waterford, Limerick and Galway.
- Foreign direct investment previously located in rural areas started to withdraw from the Republic or relocate higher value-added processes to urban locations.
- The cost basis for high value-added jobs creation is less favourable in rural locations due to shortages of infrastructure, amenities, knowledge networks and the lower ability of these areas to attract and absorb skilled domestic and foreign labour.
- Enhancement of ‘gateway’ developments within urban areas is more likely to result in the growth of communities adjoining urban high-density locations, inducing reverse commute patterns and local employment.
- Despite stating that the objectives of the spatial development policy include preservation of natural habitats and the environment, the NSS (2001) concluded that ‘There must be a strategic expansion of rural villages and towns; people should be encouraged to live in rural areas.’

Thus, the NSS and the NDP 2000-2006 set out to achieve conflicting objectives. The expansion of isolated towns

Figure 1  
**Urban population projections**  
 Urban population refers to the Greater Dublin, Cork (SW), Waterford (SE), Limerick and Galway (W) areas computed under the current demographic trend scenario. Source: Blackwell (2001)



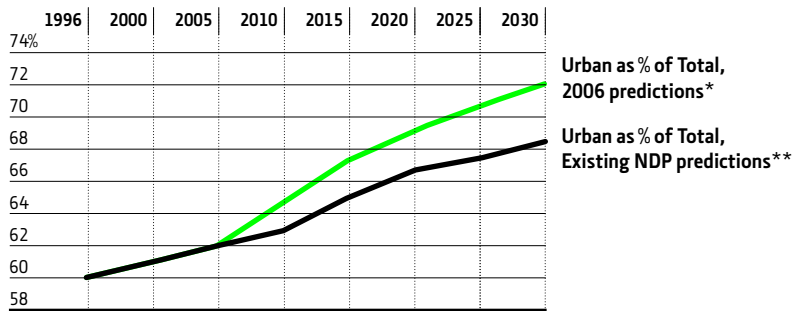
was seen as a response to suburban sprawl, while agriculture and population maintenance in the rural areas was seen as a conservation objective. Instead of focusing on the rural locations' comparative advantage over larger urban centres, the Government simply interpreted rural Ireland as a collection of semi-urban areas. Under specific allocations programmes, the NDP 2000-2006 contained little in terms of differentiated measures aimed at distinct rural development, focusing the majority of funds on building up urban-style infrastructure and economic development programmes in rural areas. Only under the measures related to the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) did the NDP 2000-2006 attempt to deliver some tailored programmes, including limited support under the Rural Environment Protection Scheme and for forestry.

Despite the abject failure to deliver on the promised correction of the rural-urban gap, the same policy errors are replicated in NDP 2007-2013. For example, NDP 2007-2013 (2006.3) proposes that 'If Ireland is to retain a substantial proportion of its population in rural areas... *Settlement policies* are needed that take into account varying rural development contexts. *Enhanced accessibility* must be linked with integrated settlement policy to revitalise rural communities.' And furthermore, 'at an overall level, the sustainable rural settlement policy framework has as broad objectives: (1) To sustain and renew established rural communities... (2) To strengthen the established structure of villages and smaller settlements... to accommodate *additional* population in a way that supports the viability of public transport and local infrastructure and services, (3) To ensure that key assets in rural areas such as water quality, the natural and cultural heritage and the quality of the landscape are protected to support quality of life and economic vitality.'

Indeed the NDP (2006.3) claims that 'it will be necessary to *secure agriculture* ...by maintaining the maximum possible number of family farms'. At the same time, the NDP sets out to '*diversify rural employment* options and stabilise population through: *resource-based development* in sectors such as forestry, marine and natural resources, enterprise and local services; *tourism development* through quality market-responsive products, enhanced access and co-ordinated promotion of a tourism product; *protecting landscape*, water resources and habitats.' All of the latter objectives have been continuously undermined by agricultural development in the Republic (see RENSS, 2000 and the ongoing debate about access to rural land).

These strategies show that the Government is committed to artificially inflate population in rural areas and to continue pushing for urban-style economic development alongside support for agricultural and urbanised development programmes, with little differentiation between urban and recreational tourism (see Finance, 2006). One can't have the cake—an increase in rural population and traditional (industrial and services) employment—and eat it, to ensure the preservation and enhancement of key rural assets.

This led to mimicry from local authorities, as rural zones politically accepted and embraced the state funding and development buzzwords. In many cases, local authorities interpret NDP 2007-2013 objectives as a mandate to continue mixed development of rural areas along suburban development patterns (see, for example, SERA, 2006 and SWRA, 2006).



\* Urban-2006 scenario was computed using Census 2006 figures.

\*\*Urban scenario corresponds to NDP 2006-2013 forecasts.

### 3. Fleeing rural Ireland

Since the early 1990s, Ireland has experienced both a decline of rural and ultra-rural communities and a continued strengthening of urban centres, as illustrated in Figure 1. The former process was most notable in the sparsely populated and remote areas of the Border counties—Donegal, the Western Midlands and the West. The latter is exemplified by the rapid growth of Dublin and Cork.

In 1996, the Greater Dublin Area was home to approximately 38.8% of the Irish population, rising to 41.79% by 2002. Census 2006 results show that today Greater Dublin accounts for 42.63% of Ireland's population. Overall, Ireland's five main urban areas were home to 59.1% of population in 1996, rising to 60% in 2000. Adjusting for the Census 2006 preliminary results, the share of Ireland's population residing in the main urban areas will increase from 63% today to 72% by 2030.

According to the DRA (2006), 'It is clear that Ireland's economic growth has been an urban-led phenomenon, with the Dublin Region providing the main engine of growth for the country as a whole.' More importantly, this trend in development will continue: 'If the CSO's more optimistic projections prove to be accurate, then the Dublin Region could see its population increase by almost 40% on 2001 levels rising to 1.55 million by 2021' (DRA, 2006). Ironically, Census 2006 already shows the Greater Dublin Area having 1,661,185 residents.

Looking at the spatial distribution of dependency rates over time, the pattern of a more productive population residing in urban centres will remain. This will coincide with the widening gap in favour of the urban centres' share in total employment. By 2010, 66.7% of all high value added jobs in the country will be located in the Greater Dublin area—up from 62.7% in 2000.

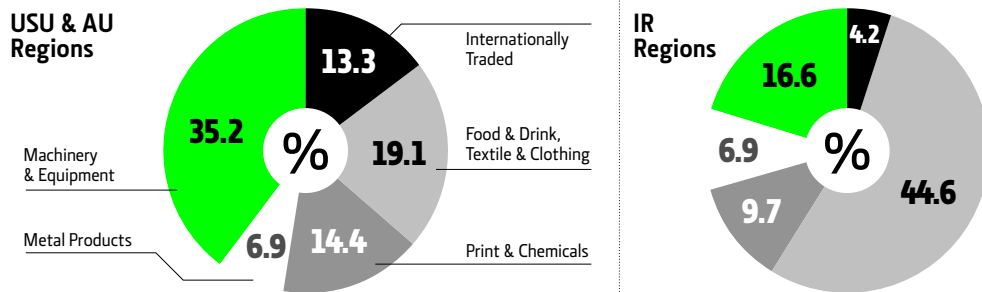
Overall there is no evidence that the existent rural population can be sustained, let alone enhanced in the areas not associated with larger urban locations. 'Areas experiencing population growth... have a strong urban structure within or associated with them. This has helped them to attain a critical mass in terms of population, which supports investment in necessary infrastructure, attracts or generates employment and sustains investment and development... in the wider rural hinterland. Movement of people to the areas where the investment and jobs are generated, or can be drawn to, as well as natural population increase, reinforces these areas' population base and fuels further population growth' (NDP, 2006.2). Figure 3 illustrates the resulting spatial distribution of areas, experiencing growth and decline.

These processes are unlikely to be reversed by central planning efforts without a significant displacement of economic growth. The Government appears to be oblivious to this fact. Despite all efforts exerted under the various National Development Plans so far, Census 2006 shows marked deterioration in population and economic activity in the rural areas and particularly in the Border, Western Midlands and Western regions, i.e. the areas receiving most funding per capita under the NDP and NSS programmes.

In line with population concentrations, the urban areas of the country hold a dominant position in terms of overall economic activity. In 2002, the value of the goods and services produced in the Dublin Region exceeded Euro 42 billion, or 37% of the national total. By 2005 these figures increased to Euro 53 billion, or 40.5% of the national output.

Over the years, the urban areas experienced faster rates of jobs creation and renewal. While outside the five main urban areas in the country the average change in employment between 1995 and 2000 was only

Figure 2  
Manufacturing  
& Traded Services



+8.2% for domestic and +4.3% for foreign jobs, urban areas had jobs change rates of +27% and +39% respectively. For greater Dublin these figures were even higher, with 46.7% of domestic jobs and 67.4% of foreign direct investment jobs being added to the economy between 1997 and 2000. These trends became even more pronounced with rural and remote locations losing large number of jobs in recent years.

The figures for jobs creation in advanced sectors of the economy are even more dramatic. Between 1995 and 2000, Dublin experienced an increase of 17.3% in advanced sectors employment. The urban areas of the country experienced an average increase of 11.1%, while the rest of the country experienced an increase of only 2%. In the rural regions, there was a net contraction in high-quality employment of approximately 0.76%. The fact that urban and adjacent regions have higher value-added economies is illustrated in Figure 2.

Distinct differences in patterns of development allow us to distinguish three well-defined types of regions:

**Urban and Suburban Regions (USU)** of Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Galway and Waterford—the regions where sectoral composition of services and employment is ‘evenly distributed and broadly based, productivity growth is strong and other factors (such as multipliers), perhaps from strong stores of infrastructure, are present’.

**Adjacent to Urban Regions (AU)** are extra-urban areas that include parts of the Eastern, Southern, South Western and Mid Western Regions which ‘have yet to fully diversify their employment [and services] base and which are not as yet experiencing marked productivity gains as a result’.

**Isolated Rural Regions (IR)** exist at the margins of the Adjacent to Urban Regions, where small economies of scale and a low degree of economic and social diversification imply over-reliance on agriculture and traditional sectors. These areas represent a mix of rural and ultra-rural zones, with the latter distinguished from the former primarily by the intensity of the agricultural economy in the overall development mix.

Figure 3 illustrates these areas and shows the major locations of declining and growing population.

## 4.

### Toward a green Ireland

Using the classification above, we can outline a pattern of organic growth-driven evolution of the main regions. In doing so we first summarise the underlying demographic and socio-economic conditions driving this evolutionary process:

- Consistent with the widening gap between rural and urban zones, some of the smaller towns, particularly those located in the less developed periphery, are *de facto* becoming IR-type entities.
- Despite the concerted efforts to reverse development and growth concentration in urban areas, USU and a few adjoining AU regions continue to separate from the IR regions and are effectively merging into a diversified urban core.
- Within the USU regions, the Greater Dublin Area exhibits unchallenged dominance as the focus of economic development in the Republic.
- Rising economic affluence in the USU regions will exert added demand pressures on IR to supply land for recreational and environmental use, while the declining importance of agriculture in the economy, coupled with forthcoming reforms of the CAP, will put under strain the concept of land as an input into agricultural production, favoured by Irish social planners.

Figure 3

Increasing density green areas are transitions from rural (light green) to ultra-rural/parkland areas (darker green).

Urban areas (dark brown) to extra-urban areas (light grey) are based on existent projections for NDP 2006-2013.



- e. Increased emphasis on high value-added services in the Irish economy will imply further concentration of economic activities within the five main urban areas and the drying out of foreign direct investment and domestic investment in rural locations.
- f. Increased emphasis on human capital-intensive technologies will amplify the importance of urban education centres, leading to a declining ability of the rural areas to retain a young population.

Both the existent patterns of demographic and social evolution and the demand and supply pressures of modernizing society experienced in Ireland suggest that within the next 20-30 years, rural Ireland will shift more toward the IR-type of development, while the extra-urban zones will become increasingly urbanized.

In this context, the organic evolutionary process of spatial development suggests that by 2030, Ireland will be composed of predominantly two types of areas, illustrated in Figure 3:

**Urbanized regions:** focused on the main five cities, these regions will exhibit population density similar to today's Dublin, with all universities and tradable activities concentrated within their boundaries. A gradual spatial diffusion from the high-rise, high-density urban core toward mixed development in the suburbs will imply that the present-day extra-urban spaces of one-off housing will be pulled into well-defined satellite-towns and suburbs. Parts of extra-urban zones will supply high-quality niche agricultural products to urban regions.

**Ultra-rural regions:** This will be large areas of predominantly recreational lands with land-owners employed in land-maintenance, forestry and tourism-related services. Within these regions, some of the more remote locations will cease to retain their current makeup as farm house-

holds will be pulled into urbanized regions. The land made available from failing agriculture will be aggregated into larger holdings that can sustain more active forms of recreation, such as outdoor sports, hunting, fishing and naturalized semi-commercial forestry.

This scenario is largely consistent with future development trends outlined in the NDP (2006.3) itself: ‘The majority of new jobs will continue to be created in services rather than manufacturing... [with new enterprises] preference for locations at or close to major points of consumer demand... plus their requirements for infrastructure to trade in products and services which have a high information content. Local services, health care, leisure and tourism will become even more significant as the population ages and disposable incomes rise in the high productivity and traded sectors... Skills related to technological and organisational development and innovation will become more significant requirements for business enterprises. Regions with a strong population base that can support high quality business infrastructure, technological development and innovation will continue to be major attractions... A range of high quality locations will be necessary to present opportunities for business to attract skilled labour from abroad to support operations in Ireland.’

All of the above point to the continued decline of industrial and services development in rural locations—a conclusion missing from the NDP 2006-2013 politicised vision of Ireland. In the context of the dual-patterned development, it is important for the future of tourism and recreational services to ensure consumers’ access to the land is made available by agricultural withdrawals. This will require:

- a. Establishment of post-CAP tax incentives for farmers to convert land from agricultural production into recreational use, subject to free public

access, and compliance with environmental and safety regulations promoting the return of land to its natural state.

- b. Abandonment of all population maintenance and investment-shifting policies in rural areas.
- c. A unified system of private permits for recreational activities, with proceeds ring-fenced to support maintenance and improvements to the natural facilities supporting these activities.

If Ireland were to pursue its organic growth processes in line with those experienced during the Celtic Tiger years, the changes from rural to urban areas necessitated by the need for sustained growth will lead to a continued separation of rural areas from urban and extra-urban zones. The result will be a transformation of Ireland into a high growth and high-density island with three or four core locations of economic and social activity, which will support a set of large recreational zones similar to the state and federal parks in the US. This process will coincide with continued reduction in economic diversification of the peripheral rural locations, to the point of rural areas emerging as publicly accessible forestry and parklands with developed recreational infrastructure.

If green and sustainable development is the real objective of the Irish State, then a Republic where the countryside is allowed to emerge as a naturalized parkland supporting a high value-added recreational economy is the way forward.