City of Dreams? Belfast, planning and the ‘myth’ of development


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City of Dreams?
Belfast, planning and the ‘myth’ of development

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The meaning of ‘Belfast Futures’

‘Development’ and its myths

Two visions of Belfast Futures:
- 1945 – Planning Proposal for the Belfast Area
- 2015 – Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan

The language of plans, the control of the future
Where do we find the future of Belfast?

City Plans and their purpose

Changing concepts of:
- ‘Future’
- ‘Belfast’
- ‘Planning’

... all share a belief in ‘development’
Development: the establishment of conditions and institutions that foster the realisation of the potential of the capacities and faculties of the human mind in people, communities and, in turn, in places (Sen 1999)

- Planning is ultimately about securing ‘development’
- It is an ‘unexamined term’ and language in planning is often unquestioned
- It begs the questions of:
  - What sort of development do we want?
  - How will this happen?
  - Who is the development for?
  - Where does development occur and at what scale?
  - What are the alternatives?
Back to the Future: A Belfast planning timeline
Belfast and Northern Ireland 1937-2013
- No census during the war
- 1937 and 1951 Census
- 2013 based on mid year estimates

Demographic change
- In 1951, Belfast accounted for 32% of the total population
- In 2013, this has dropped to 15%
- From 1951 – 2013 the Northern Ireland population has *increased* by over 33%
- Over the same period, Belfast’s population has *decreased* by 37%

The ‘shrinking’ of urban Belfast
- De-industrialisation
- Urban disinvestment
- Ethnosectarian conflict
- Rising suburbanisation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Northern Ireland</th>
<th>Belfast</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1937</td>
<td>1,279,745</td>
<td>438,086</td>
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<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>1,370,921</td>
<td>443,761</td>
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<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>1,829,725</td>
<td>281,735</td>
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Household change
- From 1951-2011 the number of households across Northern Ireland has increased by almost 99%
- In 1951, 31% of Northern Ireland’s households were in Belfast
- In 2011 this dropped to 17%

From 1951 to 2011 the number of households in Belfast *increased* by 9%
- Much of this increase occurred between 2001-2011
- Here number of households in Belfast increased from 113,934 to 120,595 (nearly 6%)
- Major apartment development and over-speculation throughout the urban core dominated this period
- High vacancy levels in the urban core
- Economic crises and recession
Two visions of the future

1945:
- Produced by expert commission in three years.
- No public consultation
- 15 pages, 8090 words

2015:
- ‘Democratically’ produced, subject to public consultation and public inquiry – 15 years
- Currently subject to Judicial review by DETI
- 7 Vols, 869 pages c. 532,700 words
The 1945 Plan

- A plan for reconstruction;
- Focussed on agriculture, industry and ‘the health and convenience of the people’
- Key issues were suburban growth; transport; industry; ‘healthy and convenient residential areas’; and Open Space.
- Proposals made in the ‘best interests’ of various sectors
- Proposals resisted by ‘local opposition’
BMAP 2015

- A plan to comply with planning legislation;
- An long process of consultation and enquiry
- A comprehensive plan for planning control;
- Detailed proposals for specific land use parcels;
- Facilitates ‘sustainable growth’
- Proposals resisted by local and political opposition
The rhetoric of the ‘Future’

1945:
Social consumption
Residential, estates, housing, people, health, living

Connectivity/economic production
Traffic, railway, roads, travel, roads, transport, industries

Planning vision
Future, new, maps, people, possible, improvement, advantage, action

2015
Scale of planning response
Regional, local, communities, metropolitan, villages, centre, urban, rural, settlement, site

Economic development
Growth, development, retail, tourism, office, regeneration
1945:

“... planning should be carried out in the best interests of Agriculture and Industry as well as of the health and convenience of the people”

‘... bombing of Belfast has provided many opportunities’

‘Sound planning will bring rich benefits in health and convenience in the future’

‘... real improvement are to be made in the living conditions of the people’

2015:

‘The purpose of the Plan is to inform ... of the policy framework and land use proposals that will be used to guide development decisions’

‘One of the main functions ... is to facilitate development and create a land use framework that will allow investment to take place.’

‘The public consultation process has been a fundamental element of the formulation of the Plan’
Rhetorical insights

1945
- **Ethos**: ‘in the best interests of agriculture, industry and the health of the people’.
- **Logos**: Rationality, order, efficiency, reconstruction
- **Synecdoche**: ‘convenience’
- **Metaphor**: ‘unspoiled countryside’

2015
- **Ethos**: ‘most extensive consultation exercise ever undertaken’.
- **Logos**: Facilitating development
- **Synecdoche**: ‘sustainable growth’
- **Metaphor**: ‘living and working countryside’
A loss of directness, and **honesty** in the language of plans, and of the intentions for the future.

**Growth** for who, for what purpose?

**Homogenisation of entities**: ‘the Metropolitan Area’

**Euphemisation** of value laden terms: ‘*balanced growth*’

**Anonymisation** of actors: ‘*The zoning of land provides a basis for rational and consistent decisions on planning applications*’
Changing language of plans (2)

- **Creating mythic entities**: ‘compete successfully at the European and International level’
- **The denial of conflict**: provision of housing and employment in order to enhance the quality of life'
- Co-opting/narrowing the **meaning of words**: ‘sustainable growth’
- **Misplaced concreteness**: ‘... integrate the need for both conservation and development through a mix of co-ordinated economic, social and environmental policies and proposals'
A shift in the ‘subject’ of plans: From people to property, from development to growth.

A shift in the meaning of words...

A shift in the meaning of the future

Language of the future is not about the repression of alternatives, but the suppression of their germination (Marcuse 2015).

A democratised planning system, but a dominant discourse that has no space for debate.