

PLANNING FOR THE CREATIVE USE OF SMALL SITES

INTRODUCTION

In smaller urban settlements the complex mix of land use and users adds significant quality to place (Pike 1988). Ownership patterns create an urban tissue which is full of variety. In this morphology there is often a tendency for development plans and rejuvenation plans, born in principle out of urban renewal as a broad and simple facility, to fail in their response to the more complex site-by-site needs of such places.

In an Irish town in 1992, one plan in particular however showed an unusual response to this circumstance, attempting to engage with social and functional detail at a very small scale. Its unconventional approach achieved successful results, which have attracted some interest. This paper sets out to describe the plan and its effect, in a format which is broadly descriptive, with some reflection on what was perhaps an unusual approach to common circumstance. A second plan, which built on the principles of the first, is also reviewed.

PLANNING CONTEXT

Ireland has an established statutory Planning System since 1963, with extensive facilities for public participation both at plan-making stage and in the process of implementation. Urban areas are required to have a Development Plan, which describes spatial planning intention and policy. Development plans must be reviewed periodically and must exist for all settlements, including of course small towns. Within the development plan framework, statutory provisions exist for more detailed local planning and action planning when necessary.

Rising prosperity has brought greater personal mobility to the Irish in the latter half of the twentieth century and as a result much diffusion has taken place in the settlement structure, particularly in the smaller towns, where many land uses have moved to the perimeter in pursuit of ease of access and cheaper land. In particular urban residence has moved not just to the perimeter but often considerably farther into the countryside in pursuit of an attractive environment. Attempts, in planning policy, to prevent this diffusion have had poor public support. As a result the land use mix in small traditional settlements has suffered.

Up to the 1980s most development investment in town centres had been public. In response an attempt was made by government to encourage more private investment, first in cities, and subsequently in smaller towns, by the introduction of incentives. An Urban Renewal Act was passed in Ireland in 1986, with an associated Finance Act in 1987, providing for tax related incentives to encourage urban development and renewal. Physical areas were designated in urban centres to which tax incentives would apply.

SETTLEMENT CONTEXT

The location of this case study is at Sligo, a town in the northwest of Ireland. Sligo has an urban population of 18,000, but with a dependent hinterland of up to 50,000, which gives its centre a strong service function as a central place. In 1990 it was the ninth largest settlement in Ireland.

The town is mediaeval in origin. Much of its street structure dates from the early modern period and its central urban fabric is largely from the nineteenth century. Its traditional plot structure still exists, through which modern business trades vigorously in its central streets.

BACKGROUND CIRCUMSTANCE

In Sligo, three areas were identified in 1987 within which the benefits of tax incentives for urban renewal would apply. One of these was the Rockwood Parade waterfront area. This was an area of derelict land facing the town's river between two bridges adjacent to the town centre. Despite its central location and attractive environment however, incentives here induced no development in its first four years of designation. At this stage the municipal authority, Sligo Corporation, commissioned the National Building Agency to examine the circumstances of the area and prepare a strategy for its development.

The National Building Agency is an Irish state-sponsored agency, which provides consultancy services to municipal authorities in Architecture, Urban Planning and Urban Design. It may prepare plans to be administered by the municipal authority but it also has revolving funds which allow it to become a developer within its own plans, or to engage in joint-venture development with local authorities, private developers or landowners. It can do this in order to create leader development on flagship sites in order to induce development in areas where investment confidence might be low. While it must not lose money in this process it can operate on lower profit margins than those of mainstream developers, its primary objective being to recover its costs.

It was however in the capacity of its first or primary role as an urban design consultancy that it was engaged in 1991 to examine this particular designated area and, if appropriate, prepare a strategy to encourage development. The status of the strategy would be that of a statutory Action Plan, to be adopted as part of the town's statutory Development Plan.

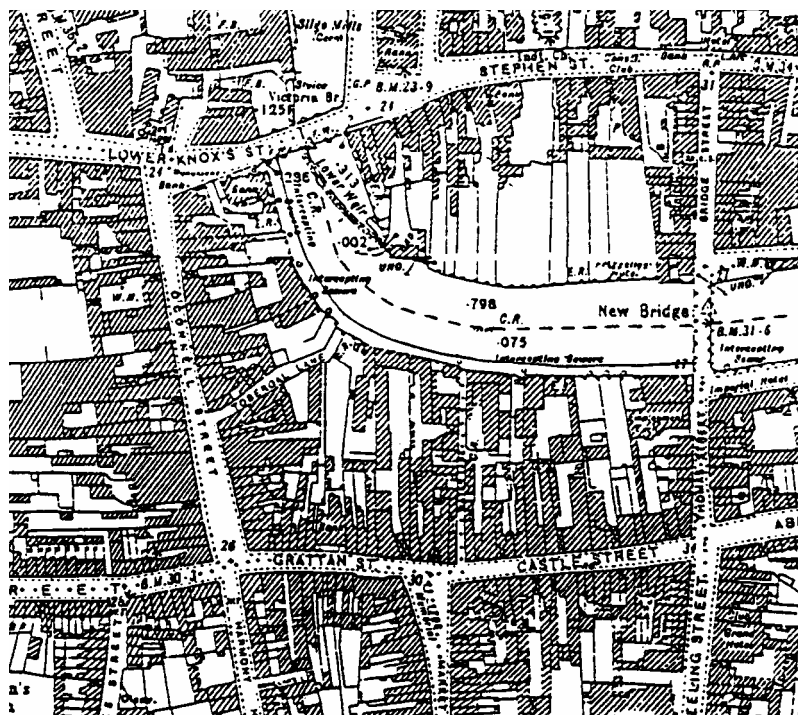


Diagram 1 Urban Context, Sligo (source: Ordnance Survey Ireland)
Area of Designation is that south of the river between the bridges

APPROACH

It would be initially assumed that such an area or block might have an important contextual function or role within the town or within the surrounding urban structure, to be identified and developed. It might be argued that this was a role which went beyond the development of

existing sites availing of incentives within their individual circumstances. It was obvious for example that the site presented an ideal opportunity to link the town centre to its river if this link proved opportune. In fact pedestrian surveys suggested that a strong desire line existed to support a river crossing at this point, introducing the potential to draw activity across the block and thereby increase its exposure.

An initial scoping of the circumstances of some landowners, many of whom had both active business and dereliction on their properties, concluded that lack of access was the main deterrent to development. Saturation or choke point (Larkham 1995) had been reached in the burgage cycle of many plots. Most landowners were trading successfully on to surrounding streets to the west and south, at the front of their sites, or along the crust of the block, but were unable to extend this activity to the waterfront edges of the block because of site shape or lack of frontage. What existed in fact was an intense set of separate landlocked circumstances, incapable of individual development.

Critical to the success of any plan was an understanding of how an effective operational structure for the area could best relate to, or capitalise on the development needs of individual sites while relating these needs to the broader needs of the urban context. Because of the intensity of active small users however first attempts to understand and extract common circumstances, if in fact there were any, towards the development of coordinated options, proved ineffective by any overall survey of the operational structure of the block. In this context therefore it was decided that before exploring the details of any planning options, it might be of benefit to embark on a process of meticulous discussion with every landowner in the block. The most effective way to identify the common circumstances of all stakeholders at the operational scale of such small sites was to examine each one individually. This was where the plan departed from normal preparation processes.

The principle underlying this approach is that if an urban development area is partially occupied, with not-unsuccessful land uses, which are compatible with the intentions of a development plan, then those uses should be valued as a key asset and carefully built upon. The small-scale landholding pattern in this block could be viewed for example as a valuable opportunity as it would facilitate smaller pockets of low-commitment investment within an established trading base.

A meticulous survey and analysis began therefore with a view to identifying the individual existing land use on each site, the service requirements of that use and the expansion potential or intention of that use. Such a detailed consultation process as this with all land users in a development area, whether they had development intentions or not, was uncommon. The principle also of using collected individual requirements to lead, or open the potential of, a plan at this scale would also be uncommon.

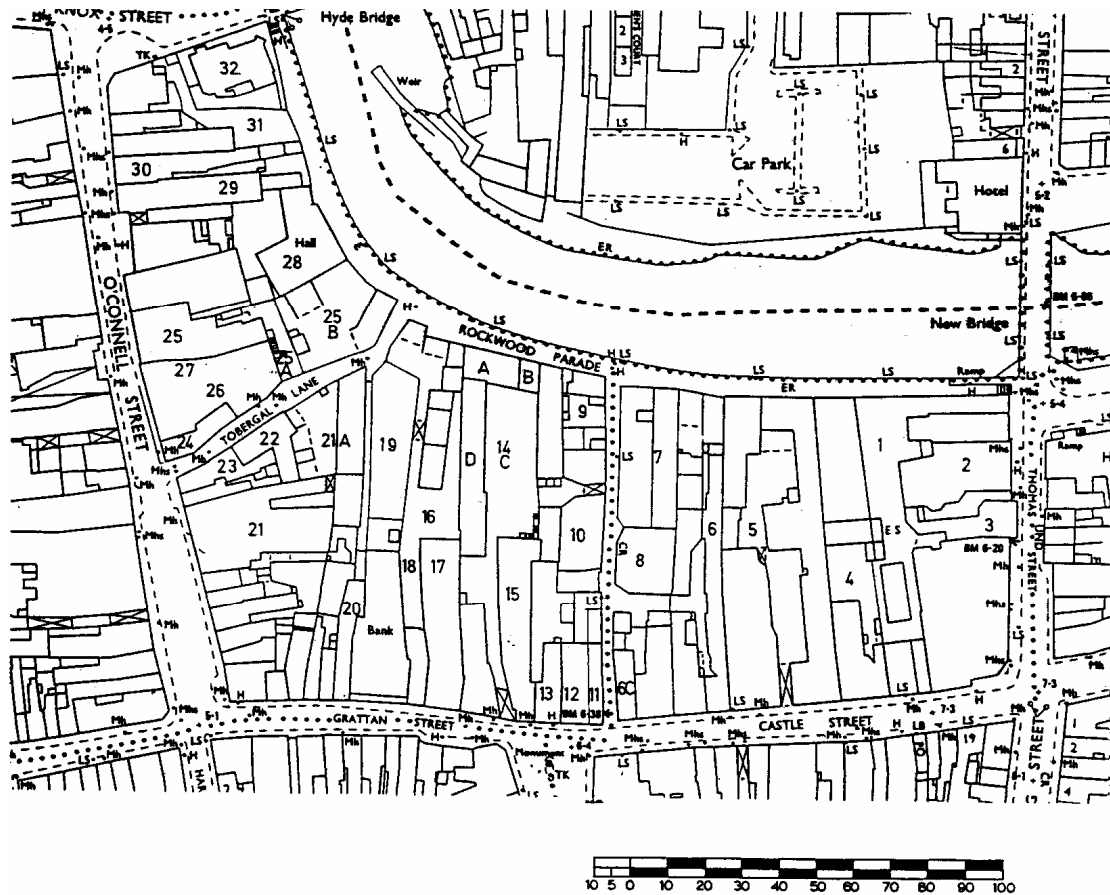


Diagram 2 Disposition of Parcels of ownership (source: Rockwood Parade Plan 1992)

Site shape and frontage-to-depth ratio began to emerge as a significant factor in the potential use of typical sites. The existence of frontage at all was also of course also critical. In some cases sites had a very short route frontage, though having considerable depth. It was in some cases necessary to explore the plan form of a proposed use such as retail to levels of great organisational detail to prove for example that a shop interior could achieve efficient aisle layout or be effectively supervised within the limitations of such site shape. In other cases sites had large frontage and shallow depth, bringing a conflict between maximisation of profile and effective servicing structure. Corner sites, with frontage to two routes might seem attractive but this attraction had to be measured against high frontage cost relative to floorspace, where pedestrian passage was as yet unproven. Many sites had established rights of way across them, which restricted their development potential, and some of these rights related to fire-escape access. From these characteristics however emerged the idea that, while many sites were incapable of being developed individually, some began to display strong potential in combination, a circumstance which might be critical to their release.

The investigation of owner circumstances revealed that for individual reasons some would not be in a position to benefit from tax incentives. One for example was a declared charity. Detailed discussion with some owners also revealed that their business turnover would not be sufficiently profitable for them to be in a position to avail of incentives.

Almost all of the potential developers in the block were owner-occupiers. With the exception of perhaps two, none of them had substantial capital to invest in large-scale development. Many would have been risking an investment of size comparable to their existing business. Risks would therefore have been very high. There were indications that many would depend on pre-sale or a pre-commitment by occupiers or tenants before being in a position to commence development.

For developers, investors and occupiers, the risk of entering into a new frontier of yet unsettled urban fabric, the bulk of which was at least 50m from the existing surrounding street activity, was substantial. Each developer knew that if he was first to develop on the waterfront, he could well have been the only one, in which case attraction to the area would not materialise, leaving his investment high and dry. Yet if all developers proceeded together, many felt that the market could be flooded with too much lettable floor space at a single time.

Discussions revealed that very often small investors with limited funds do not approach a qualified designer until they have made their own judgement on the viability of a site. For this reason many imaginative options may lie unexplored, at best, or at worse development may not be pursued at all because of a developers own misinformed judgement that the site is unworkable. In other cases, because a developer is concerned only with his own site, a development opportunity in combination with an adjacent site might not be foreseen. For this reason it was found productive to develop a portfolio of ideas for stakeholders in order to excite imagination among landowners in the block.

In this could be introduced new morphological structures which might not previously have been familiar to the landowners, such as for example the reversal of living and sleeping floors in upper storey accommodation, such that living would be on top, in order to gain greater elevation and view for the principle floors of residence in a tight urban context.

STRATEGY

At the end of the analysis all sites were sorted and grouped in accordance with their particular demand characteristics. Particular patterns emerged.

There were twenty-nine sites or twenty-nine players in the development of frontage to the waterfront and in the development of frontage to two narrow streets which might form routes through the area. Of these, eight were found to be peripheral, and while doing acceptably well in their existing state and use, had little critical input into the development of the waterfront, either because their frontages were marginal in the scale of the development, or because intensity of activities along the routes must first take place before it became viable for these sites to redirect their business frontage in that direction.

In another four, the users, although occupying sites of high profile, were operating satisfactorily within these sites and had no immediate intention to expand or reface their investments. In a further eight, the developers or owners did not wish under current circumstances to pursue immediate development or to sell their properties, but might do so later.

After elimination of the above categories, nine sites or nine key players remained who could be subdivided into two groups having an important relationship with each other.

The first group was of those who wished to sell, or who offered the opportunity to be purchased. Of these there were four. The second group was of those who had indicated their intention to pursue immediate development. Of these there were five. It was found that those remaining nine sites were concentrated in three groups by position.

Of five developers who stated their intention to develop immediately, three proposed to extend existing business interests in the block, towards the waterfront. The idea of extending an existing established use to reach closer and closer to the waterfront, thereby establishing confidence slowly, was a principle to be encouraged.

A sequential strategy emerged as the ideal framework plan. A pedestrian footbridge would first be erected on the river, precisely placed in a position where it would attract pedestrian activity across the area with maximum contact between pedestrians and individual sites, in particular drawing pedestrian footfall along a portion of the waterfront farthest from the existing street network, where developer confidence was most necessary. The municipal authority would then enhance the presentation of routes leading to the bridge. Pedestrian activity through the block would then increase the exposed profile of sites, thereby increasing the viability of site development. A use analysis of floorspace demands in the town centre confirmed a demand for medium to small scale retail uses the characteristics of which would be ideally met by the typical parcel size and service capability of development in this area.

To support this plan it was seen as necessary to intervene towards the release a minimum number of blocking sites which were in difficulty, opening their development potential in order to facilitate all sites on which a development intention existed. The National Building Agency (The Agency) would again be introduced at this stage, this time in its developer role in order to purchase and redistribute small quantities of blocking lands in key positions. Such a process could also be carried out of course by any developer, but the presence of a public body increased landowner trust.

In this first site-release exercise, which represents a typical example of the process, a number of sites in difficulty together were identified around Tobergal lane to the west of the block (sites 35,36 37 and 38 on diagram 3).

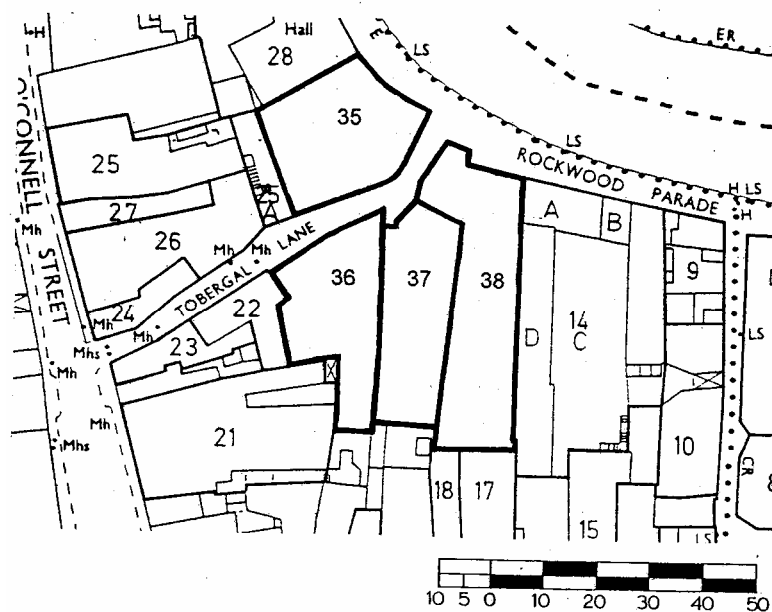


Diagram 3 Sites released for redistribution (Source: Rockwood Parade Plan 1992)

Here two sites (36 and 38), had indicated their intention to develop, but were of awkward shape and marginally too small to match their developers intentions. A third site (37) sat between them and was available for sale. This third site would offer the opportunity if purchased to increase the frontage efficiency of either or both of the first two. The first two site owners had indicated that they would welcome such an arrangement. Neither of them however had opted to buy the third site, as they could not make economic use of all of it. All three sites incorporated rights of way, which individually restricted development by reduction of their frontages. These rights of way however were similar in direction and purpose on each site.

All three of these sites could be identified as a development group, together with the rights of way, which they incorporated. If a site to the north across a small street were included (site 35), the development group could also include the realignment of the street, to the advantage of all.

In a studied resolution of this obstacle therefore the Agency was introduced in its developer role to purchase one site (site 37) and to redistribute this to surrounding sites in order to release the viability of their frontages, collecting a number of rights of way to be accommodated into a single efficient route in the process while also achieving a realignment of the street by a swap of land quantities, for the benefit of all sites.

There were three other similar circumstances in the overall area of the plan in which the Agency proposed to intervene as third party with the intention of releasing small quantities of blocking land and rights of way. In all three however, the opportunity, once recognised in the proposed intervention, was instigated by agreement of the landowners themselves.

These interventions were laid out in a manner, which attempted to identify specific areas in which concentration of effort would release obstacles, ensuring that all likely developments were activated and that private investment would be induced by the coordinated release of infrastructure. The interventions were suggested in a manner which, given the varied range of scenarios that might emerge, would ensure that development combinations which did proceed did not close options for other sites which might not wish to proceed immediately.

IMPLEMENTATION

This plan was adopted by the municipal authority in the spring of 1992 but although this adoption committed the authority to the construction of the bridge and the instigation of other infrastructural works, no private developer responded with yet sufficient confidence to be the first to develop lands within the backland context of the plan. The municipal authority decided therefore to instigate, contemporaneously with the construction of the bridge, a flagship development at a conspicuous position of high profile, at a junction between one of the main routes and the waterfront, on a central site critically visible from the principle surrounding streets. Here such an investment would be sufficiently deep into the plan area to create an example of venture confidence for other potential developers. In this position also it would form a lead reference for pedestrians who had not ventured through the area before. Here the National Building Agency was again engaged, this time as developer in joint venture with the owner of site 35, to begin construction, for subsequent sale, of the first flagship building.

In the spring of 1993 the bridge was commenced, and the flagship building was commenced on its key site. The result was immediately successful. Within months, before completion of the latter, eight other sites had reacted with a commencement of development. In the year that followed, almost all of the sites in the block were built upon, street frontages became contiguously established and land values rose sharply. Pedestrian counts increased and by summer 1995 the waterfront area had established a new and vibrant precinct with ground floor shops and restaurants trading actively and a town finally and successfully enjoying its contact with its river.

DEVELOPMENT AND EXPANSION

In 1999 a further phase of financial incentives became available. In a climate of increased prosperity and increased town centre development the next block to the west began to show signs of development need. Here sites were much larger, with national retailers located or locating among local shops in the core of the town's convenience shopping concentration. A number of stakeholders were here assembling development ideas but with a different challenge to that of the earlier block. Major infrastructural investments were necessary to co-ordinate and provide such central elements as a multi-storey car park and the co-ordinated linking spaces of a shopping precinct. To avail of tax incentives, the ideal scenario required that these be developed by private investment, but, as in the earlier plan, none of the landowners here had the capacity to invest in such major infrastructure.

Using the confidence of success on the waterfront block, the municipal authority again engaged the National Building Agency, this time to draw the stakeholders together to an agreed masterplan, matching their needs to the potential contribution which the block might make to the operational structure of the town. The authority then held a competition to attract a developer of national scale, to be appointed with the status of preferred developer, to be given a licence to develop the co-ordinating works of the plan, in order to make viable the smaller investment works of the existing landholders. The preferred developer would in return be allocated a quantity of marketable land or floorspace within the plan and of course be in a position to avail of tax incentives. The elements of this plan took three years to assemble and

work has now commenced on its instigation. Its form represents a refined and more advanced model of the earlier waterfront plan.

REFLECTION

One of the processes at play in these plans was that of inducing secure development potential for the individual with key property. Another was that of reducing the perceived risk, or of reducing the feeling of unaccompanied exposure. Because consultation had been so meticulous in the first plan the stakeholder felt that the plan was tailored to his or her circumstances. This understanding was helped by the block being small, the plan thus being local.

An important function of lead development is then that of pump priming, in which case the lead development must be seen to attract profit that relates favourably to the perceived investment so that the process on display may be seen as attractive to other potential developers.

CONCLUSION

Creativity and rejuvenation can sometimes be perceived as part of very different quarters of planning. Perhaps the former is associated with something that is new, while the latter is associated with something second-hand. The ability however to build on something which has already been created, is perhaps one of the most stable routes to the incorporation of creative development with renewable satisfaction in established urban systems.

Particularly important from this example is perhaps the ability of plans to locate, facilitate and co-ordinate minds which are incapable of singular advancement on their own, releasing creativity by scale of organisation. The facility to do this on a person-by-person or mind-by-mind process of examination of all owners and users of an urban block was in Sligo a rich opportunity.

The two plans described in this paper have together pursued a somewhat non-traditional approach to regeneration, which works with the modern demands of emerging new uses in the meticulous matching of these to traditional frameworks of ownership and operation, in order to develop renewed creativity within a land use structure already established.

The paper has outlined the unusual approach taken by the plans, in particular by the first one in its lead, and their relationship to each other, with particular emphasis on their ability to address and harness the circumstances of individual stakeholders in a complex relationship of individual sites where existing subdivisions and morphology required to be preserved while facilitating the needs of rejuvenation.

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