



Recent urban infill project in Belfast.

Regeneration and Urban Villages

On 5 March the UDG, RTPI and the Belfast Civic Trust joined forces under the UDAL banner for the first time in Northern Ireland, to investigate models for sustainable urban living.

The debate surrounding the benefits of urbanism has moved beyond prescriptive solutions on built form, to mechanisms for change and procedures that improve individual lifestyle choices. Michael Gwilliam, Civic Trust Director, addressed some of the institutional and sociological barriers to such change. Demographics, economic partnerships, information technology, local agenda 21, devolution and the growth in regionalism will all be forces for urban restructuring. Part of the work of the Civic Trust, both nationally and locally, has been to understand these trends and challenge false assumptions underlying some of the current responses - "it is not a simple push-pull argument between urban and rural area and we do not all want a four bedroom semi in the suburbs". He believes cities will become "alive" when there is real community engagement in goal-setting and urban management and when cultural values are changed by successful examples of good urbanism.

His emerging themes for urban regeneration are:

- Better urban design focusing on more small interventions and repairs to existing built fabric.
- Economic 'sticks and carrots' which have a local dimension and link

'greenfield' development taxes to reinvestment in the existing urban areas.

- Mechanisms for land assembly, linking several small in-fill sites into single development packages.
- Applying the findings of a raft of new research into urban regeneration and intensification.
- Investigation of culturally specific models for urban form and management.

The best means of championing urban areas is tackling the mechanisms for change. His message is we have the argument, the skills and the successes. We are developing partnerships but we are still lacking the right financial levers for urban renewal.

David Rudlin (URBED) presented the experience of the Sustainable Urban Neighbourhood Initiative and his own personal reflections on urbanity and change. The SUN Initiative is exploring new models of built form appropriate for urban locations, to replace the discredited modernist and suburban/garden city models. However, reflections suggest that the real challenge is political, changing the underlying attitudes and aspirations that link social status to a rural idyll. The professionals' role is to raise awareness of good examples of high-density living. The emphasis will be on a design-led approach, as no single substantive model will be appropriate for each locality, particularly in Northern Ireland. New sustainable-vernacular forms can emerge whenever locality-specific issues of

climate, context and community are combined.

The ensuing debate, interspaced with the UDAL travelling exhibition, was informed by presentations from community representatives from existing Belfast urban villages and by local architect, Arthur Acheson. This raised specific regional issues from a number of small developers who prefer brownfield sites and infill locations where the mass house builders lose their economies of scale. These locations by their very nature, require a design-led approach (in contrast to standard suburban house types) and can be uneconomic unless planners, who are still applying suburban density standards, adopt a more flexible approach to determining applications. Local institutional inflexibility was the key barrier to raising environmental quality and creating viable urban villages.

To borrow from Bob (Kafka) Jarvis's parable on urban design door-keepers - the Northern Ireland policy-makers do not even know where the keys are. If the UDAL is willing to expend energy in the regional context to open the door they will find an extremely receptive audience. #

Michael Crilly