

Check against Delivery

Speech RIAI Annual Conference

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“An economic perspective on urban architecture”

Very good afternoon to you all and a special thanks all for turning up after lunch.

I want to thank the RIAI for the opportunity to be able to speak here today, congratulate them on such a fine conference and thank-you also Mr. Chairman for that very kind introduction.

I have to start with a number of confessions:-

- First and foremost, I am not an architect
- Secondly, I am not an economist

I am not sure therefore what qualifies me to present on an economic perspective on architecture to experts like you on this topic other than that:-

- I am the son of migrants so I have grown up thinking about why people move to live somewhere else other than their home;
- I myself grew up in a rural location on the outskirts of Limerick but have lived in many other bigger cities, not least our own Dublin so I have experienced both sides so to speak;
- I got slated by certain Irish politicians and media for certain things I said during my time as Secretary General on housing and urban planning policy

It will become obvious from what I shall say today that I for one will be declaring certain biases arising from those experiences.

Given the limited time available, I am also going to have to do that in certain black and white terms for which I ask you (and the people of Waterford in particular) to forgive me.

I should however point out that the views I express are personal and not to be taken as reflective of the views of any organisation for whom I work or have worked, especially the European Investment Bank.

Planning and Ireland

What I am about to discuss is difficult to say.

I have already been on the receiving end of a hysteria among certain politicians, certain commentators and social media when while at the Department of Finance I questioned if we should all be living in 3 bedroom houses and dared suggest we were facing a housing crisis if we did not start rebuilding social housing quickly given the number of people in arrears. But all of that was nothing to the reaction from some cabinet ministers and the front page of the weekend newspapers when I asked if we could continue having repossession embargos and unnaturally low voluntary and involuntary repossession rates given our mortgage crisis as this was only going to lead to blockages in the release of houses, housing shortages in certain areas and sectors and bitterness on the part of neighbours who were actually paying their mortgages.

So I am a little nervous going where I think I need to go today. But then if I am not prepared to say it myself how can I be critical of others for not wanting to engage in the debate.

From my past experiences I am left to wonder if we are yet mature enough as a nation to make and accept proper planning and prioritisation decisions forcing certain choices onto us or is in some way our sense of the overriding public interest too weak to interfere with what individual claim are their constitutional property rights.

I am left wondering is there something in the parish pump electoral system in Ireland that prevents us as a country looking at the big picture and subjecting ourselves to the common good rather than local self-interest as we perceive it.

This conference might have presented a great opportunity to debate these issues with your housing policy being published. Sadly, this week's debate seems to be hijacked by a small picture debate whether or not the country should pay for more inspections to catch builders who decide not to follow the rules and leave buyers with sub-standard buildings.

As I have already said, I grew up in Limerick. I am fortunate to serve on the Limerick Economic Forum advising the city authorities about economic development. We are working to revamp that city. Indeed, we are seeing some notable success. Finally optimism is starting to return down town, jobs are being created again. But I feel we are hamstrung in that we are still doing so in a vacuum in terms of national policy which is certainly sub-optimal.

I am left wondering if I will ever see sufficient maturity to have a rational debate where Dublin parliamentarians and Dublin based commentators agree that more resources might need to be given in priority to the West or indeed the South or Northwest or Midlands of Ireland until those areas have caught up with Dublin in terms of economic activity. Or alternatively, can you imagine a reasoned debate where the cities in the West agree that instead money needs to be pumped first into Dublin so that the others can later follow in its coat-tails? Both may be rational choices but I would say we risk losing altogether if we fall between two stools by spreading limited resources too thinly. What is important is that a decision one way or the other is made which allows us all to start pulling in the same direction.

What does this really mean? Imagine that the Taoiseach gets a phone call from Stanford University wanting to take over an Irish University to set up a best in class European location. They are allowing him to pick which one he wants to transfer. Imagine he wants to go ahead with it.

It may make absolute sense to have a Dublin university become best in class on a European stage if our choice is that we want Dublin to compete alone for Ireland and think it can do so and be itself a top 25 location. But instead if we believe Dublin may not make it to a global top 25 and instead there is room for two top 50 locations in Ireland to compete on the world stage, it might be an equally rational choice if we wanted the West to start attracting more talent and industry to instead choose UL, NUIG or UCC (or maybe transfer all three in one go to make one university of greater scale).

The irony is that doing that may indeed improve Dublin's competitive position too since two hours is certainly not a long distance for Dublin kids to travel in the future for university. And certainly closer than going abroad to any the other top 25 locations in Europe. Having the top university within two hour trip but not in Dublin 2 may not be enough to mark down Dublin in the global location scale but if the next 1,000,000 people of population growth for Ireland could be convinced to disperse along the cities of the west coast rather than piled into Dublin, then Dublin's infrastructure works better and housing certainly becomes more affordable here too which pushes them up the ranking.

Ultimately these are all choices. Of course, to make them politics play a key role – we must look to those we elect to make them for us in the best interest of the country and they must not shy from that responsibility. But sadly few of our politicians seem to feel they will get re-elected if they support something for someone else without getting something back. And the situation will only likely get worse if we end up with a destabilised Dail with lots of independents looking after local agendas specifically. But what they all may be missing is that “very something back” they might need for their own constituency might be the success of the others if it leads to the greater good of all.

We have a whole series of conflicting policy choices to make and I fear in solving them we cannot please everyone in the audience (or is it the electorate). Can we as an electorate accept that?

Main themes

There are two interacting themes on I would like to touch specifically which raise these types of issues:-

- How the wrong choices in urbanisation trends and transport patterns may cause a huge problem for our world with increasing carbon emissions, not to mention mental health issues for commuters stuck in traffic jams
- How the right choices may not only be climate change friendly they should also be the key to a successful model for 21th Century economic growth.

I have to admit that my thought process has been helped a lot by two books. “Living Cities” by Charles Montgomery and another compelling book by Edward Glaeser, “The Triumph of the City”. The analysis of the latter in particular on US cities has helped collect my thoughts for today on these issues for Ireland and I would particularly like to acknowledge that.

For those of you who want to leave now, I can give you the conclusion. For the others, it is too important to risk that you might get an important phone call or email before I finish and have to leave, so **here is my fundamental message**:

Living in the country among trees and cows is what is bad for the environment. Living in cities with at least moderate densities should be the preferred option for the environment. Government should therefore encourage people to live in modestly sized city centre urban units instead of encouraging larger and larger suburban housing. And if we in Ireland do that right and with world class creativity of our own choose to lead in sustainable urban living we will create the right environment for a 21st Century economic growth model too.

While it is true for other countries too, for Ireland’s future success, what I would suggest to you we must do is the following:-

- future economic growth in advanced economies like Ireland depends on innovation, ideas and creativity,
- successful cities, old and young, will be those that attract smart, innovative entrepreneurial people, in part by becoming urban theme parks embracing diversity;
- Ireland therefore needs to give up on encouraging rural living patterns and concentrate on at least one city reputed to be a world class urban theme park city
- This is the formula to both help contain our own carbon emissions footprint and generate economic growth in the 21st century

- When it comes to Ireland's secondary cities and towns, to be successful they will either have to
 - do the same in a smaller way to attract their own entrepreneurial cohorts especially by trying to attract a percentage of those who have already chosen Ireland by perhaps taking advantage of an even better or more affordable quality of living and proximity to the rest of what Dublin has to offer, or
 - as an alternative remodel themselves (as some like Westport, Kinsale and the like are already doing well) so that they will economically be able to “live” off these other national growth cities and towns by upselling services, like intra-country tourism, food etc.

This is not an easy message for rural Ireland and there will be casualties in terms of life as we know it today but I would suggest that to try and swim in the opposite direction in the face of new global trends will in 50 years look just as outdated as the policies pursued by Eamonn DeValera with his maidens dancing at the crossroads before we were saved by Sean Lemass.

Get it right though and not only do cities like Dublin prosper but many other towns of Ireland adjusting to this new model can prosper too.

All of this means reversing any policy choices which encourage secondary cities/towns becoming dormer towns with people commuting daily long distances to the centre of Dublin, it will mean releasing excessive constraints on building in downtown areas of Dublin and it will mean resisting a proliferation of suburban industrial parks especially for service industries requiring innovation and creativity.

This is not to say that in the grand scheme some entrepreneur may choose not locate elsewhere (perhaps the owner grew up in Clare or Leitrim or her husband owns a farm in Offaly and she wants to live there), it is just that it is rarely economically efficient for policy to try and “force” free businesses by tax expenditure or subsidised office space to locate other than where is best for their business and therefore it is probably an inefficient use of the country's scarce resources to try and do so.

Shifting Sands also play a role

There are a number of wake up calls out there for Ireland that we cannot ignore or will ignore at our peril.

Small open economies seem as a group to be losing their historical relative advantage compared to large economics. Not only are absolute growth levels going down but I read recently that the former relative advantage of almost extra 1% of GDP growth per annum compared to large economies has reduced to 0.5% since 2011 as more and more economic activity centres in the larger economies of the world with their mega cities. Remember Ireland is not a large economy and things are changing quickly.

This audience in particular is probably already aware of the scale and speed. But let's say little old Dublin has 2 million people. In 1990 there were only 10 cities with a population of 5 times or more Dublin's – ie. 10 million inhabitants. Those cities housed 153 million in total or 15 million each on average. By 2025, none of the world's top 15 megacities will be in Europe. Tokyo will have grown 5% to 39 million, New Delhi 43% to 33 million and Shanghai 40% to 28 million.

So let this be the wake-up call if required for Ireland that if we do not do more to be known globally as one of the world's best places for the world's talented entrepreneurs and creative talent, including

our own, to live and flourish with attractive urban theme parks, they will locate elsewhere and we in Ireland at the fringe of Europe, may just become the upsellers of tourism and food etc. to the likes of London, Barcelona, Berlin and the like. To be a little dramatic, we will revert to becoming the Westport, Cliftons, Killarneys and Carrigaholts for the rest of Europe. If you want to know what that looks like, travel the large tracts of land currently 4 hours to the south of Paris or 3 hours around Madrid by car – and they do not even have to force the folks in the big cities to get a plane!

Today's competition for economic growth among advanced economies is not just about tax and cost of office space and the like. These are easy things for governments to equalise or even start a race to the bottom which is not healthy for anyone.

Sustainable economic success is about having the right environment to attract and home grow the right talent and having that talent at a price that it competitive.

Once you have the right talent who want to live in a particular location, they create their own companies or attract others to hire them driving economic growth and prosperity. Once you get the reputation for the great companies and that prosperity, you get even more talent wishing to move and you hit a virtuous cycle quicker than you think.

That puts a strong responsibility for you as architects and for policy makers as you think about Ireland, Dublin and the other cities and towns.

But in many ways as a mobile profession it is relatively easy for you to work out what success might look like. For Ireland to grow significantly faster than the average, this means operating with both Irish and non-Irish talent. It means understanding the rationale for your own decisions to remain working based in Ireland and understanding what we would need as an environment so as to see some of your best international colleagues who complain about their own home locations pick up and come to live in Dublin, as it is a better place to live and work.

What this means to architects like yourself is

- **designing the right urban spaces to attract and keep talent and**
- **providing affordable housing to keep down the cost of same.**

And the two are intrinsically inter-woven. If the affordable housing is all a two hour commute from the office, the right schools or the amenities you want to enjoy, people will just up and leave to other more successfully planned cities in other countries.

It also means doing that at a global or European level in terms of the quality of our urban spaces. We must not just be attractive for Irish people living here or wanting to come “home”. We must be among the short list of locations attractive enough on a global scale.

An Irish couple might be “happy” (or is it resigned) to commute from Thurles to Dublin, (although probably only as the grandparents live nearby and childcare in our cities is too expensive), but what Spanish couple in their right mind would up sticks to move to Ireland to live in an affordable house outside Tipperary Town, drive to Thurles to catch a 2 hour trainride in the morning to work in Dublin and then the same on the way home at night when so many other alternatives present themselves across the world?

And let's not kid ourselves. When we think about the global competition, this will not be so easy. There are lots of places with better weather than us. So we have to win on other fronts.

But it can be done and done very successfully.

So for a moment let's take stock of how well positioned we are for this journey and what are some of the ideas which go behind creating these successful economic areas for the future.

From the Vikings to the Troika

The face of Ireland as we know it has been changed by many dramatic and less dramatic events through the centuries. The arrival of the Vikings, the arrival of the Normans, the Plantations, the exodus of the mid 1800's on account of the Great Famine, the retreat of the British, leaving us their post and phone boxes to paint green to reinforce our independence of thinking, the shutdown of our economy to the outside world during the De Valera agrarian utopia years, the economic failure that followed, more emigration and then the opening of our economy under Sean Lemass and my predecessor T.K. Whitaker, the arrival of FDI, joining the European Union, a developer led building boom and then a developer led bust and the arrival of the troika.

What we have inherited from all of this is a very "interesting" mismatch of rural villages and towns from another age dotted over the country, all of this connected by one of the most extensive road networks ever which we have been maintaining indiscriminately (especially before elections) roads often built as work projects in the 19th Century before we had cars to try and feed people during the famine, without looking at the economic cost compared to shutting down the road and irrespective of where the road now actually goes. We have electricity and phone lines running alongside picturesque hedgerows to solitary houses and we have dispersed our population all over the place with bungalow blight or ridiculous housing estates in so called commuter towns kilometres from Dublin with no proper services or public transport networks. We have cities which other countries would not dare call more than a small town who try to compete with each other for resources to attract global FDI rather than home grown entrepreneurs and a capital city which has seen some urban sprawl which would make even some American cities blush.

But we love it all and find it charming. And we actually think that tourists and others should find it equally so. And they do, when they come here once to visit. But with for example only 30% of repeat visitors from North America in our numbers and 25% saying that they are coming to see friends and family, then either people find our product a little less charming than we think or they really do not like their friends and family. How many less come here for a holiday and decide they just have to come back and stay?

Building on Recovery

Last week the Government published a capital expenditure plan "Building on Recovery".

I delayed preparing my notes for today until it was published. Some part of me hoped that I would finally see an integrated plan for the rebuilding of the country, so that all of us would understand how things were going to work into the future. I had hoped to see a plan along the lines I describe in this speech or at least if it was another different plan an explanation of why that was better.

As a former SG of the Department of Finance what was nice to see at least is that we are not losing the run of our spending. But after years of deferring capital expenditure, I would have appreciated greater sharing of the wisdom underlying the plan as to why we did not decide going forward to prioritise greater capital expenditure and investment over current spending now that our economy is hardly in need of a domestic stimulus, even if that meant further cuts in some current spending to allow for greater investment.

One of the great advantage of the bailout was the entire country, central government, local government, private industry and the population knew "the plan". We may not have liked it in many respects but we could map our own individual actions into that plan. Some people left, some stayed

here. Some left employment and started up businesses, others decided to hang tight hoping they could hold on to their jobs during the downturn. Whatever it was, our decisions were informed by a clear sense of direction which is why the power of the whole became a greater force than people thought the sum of the individual parts might be because we all were aligned to a single strategy and vision.

I think remains equally critical now post the bailout to have a clear indication of the destination not just for central government but equally for local authorities planning their own activities into the broader framework and for private investors looking to see where they should be investing, whether it is in deciding to set up businesses there, building housing or funding schools.

In a country the size of Ireland is it right to allow local authorities to run their own agenda and compete with each other without a greater over-arching framework without giving them the right financial powers and resources to do so? Or do we not need to see greater and more clearly explained direction from the centre with tough decision making consistent with that direction if spending power is not being delegated further into the regions, And this should be carried out across all spending consistently whatever that means, for example, in health, housing, security, infrastructure, enterprise and economic growth agencies,

What I saw instead in the plan last week were allocations of funding along somewhat more traditional spending headings but for the moment at least little sense of the broader direction of travel. I would have appreciated a much clearer vision and better explanation of the bigger plan driving the choices. I was left hoping (without seeing any proof) that behind the choices is indeed some ruthless economic analysis other than the ruthlessness of just capping the expenditure to allow current expenditure to grow within the European parameters.

It is hard to see any hint in the document of significant new directions. Am I correct therefore to assume, that there remains a conviction in Government Buildings that we have it about right already without the need for any real dramatic intervention to change direction?

For the reasons I mention today, if this is the case, I at least would not be so sure that we are on the right path in terms of national level urban and regional planning given the shifting sands in the world at large.

The main thrust of the document seems to me to be underpinned by a decision to go forth and build as best we can with limited resources on our current system of dispersed towns and villages, substandard mobile phone system for many, substandard broadband for most, of trying to convince some foreign industrialist to set up somewhere outside of Dublin, of hooking the whole lot up with a transport system by definition over stretched on account of the many routes and in the end falling back on letting people use cars to get from one place to another.

Certainly I did not find any signs of a desire for any dramatic intervention either

- to arrest the continuous sprawling of Dublin as a major and indeed only major urban area in Ireland and prioritise services in certain locations which will be best in class competitors for Dublin, or
- to create Dublin as the one power engine of economic and population growth and spend whatever it takes in priority there.

Rather it seems a little more like trying to provide a little for everyone wherever they live. The inevitable result in a world of distributed scarce resources may be that we may not be able to give any town all of what it needs to be successful so everyone risks failure.

Yet anyone who has wandered into many of our small towns even at the weekends and looked at the empty buildings on the main street, wandered even our cities like Limerick or Waterford on a week night, who has been left standing on a bus or train in Dublin for a daily 30 minute commute, or worse still by passed by full buses now reappearing as people get back to work, who has sat for 40 mins or so in traffic or paid some 80 euros to get from Dublin to Limerick and back by train must wonder is there not a better way.

We are already seeing a massive displacement of our population into the greater Dublin area somewhat to the equal detriment of the rest of the country but we seem to be happier with that as it hurts everyone equally rather than more systematically picking other centres of excellence commensurate with our budget and building them up even if it means taking resources from elsewhere. If we are not going to stop this trend of greater sub-urbanisation to Dublin happening, then I suggest we hurt everyone else a little more equally if necessary so that at least we build Dublin enough to compete on a global stage and leave the rest of the country for stage 2.

I may be reading the plan incorrectly if so, could someone please point that out more clearly which choice we are following.

Is there another way?

It would come as no surprise that a Limerick man would use rugby as an analogy. This month we all have a not insignificant confidence that an Irish team will do well on the world stage, although perhaps less so after last night's performance against the Italians. But to get there has taken decisions to centralise our resources rather than disperse them evenly in every county, it has taken compromises between Limerick and Cork about the operation of the Munster team, it has taken decisions to make playing based in Ireland as appealing as we can to attract better non Irish players and trainers to come and grow our own game and home grown talent.

What I want to would like to see from Government more clearly is what is our rugby plan for the dispersal of services and infrastructure across the country and are we planning to grow one Dublin based Leinster team or a number and if so which ones.

If I had a young son who I thought was destined to play for Ireland I might need to know that in terms of choosing schools and houses so as to be next to the best facilities. Why should it be any different for kids whom I hope one day will be able to pay their own way in challenging work?

Knowing the direction of travel means we can all better understand and assess whether decisions about locations of hospitals, transport, schools etc. all are well founded, consistent and a good use of the euros we pay as taxes.

Face it, in the context of mega cities of 30 million people or more and the travel distances involved in those, by those international standards, we could almost consider all our other Irish cities suburbs of a Dublin metropolitan area if we had a faster train system and we could direct their planning decisions that way.

Even, if I did not want to go that far, should we be asking someone in Beijing, San Francisco or Paris to have to look at Cork, Limerick and Galway, as three different independent investment locations with on offer their own resources (by definition then rather limited) or should we rather ask them to look at those three as a larger single metropolitan area with three universities (one each), two airports, three ports, some of the best surfing in the world, Connemara, Blarney Castle and the Burren as playgrounds and some one million of people in their region. Would that be a compelling

alternative to Dublin or London in a board room in Palo Alto or Hong Kong when thinking about an investment?

If they did not know we had put the road from Cork to Limerick on the long finger or that it took many minutes longer to get to Galway from Limerick by train than by car, then I might get away with that plan. But now looking at the capital plan, I see that Limerick Cork motorway is certainly not going to happen for at least another decade.

I am rather therefore given to believe (but no one is upfront to say it) from last week's plan that much of the central resources are instead going to be ploughed into the Dublin metropolitan area and what remains spread about the rest of the country rather than have a plan to prioritise a westcoast alternative to Dublin. So I am left also as a citizen who loves much of what Dublin has to offer deferring a possible decision to move back to the West as there is not going to be another alternative there which I might help to build. I am also thinking that however much people in Cork or Limerick might believe it, we are swimming against the tide in terms of imagining a disproportionate growth potential story for those cities. I am also left worrying that without this alternative, I still do not see fuller prioritisation of Dublin with the result that it might be time to get out of there too before the system grinds to a halt. Am I right? Is this what I am being told?

Doing it differently could be a key element of a larger plan to have upcoming population growth take place in a more affordable way other than in Kildare, Meath and Dublin. If I knew that clearly, it might be interesting enough to convince me and others to move west to be part of this story. But for now we don't know that's the plan so we wait.

Remember, average household values in Limerick average 140,000 compared to Dublin's prices in excess of 250,000 on average. Simply put, that makes it only half as expensive to house people there and makes it more affordable for people to choose to live there if they can find local employment or talent to set up their own businesses there. Don't get me wrong. I am not just saying it is a case of rehousing social housing candidates only in those areas. It requires a broader plan and decision this is the way we want to go and then follow up investment in the right resources to make those locations as or even more attractive than Dublin in which to live in terms of middle class affordability.

Today, I have simply given one alternative to a mega Dublin. Mega Dublin may still be the right way forward or there may be other alternative plans – a Limerick-Ennis-Galway corridor and a Cork-Waterford-Kilkenny triangle for example.

These I would suggest are key choices for government to make before setting on decisions about the locations of health, educational, transport and other services.

So for the rest of my address I shall assume that the answer is that the plan is proposing status quo, I want to go on to ask whether this the Ireland we have built is now fit for the economic rebuilding of Ireland

Cordes

Some of you may know, especially thanks to articles in the Daily Mail, that I spend a lot of time in a small walled bastide town near Toulouse built in the 13th Century, much of which remains to this day. Back in the Middle Ages when this town was built, people wanted to live in the houses lining its streets. It was a hive of business activity. People chose to live there instead of on nearby farms as it provided security, it provided an opportunity for commerce, perhaps for employment in the service of the traders who had settled there and it provided a community of mutual support and new ideas.

Even as security concerns abated, the town continued to expand as more and more people wanted to get into the act with its prosperity.

Wordsworth

Flip forward through the ages and the Industrial Revolution comes upon us. Even more people moved to cities for work across the world but bad infrastructure often means instead of being zones of security, towns often have many neighbourhoods of extreme poverty and crime.

Then along comes one of the worst parts of subliminal urban planning messaging we ever had. If you will allow me to quote one of those examples:

I wandered lonely as a cloud,
That floats on high over vales and hills
When all at once I came across a crowd
A host of golden daffodils.
Beside the lake, beneath the trees
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude
And then my heart with pleasure fills
And dances with the daffodils.

Wordsworth was a genius at poetry but I cannot forgive him for whatever role he and others like him had in instilling in all of us this bias that the only way to fill the heart with pleasure was to escape our couch and wander lonely over vales and hills.

It is this bias for solitude and nature, which has inspired people like Frederick Law Olmsted to get into plans to take people out of city centres into suburb-building when he designed Riverside on the edge of Chicago in what may be America's first "planned" suburban community. We have since been living with the consequences of these suburban idealists who turned their backs on the ideas of the people that had previously given us Stephen's Green, the Phoenix Park, Hyde Park, Central Park and the like. Ironically it was Mr. Olmsted himself who gave New Yorkers Central Park.

Meeting the needs of all social strata

Often now what we see (and again I am speaking in very generic terms) in the more desirable cities are that the richest cohort take up the inner heart with outrageously expensive but in short supply housing. Think Paris, think London, think New York. They can also afford to essentially pay for the provision of their own education for their kids, expensive theatre and restaurants. Where, as a

result of decline or bad urban planning, these services are not available, the rich no longer consider the inner city attractive and flee for exclusive suburbs or more likely simply move to other cities.

The middle class in both cases tend to have no option but to move to the suburbs in search of affordable housing and good educational facilities. They commute to the city centre on optional expensive higher speed (often private) public transport options or in their cars.

The lower income working class unless housed socially nearer to the centre are often let to live in less attractive housing options in an outer ring towards the extreme ends of the regular public transport system.

I think you will all see echoes of that in the Dublin context although our rich inner city cohort are probably all more in D4 than D1 or D2 for the moment and happily with recent changes by the Dublin City Council we are seeing a revitalisation of the city centre as a location for our working young.

If we take as correct the calculations of the capital expenditure plan, then by 2046 or in 30 years Ireland will have an extra million people. Personally, I think in an ever integrating Europe, a successful Irish model could act as an even greater magnet for other Europeans and we may need to be planning for much larger population growth.

But even if it is just one million, do we think that we can just pile in these people by building on top of the existing system and infrastructure or do we need a broader and more diversified national and urban plan? Remember it will not likely stop growing in 2046!

A World built for cars

One of the first big questions we face in planning Ireland is what do we do with cars.

In the US, people as a whole are more than 15 times as likely to drive themselves to work as to use public transport. On the other hand, NYC residents are more than twice as likely to take mass transit to work.

Historically, European countries pandered less to the car than Americans.

Where are we on this in Ireland?

I fear in Ireland we are already hamstrung by a political system which requires one for everyone in the audience. Instead of lauding the aspiration to live without a car, having a car (or even better two) is seen as a sign of success. This need not be the case, many successful New Yorkers or Parisians never own a car.

On top of that bias, we have to admit that the human race in general is very slow to realise and take into account the negative impact of our own actions.

We have all I am sure been on a metro or train when someone (let's call him Mr. Me Fein) rushes to the door, sticks in his bag and waits for the door to reopen so that they can get into the train rather than wait for the next one.

How many here today are already repeating it – “What a plonker. We're going to be delayed now. Why couldn't he (and sadly it does seem statistically to be a male) wait for the next train or come on time?”

But how often do you think Mr Me Fein says “Great, thank-god I got that train. I was going to be late. That should save me the key 3 minutes and the only cost of that has been 3 minutes for the 400 to 500 people otherwise on the train”.

An economic efficiency of 3 minutes for Mr Me Fein at the cost of 1200 to 1500 minutes. Not a great result in the world order of efficiency.

The same thing happens in lesser scale when someone (in the interests of fairness, let’s call her Mrs Me Fein) gets into their car in the morning rather than on the bus or train. She might feel that a couple of minutes are saved of commuting time or that it is better to be able to have one’s own space to put on the rest of the make-up, but how many Mr or Mrs Me Fein take into account the incremental impact they have on that morning’s traffic jam, how many people in buses lose time because of traffic caused because they and others chose to drive in their own car.

We all know too that individual cars use much more energy than public transport to get people from A to B. And it doesn’t stop there.

As cities become more crowded and space more valuable, consider some other points:-

- When someone walks or takes public transport, a metre square is plenty and even less when the street or public transport is more crowded and that space requirement disappears once they get to their desk. The only exception being those that cycle as they will likely need a couple of square feet for the bike storage during the day.
- When someone drives, they may need 20 to 30 square metres to travel safely and when our worker gets to town to work, not only does he need his work station, he needs another 12 square metres or so of a car parking space, essentially doubling the amount of scarce urban space that person needs to do their job.

Why therefore can’t we invest more heavily in public transport and fund it by taxing people who are given a free car parking space or even with a commuter tax which by reducing peak time car usage of our urban roads would also release valuable space for housing and other services?

We should be doing everything we can to encourage people to prefer first to walk or if not to cycle or get public transportation by shortening ride times, increasing frequency, reducing fares, shortening the time to get to the transport and to get from there to work and providing as comfortable a ride as possible. We are already seeing good progress even in the last number of years with the real time information about approaching buses and the provision of wifi on the public transport. But there is much more to be done.

When I looked at our capital expenditure plan there is some indication we might do a bit but there is hardly a sense of a conviction backed by numbers showing the advantages to us all of spending money to do all that can be done to get people to walk or take public transport to work. I, for one, shall be looking hard for the analysis that justifies widening the M7 when it comes rather spending money to reducing the number of cars travelling on it. I travel often to Limerick. I get the train rather than drive the M7. I can work on the train, there is wifi (although it could be better), I can even make phone calls. I would simply just ask for more frequency, more plugs on the train, a fare consistently less in price than the petrol it would cost me and a heated shelter from the rain at Limerick Junction.

Why not leave the congestion as it is or reduce it by charging at peak times and use the money instead to reduce Irish rail fares and make the Dublin transport fares free for anyone who gets the train instead of using that road?

I very much hope at least that we shall charge anyone using that road for at least the cost of building it, pushing out extra carbon emissions and causing more traffic jams to clog up buses when they get to Dublin!

Living Closer to the City Centre Saves Energy

But mass transit is not the only way to lower energy consumption.

I do not have the Irish stats, sorry, but in the United States about 20% of the country's carbon dioxide emissions are related to residential energy use, and almost another 20% with motor vehicle use.

If people live in denser areas, they travel fewer miles, even if they drive to work.

If people live in smaller houses, with more public amenities shared with their neighbours, or in multi-unit structures they use less energy and use up less urban space.

If people have more conveniences within walking distance they may not drive at all. If you live in a city or town you might walk to the local restaurant. If you live in the country or one of our suburbs, the local restaurant may be 10-20 mins of a drive each way.

I love living in cities. I never wanted to live in a suburban sprawl – I tried it once in New York and hated the daily commute. So I live in Islandbridge. It is less than 5km from O'Connell Bridge but sometimes I do not feel like I live in a city!

And that's not just because of the deer in the Phoenix Park!

I can't get UPC – my house is not connected yet.

The 3G won't work sometimes unless I go out into the street for a better signal.

While hopping on the public transport system in Toulouse costs 1.60 for a single journey even if I cross the city, switching between buses and trams, getting here today without a Leap card cost me 5.10 euros and 42 minutes to travel only 7 miles.

These are all of the kind of things we need to fix in Dublin before we become world class.

What I would like to see for our capital expenditure planning is the economic analysis showing the advantage to Ireland's carbon footprint of having 100,000 more people living within denser urban areas walking to the shops, cinemas, work, and see the lesser spend required by not having these people dispersed across virgin land in Kildare or Meath. Armed with that information we can then see whether more money could and should be allocated and spent to make the central urban area a more desirable place to live.

Would that money even be enough to kick-start a remodelling (along the lines of the Ballymun project) of areas of Dublin with single dwelling low density housing to make them more densely populated. Areas like Crumlin, for example, which is within walking distance of the city centre and where there is a lot to be gained to bring the local populations along on this journey with the prospect of much better local communities amenities?

Urban Areas as Drivers of Creativity

We could of course, have a model of a downtown Dublin which houses government administration and some retail with people commuting in from houses outside to work, commuting locally to suburban industrial parks or even reverse commuting from the city centre to the industrial parks in dotted around the city where less restrictive planning makes office space cheaper.

But the younger millennials are globally rejecting this model and demanding a downtown urban lifestyle and rejecting the desire to live in the suburbs even if that is where the jobs are. Good companies are recognising that moving downtown too presents a more attractive alternative than asking this new talent to “reverse commute” to suburban office parks.

Another reason this makes sense is that dense urban areas since the time when Plato and Socrates debated in the marketplaces of Athens have been engines of innovation. It is harder to get idea-hopping and innovation where workforces do not mix with one another. It is harder to get sustainable growth where single industries dominate activity in a city so the more entrepreneurial we can make our environment the better.

Open conversation gives rise to new ideas. It is I think no accident that one of the most successful transformational mayors of a city Michael Bloomberg introduced the open plan working he experienced as a bond trader at Solomon Bros not just at Bloomberg but also in City Hall. The same thinking also inspired many of his urban initiatives as he rebuilt the streets of New York to maximise social interaction between the citizens of the city bringing them onto the streets in urban living rooms.

Education is a great pull

There are many factors which will make a good urban area work.

Too often though we think that this means a set of new shiny office block towers, a large theatre complex or a shiny new tram system – these will not work on their own.

Neither will building rows of empty fancy apartment blocks necessarily encourage the right talent to move there.

As people have become more talented and richer, they have more choices about where they want to live. If in the morning, everyone in this room suddenly had to move to work somewhere else, where would you go? Why would you go there? My guess is that there would be a certain convergence of choices if we were to poll the room and yet think of the number of other cities in Europe like Dublin who do not even get onto our intuitive list. What are they doing wrong that the others are doing right? What lessons can we learn from that?

What is clear though that is that for those of you with or hoping to have children, one of the greatest pulls to any location is the quality of schools. I would certainly hope that behind the spending allocations in the capital plan, the spend on education will prioritise un-apologetically the upgrading and building of the highest quality (European level) education facilities in our denser urban areas and schools fit for a mobile European population not just Irish kids.

Affordability

Another likely issue to feature big is the affordability of life for you and your family. That is a complex mix of wage levels, tax rates, and overall cost of living in which housing costs are a very significant factor. Individual cities have many policy levels to influence this calculation not least housing policies and those related to the provision of public services which take costs away from the households – think transport, think the provision of childcare, the cost of recreation. The other thing to remember is that urban scale makes it possible to support the fixed costs of theatres, museums and indeed restaurants. Multi-family city centre dwellings also reduce the cost of heating and certain other expenses, not least perhaps not needing a second car or maybe even one at all.

There are about 120 million bus trips per annum on Dublin bus. So every time you see a capital expenditure of 120 million come from government think is that better than taking a euro off of the cost of every bus journey in Dublin over a year!

Desirable Living

But if it were just down to pure maths none of us would decide to live in expensive cities like New York or London for example or we'd all live in low taxed spots like Dubai or Bermuda.

Yet cities like New York and London are booming at present. And while housing might be expensive, those cities provide not just quality expensive restaurants and theatre but also more affordable moments, whether sipping a coffee on city provided furniture in Time Square, jogging in Central Park or free entertainment provided by the city. More important, they provide the opportunity to find friends with common interests and for their disproportionately single population, a chance to meet a soulmate or lifelong partner.

How many creative people do you know who live for years on a shoe string in New York or London to be surrounded by other creative people and share ideas? The reality is that the talent which will drive tomorrow's economic growth has many choices and so other factors like the quality of life, the time available to enjoy it all come into play. There again, factors like lower commuting time and costs, the amenities available to them and their kids, the opportunities for social engagement, security and the sense of community all come into play.

It is into the mindsets of these transients, into the mindsets of the newest generation of kids we must step as we think out the design of our cities, not into the preconceived notions we have from watching programmes as kids like the Brady Bunch, which extolled the value of suburban living on a walled off plot of ground, kids jumping into the car at 7am to be dropped to school while the parents set off on a long commute to work to return too late to be able to catch up with the neighbours except on Saturday as both spent their free time cutting the lawn, washing the car or driving to the mall and caught glimpses of each other across the fence.

Wordsworth may have a lot of bad urban planning to answer for by extolling the escape from the city to a more rural environment and how ironic that such a creative genius managed to convince us all of the wisdom of a style of life that was itself not likely to generate creativity!

Or maybe what he was really telling us is that we would be happy just if our urban planners can find better ways for nature to invade our cities, along our rivers, tree and grass lined streets and in urban parks even in old reclaimed parking spots so that it is accessible downstairs and all around us as we walk or cycle to work. And we can leave the trip to the vales and hills until that Saturday and Sunday rail and cycle trip with the kids or friends.

I shall leave it there, thank you for your attention and wish you the best for your afternoon sessions.