Contested urban environments: perspectives on the place and meaning of community action in central Dublin, Ireland

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Abstract
Cities have been substantially and unevenly reshaped through processes of economic restructuring, long cycles of investment/disinvestment across built environments and the neoliberal realignment of urban governance over recent years. Within this often contradictory context, grassroots interventions have taken on new importance and meaning as people seek to influence the future of their localities and their cities. However, it is important to remain critically aware of the challenges and risks for different forms of community action within these changing structural and contextual conditions. This paper draws from a long period of research into and involvement with tenants and community organisations in local authority estates in Dublin. It offers methodological reflections on some varieties of action research. It then explores the evolution of community action in the inner city focused on issues around housing and the urban environment. The paper offers insights to the achievements of and limits to different forms of community action within a changing policy environment in a city undergoing rapid transformation.

Residents of St Michael’s Estate are just getting to grips with the consequences of the announcement on Monday 19th by Dublin City Council that the Public Private Partnership regeneration deal it had with McNamara/Castlethorn Construction to develop St Michael’s Estate will not go ahead as planned. Locals are angry and disappointed about this development... as soon as profit margins narrowed PPP collapsed like a deck of cards.

St Michael’s Estate Regeneration Team, Press Release 22.5.2009

They hope we will go away and stay in our long forgotten ghettos across Dublin City. We will return to our homes not to forget our dreams of a decent place to live but to organise our fight against Dublin City Council

St Michael’s Estate Regeneration Team, Press Release 5.6.2009
At 6.30 pm on May 26th, 2008, Dublin’s City Hall, located at the traffic-choked junction of Dame Street, Parliament Street and Lord Edward Street, became the locus for a grassroots street protest, fuelled by a level of anger and distress unseen since the anti-drugs movements of the mid 1990s. Tenants groups, community organisations and cross-city networks arrived from different points in the south and north inner city, noisily and colourfully drawing attention to the human costs of the latest urban crisis following the collapse of five public-private partnership (PPP) regeneration deals for local authority estates and public lands. One week had passed since Dublin City Council’s unexpected announcement that the agreements with McNamara/Castlethorn Construction would no longer proceed in the light of changed economic circumstances. It was a week of unexpected reversals that revealed more clearly the conflicting interests and values of capital, state and community,

For a while, PPP arrangements had become flavour of the month with city and central state officials. Up until the collapse adopted policies meant that all major regeneration projects with costs greater than €20 million had to be pursued using PPP agreements. The ability to achieve improved living environments for several working-class communities in the city – who had long suffered from the neglect and rundown of their estates – was thus made dependent on market forces. The turn to the engine of private capital for deliverance was heavily ideological, but also swept along in the blinkered enthusiasm over the Irish property boom of 1996-2007. However, with the sudden crash since 2008, boom has turned to bust and the developer pulled out fast, dramatically illustrating the vulnerabilities and limits to such market-driven approaches to social regeneration.

The protest was important for another reason. It was a collective outpouring of anger at recent injustices and demands for a better future – for the right to the city, to live and to flourish and just to be in this place – behind which lay long years of struggles, achievements and losses. Accordingly, the protest and everything that led up to it is a story that deserves careful listening. It says something about the dreams and despairs of local communities, the skills available to and the strategies pursued by different forms of urban social movement and community development initiative, the machinations of public policy at central and local level, global neoliberal ideologies trickling down through Irish political economy, and cycles of investment and disinvestment in the city. There was a further significance to these events with regard to the nature of community mobilisation in the city: this signalled a back-to-the-

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1 The Public Private Partnership model was extensively used by the Irish state in infrastructural projects such as roads, schools and housing. In the case of housing regeneration, deals were struck between Dublin City Council and private developers to develop predominantly private housing schemes on public lands that previously contained only social housing and open space. The deal meant zero public investment. The cost to the private partner of building some social units and community facilities was offset by the gift of the rest of the site for commercial exploitation.

2 A phrase coined by French philosopher Henri Lefebvre.
streets turn in strategic action after several years of engagement with participatory and partnership structures.

This paper draws from a long period of research into and involvement with tenants and community organisations in local authority estates in Dublin. It offers methodological reflections on some varieties of action research. It then explores the evolution of community action in the inner city focused on issues around housing and the urban environment. The aim of this work is to develop some strategic insights on the achievements of and limits to different forms of community action within a changing policy environment in a city undergoing rapid transformation.

**Approaching the space of community action in the city**

Urban social movements have at various times received considerable attention in social and political analyses of the city. Perhaps the best known recent body of work began with Manuel Castells’ turn from an earlier structural Marxist account (Castells, 1977) to a research project that gave a more central explanatory role to a diverse and chaotic pattern of social movements focused on environmental, cultural and political demands in the city (Castells, 1983). These battles for the right to the city and the production of urban meaning were important forces in shaping historical patterns of urban change, alongside top-down processes driven by the state and capital, which tended to receive more attention in much critical social theory.

Subsequent research in this vein has explored how global restructuring and community politics are interlinked in order better to understand the historical and socio-spatial dimensions of urban transformation (Smith and Tardanico, 1987). This suggests a research agenda that explores the linkages between such issues as everyday life in the household or community, social networks, work-based and community-based political action, global capital flows and the organisation and control of production and trade. In a similar vein, Fisher and Kling (1993) assembled a diverse set of studies of community mobilisation in the context of globalised and neoliberalised urban systems. In an examination of grassroots responses to global pressures in U.S. cities, Fainstein (1987) highlighted the local implications of integration into a world economy. In the face of the twin threats of economic restructuring and spatial reorganisation in cities (including pressures linked to fierce competition for previously devalued land in the urban core), community activists have mobilised around public-service provision, community gain agreements from urban regeneration, and community-based local economic initiatives.

A frequent theme running through this work relates to grassroots opposition to urban renewal. In Castells’ (1983) work, for example, a case study in San Francisco explored how minority neighbourhoods managed to survive under urban-renewal pressures. Renewal schemes were proposed first in the 1950s under the aegis of a pro-growth coalition in the city government “as an adequate instrument to provide a favourable setting for the new service economy, to
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renovate blighted areas, to displace the poor and minorities, to improve the urban environment, to keep middle class residents, and to reduce the flight of high income taxpayers to the suburbs\(^3\) (Castells, 1983: 102). This programme led to mobilisation on a large scale between 1967 and 1973 in the Mission Coalition Organization (MCO), which involved up to 12,000 people (out of a total population of 50,000) and 100 grassroots committees at its peak. The MCO was a citizen participation project, which aimed to represent residents’ interests in the Federal urban programmes and, potentially, build into a multi-issue, multi-ethnic community alliance representative of the entire neighbourhood. The organisation was set up essentially along "Alinsky" lines, recalling the Back-of-the-Yards Council built upon 1930s labour militancy in Chicago. This emphasised two principles, the importance of the neighbourhood scale as a social base for political action and participatory democracy (Marston and Towers, 1993).\(^3\)

The MCO exhibited complex articulations between community organisations and public programmes of social reform, neighbourhood self-reliance and local politics. Its operators (community leaders, local priests, etc.), adversaries and place in the urban social structure were reflected in a focus on class issues (poverty), race issues (minority culture, discrimination, etc.) and city issues (quality of life in the neighbourhood affected by service provision and economic value). The organisation had a number of positive effects, most notably in successfully protecting the neighbourhood from extinction in the face of renewal, improving the environmental quality of the public spaces, and winning some public funding for local community services. However, the MCO’s effectiveness was limited by internal divisions over the main priority for action (neighbourhood, class or minority issues) and the "absorption of most of the leadership into the management of the programmes\(^4\) and the subsequent in-fighting within the community over the control of public resources” (Castells, 1983, 137).

A number of researchers have focused on this complex question of incorporation – the tendency for the state or other powerful institutions to absorb and co-opt bottom-up movements within the complex machinations of policy-making and funding mechanisms. In many international cases, the state has cultivated direct linkages with local activists in the process achieving some control over potentially disruptive or dissenting organisations. A broad trend towards partnership between public and third sectors has to varying degrees reconstrued community and voluntary action as social policy delivery vehicles (Kramer, 1981; Acheson and Williamson, 1995).

\(^3\) See Alinsky (1945) for a description of the theory and action employed by this local organisation; see also Jacobs (1961) for comment on the success of the Alinsky praxis in opposing destructive urban redevelopment plans; Miller (1981) provides a description of the intentions and actions of community organisations that continued in this tradition in the post-war era.

\(^4\) Federally funded social programmes
In a wide-ranging review of grassroots organisation in U.S cities, Mollenkopf (1983) also highlighted some common limitations, particularly the fact that the inherently local nature of such movements has prevented them from addressing the structural sources of conflict over urban development or from achieving a national political presence. Furthermore, a general reliance on State grants raises the danger of manipulation from above rather than accountability from below. One important consideration at this point is Fitzgerald’s (1991) distinction between community-defined organisations, where the interests remain purely local and competition between places is promoted, and community-based organisations, which emerge and evolve in a particular locale but contribute to the advancement of broader social demands and goals.

Arising from difficulties of this kind, the critical importance of transcending localism and overcoming geographically fragmented activism has been discussed as the problem of "militant particularism" (Williams, 1989). The challenges of "properly bringing together" localised interest groups to advance the general interest and common good is fraught with difficulties, but experience has shown it is a challenge that must be met:

... it was hard bitter learning: that you would lose or only partly win particular struggles unless you could generalize and broaden them, and change their underlying conditions (1989: 249)

There is then a considerable international literature on grassroots mobilisation in urban settings, particularly where the basis or impetus relates to the lived experience of inequality or exclusion. The work demonstrates the mutual interconnections between general processes of change and local experiences and responses, and it variously explores the dynamic engagement between consciousness and action, theory and practice. This international research offers some guidance for the work on Dublin. It provides insights into the complex links between urban contradictions and struggles and the interplay between capital, the state and the grassroots at the level of the city. The cumulative international evidence provides some critical insights as to the place and meaning of grassroots organisation in the urban third sector, highlighting some important achievements and limits, notably with regard to localism, particularism and incorporation.

However, interest in this field has waned somewhat since the 1990s, as more recent commentary on social movements in the literature has tended to emphasise issues-based international movements, such as those focused on global justice, environmentalism and feminism (Castells, 1997), rather than on spatially defined urban movements. This is indeed important – we need careful critical analyses of the actually existing processes of neoliberal globalisation, including an understanding of the interests behind this project, its variable and uneven effects and the open possibilities for resistance and alternative futures.

Nevertheless, alongside this useful focus on such international movements, we would do well to remember that history shows any strategy or system of domination can also be resisted and rejected locally at neighbourhood level,
either partly or entirely (this may become an even more important fact now in
the face of the latest global crisis which is undermining people and places in
many areas of everyday life). In recognition of this political fact, Douglass and
Friedmann (1998) attempt to “put the local back in” to the conversation. They
turn our attention back to local narratives constructed around regions, cities
and neighbourhoods. These are not closed off from global economic processes –
the global and the local interpenetrate in a fluid and complex manner – but they
are the sites for effective engagement in civic action. Collective actors (civil
society) awaken to the conditions of their lives locally – of their labour and
consumption – and mobilise to struggle for the right to a voice, the right to live
differently and the right to human flourishing. In a slightly earlier formulati
on, Castells (1983, 70) would have agreed:

...the emphasis upon the social and cultural determination of space must
be combined with the recognition of the fundamental role played by
territoriality in the configuration of social processes...Only in the secrecy
of their homes, in the complicity of neighbourhoods, in the
communication of taverns, in the joy of street gatherings may [people] find values, ideas, projects and, finally, demands that do not conform to
the dominant social interests.

Notes on method

While many will agree readily enough with the importance of such local
experiences and spatially defined grassroots praxis, we are faced with
considerable methodological challenges relating to what precisely we are
searching for and how best to carry out the research in a way that can contribute
knowledge that is strategically useful to those directly affected by urban
problems and inequalities. It is important in other words continuously to seek a
research praxis that can offer insights to what does or does not work that can be
made available to those directly affected by and/or active in confronting any
issue of injustice or inequality in the city, whether the source of the conflicts and
tensions are linked to global processes, state power or more locally defined
structures and practices. This is an inescapable task of general importance: any
research programme needs to include some serious reflection on its relationship
to the wider world. It has been commonly accepted in every field of scientific
endeavour (whether social, physical or natural) that the act of analysing data
changes it. We are inescapably part of the universe we observe. If that is true for
physics – from quantum to cosmological levels – it is even more obviously true
for social research – there is no neutral ground, no wholly objective, other-
worldly view. What matters is how we try to manage the effects and direct the
potential use value of the research.

This paper argues for (and tries to make some small contribution to) an engaged
research praxis that takes seriously the significance of grassroots movements.
The point is that people’s collective readings of and responses to what is
happening to their lived city is a significant and meaningful historical fact. This
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is an important methodological as well as political principle. Organic understandings and interventions reveal much about the real social relationships – sometimes painful and conflictual, sometimes joyful and cohesive – and the values and intentions that characterise the contours of lived experience in any urban place. Thus we might invoke a simple but essential geographic and anthropological principle at the outset: place and instance, experience and practice, matter (Lee, 2002); the varied patterns of local knowledges and actions are important (Geerz, 1993).

At the same time, it is important not to adopt a naive localism or an unwarranted faith in the power of locally situated collective mobilisation. Such an unsophisticated populism would lose sight of the real limits and conditions within which any movement for change is socially constructed. This is why we need to enter into a continuing process of research, critical reflection and dialogue.

In this spirit, the discussion here explores some recent trends in organisation and action emerging from working class communities in contested inner-city spaces in Dublin since the 1970s, culminating in the May 2008 protests. The discussion is informed by a long programme of academic research and local engagement carried out from 1997 to the present. This work has included periodic involvement in various community organisations and networks as well as formal research. Some of these methods and experiences are worthy of brief reflection since it may be useful to highlight some of the strengths and challenges that can be encountered in trying to carry out engaged research aimed at generating practical knowledge or locally informed insights.

This work has included the production of a local development plan in consultation with the Ringsend Action Project (Punch, 2000), arguing for the resourcing of a diverse network of local economic initiatives in the context of deindustrialisation and docklands regeneration. Advisory support was provided for a research project of the South West Inner City Network exploring the local implications of a neoliberal urban-renewal strategy (Punch et al., 2007). Other work involved sitting on an independent voluntary consultancy forum along with residents and activists from Fatima Mansions (FAST: Fatima Advisory Strategic Team) from January to April 2004 during a period of intense negotiations over PPP regeneration plans. A similar piece of work involved a programme of consultancy and observational research with local activists attempting to negotiate the PPP consultation process in O’Devaney Gardens in the north-west inner city.

In this latter example, the first action taken involved “sitting in” as independent observers on early meetings (in April 2004) between tenants and the local authority. The local representatives succeeded in slowing down the process, which had all the appearances of being railroaded through initially. The next stage of work involved meeting each Monday night with local activists who had been appointed to represent the community in the negotiations to discuss the previous week’s meeting and prepare for the coming one. Up until the end of Summer 2004, this was simply voluntary consultation work therefore. At that
point, a small research grant was secured from the Combat Poverty Agency. This grant supported a more formal, long-term research programme agreed with the local activists, which would involve a researcher sitting in on all of the PPP negotiations as an independent observer with a view to producing a report on the process and the costs and benefits to the community involved.

This process continued between September and December 2004, involving the negotiation of a Community Charter, which was to input local needs and voices to the PPP plan. These meetings involved six tenants’ representatives, two from the local Community Development Project, three Dublin City Council officials and their private consultants on PPPs (a property firm called Urban Capital). The process was facilitated by Community Technical Aid (CTA), an independent community development organisation.

A draft report offering an analysis of the consultation process emphasised the important power differentials in the process and raised a number of serious concerns, including the timing of participation (too late in the process), the inadequacy of resources and supports for capacity building locally, the limited spectrum of input to key parts of the planning process, a lack of transparency and the need for effective consultation structures and decision-making powers at local level. The work was presented and debated at (often lively, sometimes fractious) public meetings facilitated by the Centre for Urban and Regional Studies in Trinity College Dublin. The account of these problems was welcomed by many locally, and experiences reported on were recognisable to activists engaged in other local areas. At the same time, the arguments also engendered resistance and opposition form the state partners both publicly and behind the scenes. Ultimately, the whole experience was frustrating as it proved difficult to circulate or disseminate the findings more widely as the report was never published by the commissioning agency. The approach adopted did show the usefulness of providing support and advice when invited to do so by local people engaged in struggles over complex planning issues, and for a time the observational work helped to support people in a practical way if only by placing some level of onus on the state partners in the negotiations to deal fairly and openly on the grounds that “you are being watched”. It also revealed the pitfalls of such an active approach given the complex micro-politics of local action and the pressures and limits linked to funding structures. There can be a real tension arising from the need to maintain the integrity of independent research findings where such findings generate politically charged critiques.

A second major form of action-oriented academic work has involved participation in the steering group of Tenants First, a cross-city network of

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5 This was state funding for research in the voluntary sector and it was sourced in partnership with a national housing advisory charity, which in contractual terms commissioned and therefore ‘owned’ the research. This situation was not ideal, as subsequent experiences proved, but it was the most immediate way to secure some financial support.

6 The steering group is made up of activists and tenants from local authority estates across the city. My involvement has been as a co-opted research and policy advisor to this grouping.
local authority tenants and anti-poverty groups from its inception in November 2003 to the present (ongoing). Again, there are two sides to this. It involves providing input on planning and housing policy issues raised at grassroots level (the network’s agenda is shaped by regular public meetings with tenants and activists from communities across the city). This agenda called for research support to produce a guide for tenants faced with PPP regeneration plans (The Real Guide to Regeneration). The work was based on the experience of the communities first subjected to this regeneration process. The Real Guide was subsequently “workshopped” with local tenants, community workers and activists through a series of community-based public meetings, and it has been made of (as local people see fit) in major regeneration programmes such as that in Dolphins Barn, a large flats complex in the south-west inner city. We have also produced a policy document setting out an alternative vision for housing (Housing for Need Not Greed), which amounts essentially to a defense of social housing (investment in provision and maintenance in order to move towards social housing becoming a vibrant sector of choice). A campaign to push forward this agenda is currently being devised. This latter work has been challenging in that it took literally years to iron out a platform that all members – coming from a diversity of local situations and political perspectives – could commit to comfortably and whole-heartedly.

The care taken to produce this work with diverse local input was worthwhile in that there is a real sense of ownership of the final products across all who have engaged with them, and it is thus politically more powerful. At the same time, problems and crises were mounting in housing and regeneration through all this period, so you have to live with the frustration of not being able to move forward as quickly as might be possible with an external (but top-down) piece of work. The effectiveness and usefulness of this approach remains to be seen, and it will depend on our ability to construct an effective campaign and a broader alliance to progress the arguments and recommendations coming from the research. This campaign work is ongoing at the present time. Finally it is worth also noting that Tenants First has been actively (and visibly) engaged in the various street-level protests over the past year or so.

As well as insights from active involvement of this kind, the paper also draws from a more formal and standard research programme, involving a series of 45 interviews carried out with activists from grassroots organisations across the inner city (see Punch 2002, 2005 for a report on findings relating to the social economy and the drugs crisis). The aim of this work was to record a social history of bottom-up movements in the city informed by the experiences and perspectives of local activists and to situate such experiences analytically within the broader political economy of urban change.

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7 A related piece of work has also been carried out at national level for the Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice (2009). While this is different methodologically, as it was developed in consultation with a nationally based voluntary agency, it is also now feeding into the emerging campaign work, while some of this research was also drawn on in the Tenants First document.
From the perspective of the researcher (and the research institution), a number of methodological principles provide the case for adopting these kinds of approaches (despite the risks and frustrations that can be encountered). Firstly, there is a case for a programme of research with social relevance informed by the real concerns and struggles of everyday life in the city. A university has a responsibility to its host city and those who live there, and in trying to serve and contribute to the city it finds itself in, any such research institution can make a difference and benefit from the unexpected patterns of learning discovered in the process (Linnane, 2006)\(^8\). Secondly, it is hoped that this approach can enhance understanding about how people make sense of their received situation and attempt to alter the trajectory of change to one that is more human and respectful of local needs, values and meanings. Such local action is significant given the immense barriers and costs involved; that people still get involved despite such difficulties signals something important about the social realities of the city. And finally, in reaching this local level of understanding we can perhaps say something more certain about social order, historical change and collective consciousness in general (Geertz, 1993).

**A note on definitions**

Consideration of specific local cases, such as Dublin’s inner city, can bring some useful experiential depth to the conversation, but we need first to clarify some terms before looking at the evidence. Notwithstanding the theoretical-methodological importance of local experiences and social practices, there remains considerable definitional confusion. A large area of such experience and practice is often termed “third sector”, “third space” or “third system” (being outside of and alternative to the institutions and practices of state and capital). However, this “third space” remains a loose definitional category, spanning a range of voluntary associations and networks outside of the state and private sectors, including everything from independent and anarchic grassroots social movements to bottom-up community action and developmental initiatives to formalised international NGOs and charitable organisations. It encompasses civil society in its broadest sense – essentially, citizens being actively engaged in processes of societal development and change through involvement in churches, cultural associations, sports clubs, independent media, concerned citizens groups, social networks, etc. (Flyvbjerg, 1998). There is obviously a chaotic diversity across this inchoate grouping in terms of intentions, philosophies, praxis, institutional forms and relationships.

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\(^8\) I address this point about the university and the city to the academy in part as a protest given that this is precisely what is not happening or is being more and more marginalised in the top-down demand for research that can gain access to the top-rated, least-read academic journals and that can attract funding from outside institutions that bring their own interests and agendas. This is one important dynamic of the power structures of universities and an important aspect of the problem of power and the production of knowledge more generally. Within such a framework, any kind of engaged work has to become essentially a matter of voluntary commitment alongside the academic work valorised and rewarded by the institutions.
with (and attitudes towards) the dominant institutions of state and market. The enormous variation is clearer still when one considers this sphere of social action can denote everything from conservative residents’ associations opposing the siting of a homeless facility to radical social movements seeking to build alternative ways of living or to challenge and change the existing dominant culture. For clarity and simplicity and in the interests of narrative coherence, the focus here is narrowed considerably to the emergence of new forms of spatially defined grassroots organisation and action in inner-city urban neighbourhoods.

**Inner city organisation in Dublin: housing and the urban environment**

In general, the most striking elements of community-voluntary organisation in Dublin were primarily top-down in nature up until the late 1960s, consisting mainly of action inspired by charitable or philanthropic impulses. The impacts and role of the Dublin Artisans Dwellings Association and housing initiatives such as the Iveagh Trust, for example, are well documented (Aalen, 1992). Many social and economic services were delivered by religious organisations acting from scriptural values (notably Matthew 25), including local parishes and national organisations such as St. Vincent de Paul. Traditionally, this work followed a caring model, constructing crucial support systems and services for the poor, but structural challenges to the nature and persistence of poverty and inequality in the urban system were less frequently present (though under the influence of liberation theology in the 1970s, many such organisations began to take on more explicit and radical social-justice orientations). This tradition of charitable action with a service orientation flourished in the context of a relatively weak welfare state and the presence of considerable economic inequality and social disadvantage, starkly evident in the poor and overcrowded living quarters in the working-class locales that made up much of the historic built environment of the city.

**New directions**

From the 1970s onwards, a number of important historical shifts occurred, producing far-reaching changes in the qualitative nature of the third space in the city. In particular, the early 1970s saw a different mode of local organisation and action starting to spring up at grassroots level, a turning encouraged by a confluence of forces. These included the collapse of the older industries, top-down redevelopment and housing plans and social problems linked to inequality (Inner City Organisations Network, 1998). Such organisation was also provoked by a planning culture perceived to be unsympathetic to local needs and values:

*(In the 1970s) a number of tenant groups had evolved around the city...and some of them took the form of community organisations,*
community development associations...And there was a sense of people being completely alienated from the state and completely alienated from planning and the development that was going on in their areas (interview, community activist).

These emergent tendencies marked an historical shift in community-voluntary work in Dublin. It began to move from being a space for predominantly top-down activity informed by a charitable ethos to one containing a busy microworld of bottom-up community organisation responding to local needs and conflicts and in many cases informed by more radical intents such as empowerment and equality agendas. The concerns of these movements have been diverse, including local economic development, community culture and heritage, the anti-drugs movement and housing and urban environmental struggles. Grassroots organisation around this latter core theme is examined in the rest of this paper to provide a focused consideration of some key issues facing local activists.

**Housing and the urban crisis**

The major initial impetus for grassroots organisation was the urban crisis. In particular, the housing question re-emerged as a serious social issue from the late 1960s onwards, as a result of overcrowding, insufficient supply, poor living conditions, inadequate maintenance and aging stock in the inner city. This reached crisis point in the 1970s, as the first manifestations of an essentially anti-city planning process (Mumford, 1961) included the detenanting of flat complexes around the city centre and rehousing on the periphery and road-widening schemes (creating urban blight and dereliction). Housing action committees were set up to campaign on housing problems around the city, notably the Dublin Housing Action Committee. There was a simultaneous emergence of tenants' organisations, including the creation of a national coalition, the National Association of Tenants Organisations (NATO). Much of the action at this time involved street-based resistance and oppositional stances towards top-down processes of urban change.

One important early example was "the state’s decision to remove 700 families out of the centre of the city" (Summerhill, Sean McDermott Street, Gardiner Street). It was clear to activists that the intention "was to create space for offices, car-parks etc." (Rafferty, 1990; 223-4). The most immediate local effect of such paternalistic anti-city policies was the disruption of inner-city communities and, by implication, their complex informal networks of support. This experience produced varying levels of critical awareness regarding the operation of capital and, usually more clearly, the local state in the production of urban space. The contradictions of strategies that hastened urban decline were keenly felt:

...around the 1970s, there was a lot of speculators would have moved in and seen this was prime land and they had great visions for it. But in the meantime all the flat complexes in around Sheriff Street and around the inner city, the likes of Seán MacDermott Street, Corporation Street and
Foley Street were being allowed to run down...The plan that the Corporation had for them then was to shift these people, the community, out of the area. Put them out in the suburbs where there was no infrastructure in place (interview, community activist).

The decentralisation strategy was often implemented in the face of vigorous local opposition. A number of campaigns against the detenanting of the inner city (Summerhill, Seán McDermott Street, Sheriff Street, etc.) sprang up during the 1970s and 1980s: "...there was a coming together of the people to resist this, and that brought about the birth of different organisations, tenant organisations...which stood up and stood their ground" (interview, community activist). Experiences of the street actions raised critical questions about urban inequalities: "I remember members of this project blocking the road and blocking Summerhill and they were imprisoned for stuff like that. So taking action led to another series of issues like equality in your area - if this road had been going through another area, how would residents feel about that?" (interview, community activist). However, faced with an often intransigent local authority, such urban struggles often met with failure:

My own mother was shifted around to Foley Street [in 1972]. But she swore she would never move again for the Corporation [local authority]. But the time came - the Corporation came in then and they decided they were going to knock Foley Street down then - this was the eighties. So my mother said she wasn't going to move, and she stuck to her guns. So what took place then was they rehoused every tenant out of Foley Street but she wouldn't go - there was an awful lot of houses on Foley Street. So anyway, at the end of the day she was the last there, and they were demolishing the place around her, and they cut off electricity, they cut off water, they created leaks in the roof and the whole lot...at the end, she had to give in - her health just got the better of her (interview, community activist).

At a more abstract level, the experience in fighting the various spatial issues generated for some activists a more critical understanding of the motives and the power relations behind urban change:

"There was a whole series of protests, and then a gang of us got arrested...but the battle was for space...the southside was over-developed and the planning objective was to shift the centre of gravity more northside. But the northside was predominantly a class which in their eyes had no contribution to make to the commercial fabric of the city and therefore logically they should be moved out" (interview, community activist).

The urban focus continued in later years, reinforced in particular by pressures related to property-based urban renewal. Contradictions between planners’ and developers’ visions for the city and local needs and values fed into the emergent patterns of organisation and action. The International Financial Services Centre (IFSC) was a textbook case, one that illuminated the dislocation between the new functions apportioned to the inner city in the global space of capital and the
economic deprivation that was rife in neighbouring working-class locales like Sheriff Street (north docklands). The IFSC was constructed at the Customs House Dock site, supported by a generous range of tax incentives (set up under urban renewal legislation in 1986) offered to the private consortium that invested in the development. This contested site in the north docklands proximate to some of the poorest communities in the country (hit badly by the deindustrialisation and job loss of the 1970s and 1980s) now became a central component of government strategies to connect the city and nation into the global networks and flows of finance capital. A flagship project, it adopted many of the defining features of Thatcherite regeneration programmes such as the London Docklands. It followed the broadly neoliberal policies of low corporate taxation, fiscal incentives for capital and deregulation, in the process defining regeneration solely in terms of economic growth concerns.

This regeneration vision was at best irrelevant to local communities, at worst actually destructive. This became urgent in the case of Sheriff Street, a mid-rise flats complex adjacent to the renewal area. The government decided to sell the site for private development and demolish the flats, in effect displacing the existing community. Community bulletins circulated to build consciousness capture the mood locally in the face of these urban pressures and an uncommunicative renewal authority. The renewal plans were “in effect a death sentence on the Sheriff Street community”, which would lead to “the demolition and scattering of the people...There is now little doubt that this was the real objective, the people and the community were seen as expendable – as surplus to requirements” (North Wall Community Association, 1990).

The plans prompted spirited opposition, including intense community mobilisation, mass public meetings and street-level campaigns: "...the locals held a three-month protest, a sit-in, to prevent that happening because they were being put out...that caused huge tension because they actually sat down in the streets, held things up for three months" (interview, community activist). The fight against displacement was based on asserting a simple conviction over and against the logic of renewal: “the rights of a Community should never be regarded as subordinate to those of commercial interest. A proper housing policy is central to the success of Inner City renewal and regeneration” (North Wall Community Association, 1993). The campaign was successful in ensuring people were rehoused locally in a local authority development north of the old site. However, the private redevelopment was exclusive and heavily segregated (walls, gates, moats) – a built expression of wider social inequalities and power relations in the city. And for some, the loss of the older built environment also generated mixed emotions: “a lot of the community got rehoused from the flats...and some have missed that...they miss the whole social interaction of living in the flats. There’s no balcony...some people feel more isolated in the houses” (interview, community activist).

New urban pressures, new grassroots strategies
Where the early grassroots activism from the 1970s to the Sheriff Street battle tended to be independent and of an oppositional and mostly defensive nature, more recent periods saw important shifts in praxis and in the wider context. A raft of EU and state funding has been made available for local development, supporting the construction of a complex network of funded projects (youth, drug treatment, social economy, family resource centres, etc.). The state has also shifted its strategic approach to planning and renewal, creating a diversity of consultation structures, which have in various ways brought some activists and tenants “inside the boardroom” within structures such as the Community Liaison Committee in the Docklands, the Monitoring Committee in the Liberties-Coombe (south-west inner city) area regeneration and in various forms of Regeneration Boards for the more recent PPP efforts.

This is part of a broader shift in governance in Ireland whereby a “social partnership” model has become a standard mechanism for developing policies from national to local level on everything from national wage agreements to the management of local community development projects. The structures generally have representatives from all key stakeholders – government, business, trade unions and the community-voluntary sector. This cultural shift has precipitated a profound change in grassroots praxis as activists move from learning the language and strategies of street protest to those of participation and negotiation, while also becoming more involved in managing funded development projects. This poses an open question about the future of community action. The dilemma is whether it belongs within such social partnership processes – arguably part of the architecture of neoliberal governance – or in an alternative space of citizen participation, where the goal “is to ‘democratize democracy’ in a genuinely inclusive form” (Powell and Geoghegan, 2005: 140). A strong case can be made that community organisations need to look beyond such state-led consultation structures in order to challenge neoliberal orthodoxy and further the interests of oppressed groups (Meade, 2005).

A further set of challenges arrived with the economic boom (c. 1995-2007), which engendered intense urban development pressures (commercial and residential) across the city. The city’s economy became increasingly dominated by a number of key sectors, notably financial services, real estate, and personal services (retail and tourism). Private capital flooded back into new build and redevelopment projects until the relatively sudden bust in 2008. This was also a period of further experimentation in urban planning, with Dublin City Council taking a highly entrepreneurial turn in its policies, introducing considerable flexibility and experimentation in approaches to the regulation and regeneration of the city (McGuirk, 1994; McGuirk and MacLaran, 2001). Over this period, relationships between capital, state and the grassroots have evolved through moments of, variously, engagement and retreat, collaboration and conflict. The state placed considerable emphasis on encouraging investment in high-grade property development for commercial and residential purposes, and at the same time a plentiful supply of financing was ensured by low interest rates and the eagerness of the lending institutions to advance loans - sometimes of
spectacular sums. This also resulted in occasional urban struggles, as rapid development often posed a threat to the survival of indigenous communities, local culture and the integrity of the urban fabric and the locale.

In particular, the increasingly neoliberal bent of urban governance gradually provoked a level of disquiet as a range of schemes were cooked up to market and remake whole city quarters, enticing in large-scale investors and reimagining the city as an attractive (and lucrative) site for European-style urban lifestyles and commercial, retail and cultural activities. This included the creation of the Dublin Docklands Development Authority in 1997 and the Urban Renewal Act of 1998, which created five new integrated area plans (IAPs) across the inner city (outside of docklands) designed to encourage property development but also wider outcomes in terms of cultural activity, image enhancement and community gain. These schemes involved various degrees of community engagement, as local activists were invited to sit on monitoring committees or otherwise make observations and recommendations on policy. Research into one of these, the Liberties-Coombe IAP (Kelly and MacLaran, 2004), revealed the predominant effect to be the “incentivisation of gentrification”, while community gain was minimal. The frustrations led to the resignation in protest of activists from the Monitoring Committee. The story took a further twist with the state’s engagement with urban regeneration via public private partnerships (PPPs), the most overt expression to date of the infection of urban policies by neoliberal ideologies.

Public private partnerships and local action

The first public notice of the strategic turn to regenerating inner-city local authority estates via public-private partnership models came with a 2001 circular emanating from central government (Department of Environment and Local Government, HS 13/01), which required that local authorities consider the extent to which additional housing supply can be achieved using PPPs. In 2003, a further directive required that regeneration projects costing over €20 million would have to be considered for PPP. Dublin City Council took up the baton energetically, earmarking numerous flats complexes for demolition and redevelopment.

The situation was of course complicated because these were in the main living, historic social areas of the city: localities like Fatima Mansions, St. Michael’s Estate, O’Devaney Gardens, Dominick Street, Dolphins Barn, Croke Villas and others. These were urban places with strong identities and felt attachments, wherein people had struggled and survived for generations against the hardships of exploitative working conditions and low pay, mass redundancies and unemployment, poverty and degraded living conditions, and the myriad social problems that go along with these conditions of inequality and injustice, including the drugs crisis. These communities had mobilised over many years and organised dense and complex grassroots networks and infrastructures to fight for local interests, achieve creative patterns of local development and
publish community plans for people-centred, social regeneration (Fatima Groups United, 2000; St. Michael’s Estate Regeneration Team, 2002). And now, after decades of decay and neglect, private capital and the state were focusing attention on these publicly owned sites with ambitious plans for clean-sweep redevelopment to produce much denser residential complexes dominated by private housing on the remains of what once were entirely social-housing estates.

This was neoliberal planning writ large, entrepreneurial governance taken to its limits. On the surface, it made perfect economic sense. It seemed to offer a means to reconstruct rundown estates at zero public cost. The private sector partner would redevelop the whole site, providing an agreed number of social housing units and amenities in return for the development rights on the rest of the site. In fact only Fatima Mansions, the earliest PPP set in train, was actually constructed by this method. In this case, resourceful local action and the ability of activists to set up effective consultation structures and to keep ahead of the game succeeded in winning a high quality development of social housing for local residents and significant input in community facilities and services. The private housing that makes up the majority of the redevelopment is nearing completion and its long-term future remains to be seen, though in the short term a substantial section will be used by the local Institute of Technology for student accommodation. Elsewhere, people learned the hard way – through years of arduous and ultimately dispiriting negotiations – the limits to market-driven models of regeneration. The example of St. Michael’s Estate illustrates the process and the lessons (Bissett, 2009).

The estate is less than two miles south-west of the city center just outside the historic Liberties area and adjacent to a recently completed Luas (tram) station. Constructed between 1969 and 1970, the original estate consisted of 346 flats in a series of mid-rise blocks isolated from one another by mostly functionless open space. It suffered the hardships of job loss and unemployment consequent to the deindustrialisation of the area in the 1970s and the recession of the 1980s. Largely neglected by policymakers, it became “ghettoised”, one of the “scary” spaces of the city, abandoned to its internal problems by the state. It had the heart torn out of it by the drugs crisis, being used as a site for selling and using and afforded little police protection, and many tenants moved out, leaving boarded-up units and an air of dereliction. The local authority did not maintain the estate, and its physical deterioration added to the sense of local crisis over many years.

People duly got organised and mobilised for change, setting up a family centre (1985) and a representative Blocks Committee (1986) and taking part in a joint Task Force (1998) with city council representatives. This established that the people favoured demolition as a radical solution – the hoped-for new start – to the conditions of daily life. In 2001, a community regeneration team think-tank was established, which published Past, Present, Future: A Community Vision for the Regeneration of St. Michael’s Estate. There followed a long process of negotiation and resistance, progress and setbacks, beginning with a 2001 plan.
for demolition and redevelopment, which was rejected by the Department of the Environment in 2003, demanding in its place a PPP regeneration. A 2004 plan produced unilaterally by the City Council would have resulted in demolition and replacement by 550 private units, 80 social units and 220 affordable units. This was resisted fiercely through a (mainly) street-level protest campaign focused on delivering the original agreed plan. This succeeded insofar as the council’s own plan was voted down by councillors, and the long process of PPP negotiation commenced in 2005, involving local representatives at the table. An agreement was reached involving McNamara-Castlethorn Consortium in January 2008 in a development to be financed by the sale of 480 private apartments plus some commercial facilities. This was followed by yet another twist on 19th May 2008 when Dublin City Council announced the collapse of several PPP schemes, all involving McNamara-Castlethorn. And so began the latest series of street protests outside City Hall involving all the affected communities and supportive groups and networks.

The whole PPP strategy contained inherent weaknesses related to its reliance on market forces for completion. Indeed, the decisive criteria for development were not the public good or social regeneration but exchange values and economic viability (that is, profitability). Thus, the contradictory values of capital, state and community became the central point of tension and conflict through all of the negotiations. The seminal account of the realpolitik of regeneration by John Bissett, a community worker and one of the two local representatives on the Assessment Panel, reveals much of the central tension and conflict around values:

Looking back over the negotiations, it is clear that there was more than one ‘regeneration’ going on. There were two diametrically opposed views as to the best way forward...Such differences manifested themselves most lucidly around the provision and status of social housing. Within the negotiations social housing became something of a marginalised category. From a community perspective the necessity of providing social housing was defended fiercely. Against this, Dublin City Council built all of its negotiation strategies and tactics around privatising the Estate using the logic of ‘the market’ (Bissett, 2008: 79).

What this meant in practice was that the delivery of social housing depended on the sale of private apartments. You thus had the odd situation whereby the City Council was driving and attempting constantly to legitimise this process of commercial exploitation. These inherent contradictions and tensions led ultimately to the unravelling of the entire exercise, leaving the plans dead in the water and the dreams of a new start in a good living environment crushed. Devastated and angry, residents and activists set in motion a back-to-the-streets protest movement, arguing for an alternative to neoliberalism:

9 St. Michael’s Estate, O’Devaney Gardens, Dominick Street, Infirmary Road, Séan MacDermott Street.
There are no safeguards built into the PPP model to protect the interests of the city council and residents against market change. It is a boom or bust strategy... We are talking about people's homes and families here. PPP is not a suitable process for developing social housing on public lands. It's a long drawn out costly process, with too much emphasis on how much money can be made from public land for the council and the developer.

(St Michael's Estate Regeneration Team, Press Release 22.5.2009)

**Achievements and limits: strategic considerations**

It is clear that all of this grassroots work has made valuable and lasting contributions to the life of the city and its patterns of change, but also that there are real and significant limitations. There have been quantifiable gains in tapping into available funding streams (EU and state). Some of the engagement with consultation structures secured real gains such as in Fatima Mansions (social housing redevelopment and social regeneration investment). Much has been acquired (sometimes painfully) in applied learning and knowledge from engagement with economic and cultural development activities and engaging in negotiations around complex planning and regeneration processes. The production of knowledge independently through action creates a base of understanding that is owned by the community rather than created externally and (even with the best of intentions) “parachuted in” or made partially available in the shape of publications, workshops or other such resources designed and created by a top-down research institution. All of this has meant that communities have managed to build considerable capacity locally, and that is a real gain.

There have also been more ineffable yet essential gains through self-organisation – the creation of complex networks of local groups with their own modes of decision-making, collaboration and action. Progress has been made in collaboration through independent networks such as Tenants First, which has had some innovative success on two fronts. As a forum bringing together local activists for almost six years now it has provided an independent grassroots space for sharing knowledge and information and offering mutual support and encouragement. Thus the knowledge produced locally (for example regarding technical or strategic issues involved in the PPP negotiations) can help to empower other communities at early stages of negotiation over regeneration. This organisation has also produced publications (and offered related workshops locally) based on research and analysis into regeneration and broader housing policy issues, and these have been informed by needs and experiences on the ground locally. And within this work, a key area of knowledge relates to the experiences with building local organisations and structures that can more effectively engage with complex top-down planning processes particularly under PPP regeneration (Fig. 1).
These are all real gains offering positive lessons for any grassroots movements emerging from and operating within working-class communities and dealing with the everyday oppressions of top-down neoliberal agendas (like PPP regeneration) in the city.

There are some evident concerns, however, and these also provide important lessons for consideration. One essential concern is the risk of incorporation. Available state funding for community development has meant that activists have also by default become increasingly engaged as project managers, and energies are increasingly absorbed in endless rounds of meetings, form-filling exercises and the day-to-day demands of running the various schemes. Local development policies have also engendered varying degrees of dependency on what are ultimately vulnerable and short-term sources of income. This process of incorporation is a central problem in the political economy of community action. Where alternative or oppositional movements or cultures emerge in any society, the dominant (hegemonic) forces will usually tend either to marginalise, suppress or co-opt such activity. There is wide recognition locally of this problem. The challenge for activists is finding organisational structures that can facilitate a balance between the value of maintaining autonomy and a critical distance and the need to access resources in order to support and diversify activity and achieve their goals. As an unfunded voluntary network, Tenants First has attempted to explore one model of doing so, by providing an
independent space within which people can collaborate to seek common ground, develop understanding and analyses and campaign for alternative policies.

There are also complex problems in engaging with consultation structures set up to implement urban regeneration plans. Activists and community workers involved in independent organisations became to varying degrees increasingly embroiled at negotiating tables in boardrooms, learning fast a different language and culture of business, property investment, planning and city marketing. However, such engagement also carries inherent dangers of incorporation. It makes the maintenance of independence and a critical distance more difficult, as participants come under subtle or (sometimes) direct pressure not to comment or speak outside the boardroom, but rather to keep all such comment within formal negotiations. At the end of the day, any final agreed plans are in part the property of all of those who participated, and it is difficult then to resist or propose alternatives to any policies, regardless of how uneasy or conflicted some activists might feel about the implications of these. Worse, if things go wrong, those involved in the negotiations can become the “flak-catchers” for local anger and disillusionment.

Finally, we might consider the role of action research in this and its own possibilities and limits. The key challenge here is to ensure that it is owned by the relevant community, something that is not at all straightforward. There are complex power issues in the production of knowledge within university and other research institutions, and in ways this is becoming even more problematic with increasing pressures to attract funding and publish in a narrow range of outlets (international journals that rank highly according to their academic impact). There is a broad moral case that at least some research activity should be action-oriented and to some extent “owned” by and useful to those actually experiencing the issues under consideration, and this is something quite different to the pressure and targets at work within the universities. How is this to be achieved?

The key challenge is ensuring that engagement from the bottom-up is carried out in a way that gives ownership of the research to those who are directly affected by the issues under study. This is true for all stages – identifying the research questions, designing the method, entering into critical reflection, making recommendations and disseminating the findings. At the same time, it is important also to maintain the integrity of the research, and that might include arriving at findings that are uncomfortable for some participants or that may lead to some tension or conflict. The hope is that such difficulties can be managed in most cases if the whole project is authentically rooted in the locale and owned by the community. Realistically, however, such conflicts can sometimes prove unmanageable and it may be impossible to progress the project in such situations.

In the case of the research and publications produced by Tenants First, the work carried out was informed by the questions and needs identified through local public meetings, while the analysis was constantly rewritten and reshaped.
through the work of a smaller sub-group consisting of activists plus one or two researchers. Recommendations were then debated and agreed among the wider steering group of Tenants First itself (also made up of activists with some input from researchers). This latter process literally took years, but it did produce work that was in a meaningful sense owned by the organisation. The aim of such an approach is to support the emergence of a kind of “counter expertise” from below as against the “officially sanctioned knowledge” of the city coming from above (Nilsen and Cox, 2005). For example, this approach could counter the official narrative that the local authority estates were decayed spaces of little value for which PPP regeneration offered the best medicine. It proposed an alternative – the possibility of imagining alternatives to demolition and regeneration based on recognising the value of what exists and improving on it (the flats complex as home and a space of working class traditions of community solidarity) (Tenants First, 2006). Interestingly, the University does not in practice acknowledge the existence of such work, which in any event has a collective authorship.

Overall, the social-movement repertoire (Tilly, 2004) will benefit from a diversity of inside and outside strategies – street-level protest when that is most appropriate, engagement in negotiations and boards at other times, funded developmental work, unfunded independent networks, etc. – and informed recognition of the different gains and limits of each of these different modes of praxis. Research can help with this latter aim and in identifying and articulating demands for policy and other changes in the external environment, but it will be most effective if all stages of the research process are “locally owned”, something that takes time (even years) and a level of voluntary commitment (at least as long as universities and research institutions remain unsupportive of such fluid and uncertain approaches that are unlikely to win major grants). All of these approaches – inside, outside, research – bring their own considerable challenges, but each is relevant to the bottom-up struggle for a living city for all people. The stakes could not be higher.

References


10 Typically, “research active” is defined in terms of numbers of academic articles in refereed international journals, academic books and chapters in academic books.


About the author

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