Putting it all back together : After the collapse, what now?

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Introduction

Northern Ireland was created as a separate jurisdiction in 1920 by the Government of Ireland Act of that year. As a result Northern Ireland is often referred to as a place apart within the UK. Ireland politics have been determined by this co-existence of two communities with differing identities and aspirations (Bell 1987, Ogle 1989, Gray 1994, Boal 1996). Some writers refer to the poor housing conditions in the province as one "which lagged behind other UK regions and which merited special attention." (Evason 1980, Brett 1986, Murie 1992, Gray & Paris 1999). The extent of religious segregation that exists in the province is mostly apparent in public sector estates although not exclusively located there. There is no realistic prospect of a significant short term change and new peace walls were being constructed and extended even after the cease-fires were announced in 1994.

In the past ten years the social, political and economic landscape in Northern Ireland has changed considerably. Despite a number of achievements, expectations that the policy landscape would greatly reflect the presence of a local administration, like that in Scotland and Wales, were not realised due to a five year hiatus following the suspension of devolution in 2001. Northern Ireland has been much more generously funded for social housing than other parts of the UK. Owner occupation stands at just under 70% of all housing in the province.

Affordability

One of the objectives of national housing policy in the UK is to provide a decent home for every family at a price within their means. For many years Northern Ireland was seen as one of the most affordable areas for property throughout the United Kingdom and within the island of Ireland. The 2007 Q3 Bank of Ireland/Housing Executive/ University of Ulster house price survey (University of Ulster et al, 2007) showed an increase of 40% over the previous year while the Department of

	Social New Build - Completions	NSM Estimate of Ongoing Need	Backlog - Cumulative
2001/02	1,613	1,500	(113)
2002/03	1,095	1,500	292
2003/04	687	1,500	1,105
2004/05	888	1,600	1,817
2005/06	973	1,600	2,444
2006/07	1,375	2,200	3,269
2007/08	1,004	2,200	4,465
Annual Averages	**1,091**	**1,728**	**638**

Table 1: The Shortfall in the construction of new social housing 2001-2008
Source NI Housing Market Review 2008-2011 NIHE Belfast

	2001	(%)	2006	(%)
Owner Occupied	432,300	66.8	468,800	66.5
Private Rented & Other	49,400	7.6	80,800	11.5
Housing Executive	116,000	17.9	93,400	13.3
Housing Association	17,900	2.8	21,500	3.1
Vacant Dwellings	31,900	4.9	40,400	5.7
TOTAL	**647,500**	**100**	**705,000**	**100**

Table 2: Northern Ireland's Dwelling Stock by Tenure, 2006

Communities and Local Government House Price Index for March 2007 showed that Northern Ireland was the only part of the United Kingdom where house price inflation rose from 48.5% to 50.1%.

The Current Economic Situation

Northern Ireland's economy is in recession with economic growth forecast to remain flat in 2008 and to contract by 1.5% in 2009. Private sector output in Q2, 2008 was 2.2% below the corresponding quarter in 2007. The report emphasizes that Northern Ireland cannot insulate itself from global economic developments.

The rapid growth in house prices has created difficulties for housing associations involved in the delivery of new social housing for rent as they too struggle to secure land for development. In many cases, land cost is now approaching 50% of the cost of a newly built house; compared with land cost in 1993, for example, which was only approximately 9% of development costs. The target to deliver 1,500 new social housing homes each year has been severely hampered by these high costs and problems regarding the acquisition of land for development coupled with difficulties securing the necessary planning permissions in time (DSD, 2007).

Results from the 2006 House Condition Survey carried out by NIHE have been emerging since May 2007 and provide the most recent picture
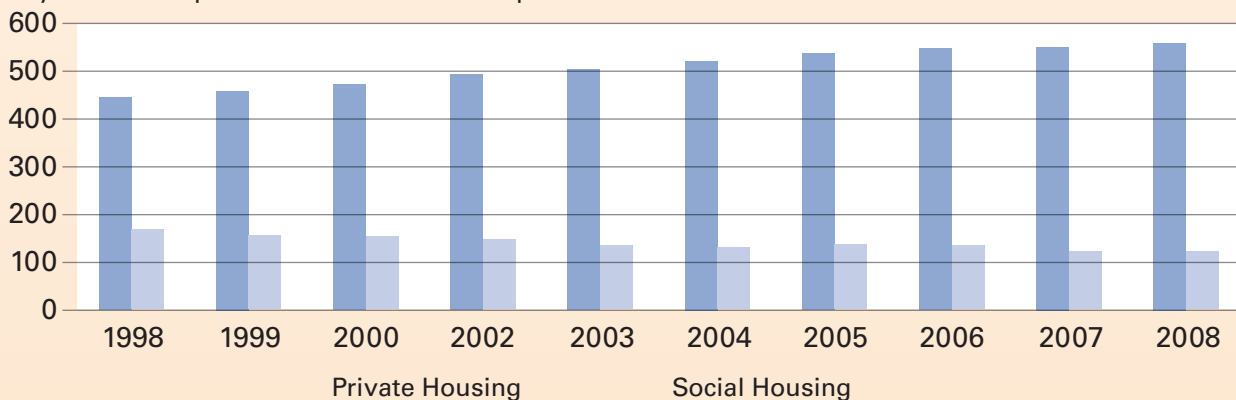
of the characteristics and condition of Northern Ireland's housing stock. In 2006 there were 705,000 dwellings in Northern Ireland – an increase of 57,500 (9%) over the period since 2001.

Dwelling Tenure

Table 2 provides the key tenure related information:

- Significant growth in the owner-occupied sector.
- The continued rapid increase in the number and proportion of private rented sector dwellings.
- The number of tenanted social dwellings has fallen.
- The total number of vacant properties has increased (NIHE 2009)

Figure 1 illustrates the balance between social and private housing in Northern Ireland over the last decade.

Within the social sector, the gradual shift in the balance between Housing Executive and housing association stock continued during 2007/08. Since the House Sales Scheme was set up in 1979, the Housing Executive has sold more than 117,000 of its dwellings. The Scheme has not only provided an affordable route into home ownership for numerous house holds, but also had a significant impact on the overall level of social housing

Figure 1: The Changing Balance of Social and Private Housing, 1998-2008
Source: DSD Housing Statistics

Figure 2: Housing Executive Stock, 1998-2008
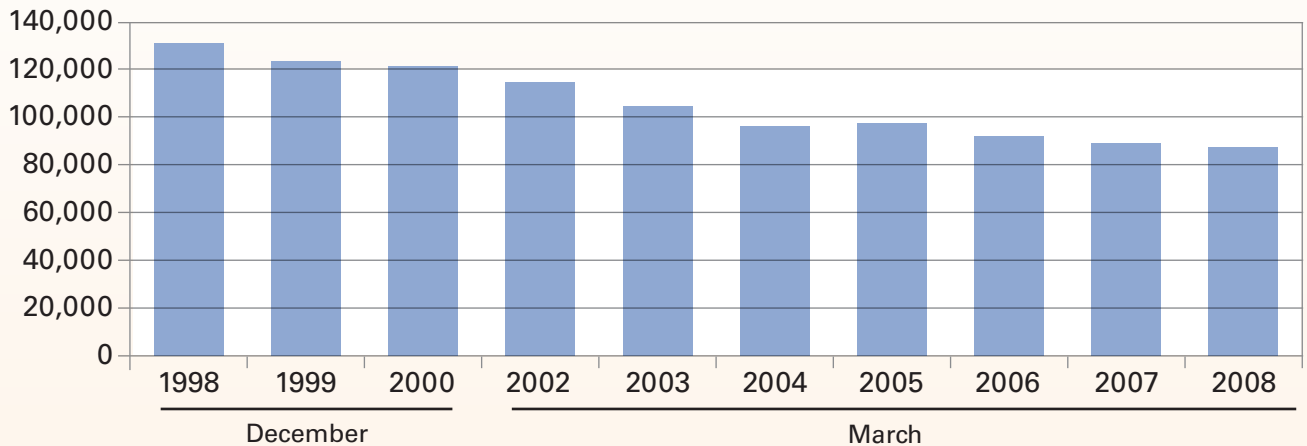
Source: DSD Housing Statistics

stock.

As part of the Housing (Northern Ireland) Order 2003, the provisions of the statutory House Sales Scheme were extended to housing association tenants. Figure 2 illustrates the combined impact of house sales and demolitions on the (occupied) Housing Executive stock.

Mixed Communities

As has been the case in Great Britain, the United States, the Netherlands and various other jurisdictions, creating integrated and sustainable communities has become a key policy concern for governments in the island of Ireland in recent years. One of the main drivers of mixing policy has been concerned about the growing tendency for social housing to be occupied by marginalised households with high levels of unemployment and low incomes, higher than average proportions of children and a high concentration of single parents. With an increasingly multi-cultural population, a number of problems have developed, including some manifestations of hostility towards immigrants within local communities and the challenges posed by (in some cases unexpected) population growth, given the imbalance between housing supply and demand in many areas.

Segregation in Northern Ireland

In Northern Ireland, the specific circumstances and history have meant that research and analysis have focused on issues of sectarian segregation and the potential for creation of mixed religion communities. Given the sensitivities of the issue, the mistrust between communities and the threat of violence and danger have existed for many years. More recently the Housing Executive, as part of its community cohesion strategy, has sought to encourage more mixing within its estates. The Good Friday Agreement in 1998 made a specific commitment to promote integrated housing and

to help people have the right to freely choose their place of residence and be left in peace there (p16). A Shared Future: The Policy and Strategy Framework for Good Relations in Northern Ireland, published by the Officer of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) in March 2005, also highlighted the importance of developing and supporting mixed housing.

The two main areas of development within A Shared Future are:

- to develop shared communities where people of all backgrounds can live, work, learn and play together;
- to support and protect existing areas where people of different backgrounds live together (2.5)

More recently, against the backdrop of devolved Government and difficult decisions about public spending, attention has been drawn to the unsustainable costs of segregation.

Reporting on Deloitte's research findings, the Independent newspaper referred to the housing issues identified:

In housing terms many homes lie empty – and some have to be demolished – although there is housing need in various districts those allocated to them refuse them on the grounds of safety.

Houses and apartments in problem areas can also cost more because of additional security measures deemed necessary.

The report concludes: 'While we recognise the potential to respond positively to the challenge of a shared future and to re-define service delivery, it must be recognised that the timeline for change and benefit realisation is not

insignificant.'

Shirlow and Murtagh (2006) describe the impact of segregation in Belfast in particular, and have also considered the impacts and extent of policy response to the issue. Shirlow and Murtagh also explain that:

'…residential segregation has been a prominent

Table 3: Housing Aspirations

	Mixed religion	Own religion	Don't know/other
2007	80	12	8
2006	79	13	8
2005	78	18	4
2004	80	19	2
2003	72	21	7
2002	74	19	7
2001	66	26	9
2000	70	22	8
1999	73	22	5
1998	71	21	9

Source: Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey, various years.

feature of urban division within Belfast since the onset of the industrial age. However, unlike previous periods of intercommunal violence, Belfast has been scarred by contemporary unrest in a different way. A significant effect of contemporary violence has been the virtual disappearance of neutral zones between segregated places. The subsequent increase in segregation, which has been commonplace within parts of Belfast since the late 1960s, has encouraged a succession of bordering events that have extended the connotation and magnitude of preceding ethno-sectarian divisions.'

An Appetite for Mixing
Although such well-documented and highly obvious patterns of ethno-sectarian segregation in Northern Ireland have tended to receive the most attention, there are examples of relatively mixed communities that have developed organically over a number of years, or maintained a generally mixed character despite the pressure of the conflict. Successive surveys have also suggested that although people do not always vote with their feet, there is a will to live in more mixed environments.

Studies in the Ballynafeigh area (Murtagh and

Carmichael (2005) and Byrne, Hansson and Bell (2006)) sought to identify the factors that helped this particular part of Belfast retain a 'mixed' reputation before, during and after the Troubles.

In their analysis, Murtagh and Carmichael referred to Murtagh's previous research (2000), which identified a number of factors that helped influence mixed housing outcomes:

- Political stability
- Safety
- A history of political neutrality
- The wider geographical setting
- Access to services
- Stable demographics

The apparent importance of stability across a range of factors is interesting in the context of the research in Ballynafeigh, as well as Areema and Rathfriland (Byrne, Hansson and Bell, 2006), where notions of communities in transition were identified. A further common theme arising from Murtagh and Carmichael and Byrne et al's research is the importance of community groups and neutral shared spaces.

Murtagh and Carmichael pointed out that mixed (social) housing estates tended to be concentrated in a belt of mainly rural districts, while Byrne et al identified the particular impacts of the agriculture industry, which facilitated mixing at critical times of year including the harvest.

In both rural and urban settings, length of residence has been identified as an important component in creating and sustaining relationships. In this context, it is useful to take account of a number of indicators of mixed areas identified by Byrne et al:

- Protestant and Catholic residents
- Few sectarian incidents
- Acceptance of cultural symbols and events
- Freedom of movement
- Expression of culture (without fear of persecution)
- Community participation
- Diversity – the presence of different ethnic groups helping to promote a perception that an area is safe and secure

The findings on the need for social interaction were elaborated by a recent report by Hewstone et al for OFMDFM,. The authors of the report found that:

It is not the case that in 'mixed' areas the two communities simply 'live side-by-side'; rather, there is evidence of real integration. Those who live

'apart' in segregated communities have, for the most part, also studied apart and now work apart. Although there is evidence of 'more' extensive social interaction in segregated areas, mixed neighbourhoods had just as much social capital when the quality of interactions was measured. Thus, living in a mixed area does not have to come at the cost of valued social interactions. Our findings lend support to:

- The promotion of policy prioritising the development of more mixed housing in Northern Ireland.
- Initiatives to ensure that contact in mixed areas is not just superficial, but that, where possible, it facilitates the development of friendship bonds between residents from different groups.
- The promotion of shared space and strategies to deal with chill factors.

The Social Costs of Segregated Housing
Segregated housing dictates a more complex relationship between housing supply and demand than integrated housing (Boal 1996). However, segregated housing can lead to more than financial costs as it is argued that segregated residential areas lead to greater community isolation and to community fragmentation (Jarman 2002). Poole and Doherty (1995) also argued that residential segregation can help to cause what was termed by Boal (1982) as "activity segregation".

Despite the peace process, many communities in Northern Ireland still experience fear and subsequently avoid areas dominated by the other religion. Most research has concentrated on the scale and effects of residential segregation. The costs of segregation have been highlighted above; however, there has been relatively little research on religiously integrated housing in Northern Ireland. Murtagh and McDaid (2000) highlighted the financial, housing management and social benefits of mixed housing.

The Problems of Developing Integrated Housing
Social housing providers face difficulty in securing land in high demand areas for all newly built social housing.In Northern Ireland the issue of land is closely aligned with that of territoriality and in 2004, Darby and Knox highlighted the importance of territoriality. Whilst the costs of segregated living and the benefits of it have been outlined above, it is necessary to reflect upon the issue of choice – are those living in segregated areas living there voluntarily or involuntarily? Indeed, many choose to live in segregated areas.

The importance of the ability to exercise choice, i.e.

that people have viable housing options to choose from, in this case mixed areas or segregated areas, has been highlighted by several academics. For example, Boal (1982) stressed the importance of choice over a forced integration policy. Poole and Doherty (1995) also argued that what is more important from a policy perspective are whether there are sufficient choices of a range of social environments to make a voluntary decision possible.

A Sheffield Hallem University team has researched the contribution of housing management to community cohesion.Although segregation was an important concern for many of the study's respondents, opinions varied about: whether it was actually a problem; whether it was an issue that should be tackled; what interventions might be appropriate, and how tackling segregation might promote or undermine community cohesion (Robinson et al., 2004). One housing association Director observed that 'my most sustainable schemes are mono-cultural' (p15). Residential integration was not seen necessarily as essential for integration to take place and reservations with regard to promoting residential integration appeared to recognise that people often live in segregated communities for good reason. Blackaby (2004) also provided a good practical example of how community cohesion can be developed. Here the aims are to:

- Develop and maintain contact with hard-to -reach groups;
- Provide tenancy support to complement the work of other service providers;
- Co-ordinate and promote community development activities (and develop new projects and activities to encourage social and residential integration and cultural awareness);
- Support the communities to move to non traditional areas;
- Forge multi-agency partnerships to tailor services to deliver more effectively to meet specific needs in deprived areas; and
- Provide 'racial equality' and cultural awareness within tenants' and residents' associations (Blackaby, 2004).

Intrinsically, A Shared Future (2005) takes the view that the development of integrated social housing, whilst facilitating increased choice, should not be the main policy driver in newly built social housing, but rather as an add-on through projects in selected areas.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that the future of Northern Ireland's housing market is closely tied up with developments in the world economy. In recent years and particularly in 2007, Northern Ireland's housing market experienced a significant increase in house prices. It will take at least another year for confidence to return depending on wider trends in the world and in the UK economy.

There is no doubt that the future of Northern Ireland's housing market is closely tied up with developments in the world economy. There are increasing signs that the US economy has already entered a more prolonged recession. The dependence of the UK economy on the financial sector makes it particularly vulnerable to the ongoing effects of the "credit crunch".Lenders are more cautious in terms of lending policies and the price of credit has increased. These factors combined indicate a significant downturn in Northern Ireland's housing market, with sustained difficulties for most first time buyers.

Added to this negative scenario is the legacy of the 'troubles' particularly in the social rented sector where ethno religious division is rampant. Northern Ireland has much to do before it becomes an integrated society due to longstanding community divisions that have existed for centuries. Amongst the impediments to a shared society are the territorial divisions that mark A Shared Future (2005) noted that: 'the costs of a divided society - whilst recognising, of course, the very real fears of people around safety and security considerations - are abundantly clear: segregated housing and education, security costs, less than efficient public service provision, and deep-rooted intolerance that has too often been used to justify violent sectarianism and racism. Policy that simply adapts to, but does not alter these challenges, results in inefficient resource allocations.These are not sustainable in the medium to long-term.' In a period when public money is scarce it is important to embrace the goodwill that exists within some communities to create a situation where, in the long term, savings will be made by the abolition of the duplication and the multiplication of service delivery.

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