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# The Imagery and Language of Spatial Consciousness in Planning Within Northern Ireland

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## Introduction

Planning and development in Northern Ireland have long had to deal with a suite of public policy-related tensions that surface as: Northern Ireland and island of Ireland / UK relationships; west of the River Bann versus east of the River Bann (a geographical metaphor for expressing a perceived predominantly nationalist and rural periphery located beyond a unionist urban core); countryside development versus landscape protection; urban versus rural; top-down bureaucratic prescription versus bottom-up citizen-led involvement in the policy process; and departmental independence within the business conventions of a long established and powerful regional Civil Service code *vis-à-vis* local authority assertiveness. The deeper issues that these represent are about the persistence of seemingly intractable ethno-religious divisions, spatial and social equity across the region, how the urban and rural are perceived, the relative weight to be given to new alignments of participatory and representative democracy, and the acceptable shape of public administration in Northern Ireland.

There is, in short, an ongoing struggle by multiple interests to be heard and seen in different modes of planning across time and at varying scales of application. Accordingly, plans and planning policy statements (both official and unofficial) are significant moments in the processes of advocacy, decision-making and action and often convey different messages to varying audiences. These documents draw on dogma, metaphors and rhetoric, and combine carefully chosen visual and written formats to win legitimacy and connectedness with multiple constituencies. Lines, zonings and symbols are placed on maps, and particular perspectives are included or not included in plan texts, while the documentation can seek to secure the representation of selected political, administrative, issue group and organisational preferences along with the achievement of hidden objectives.

In this paper I wish to explore how, across time, some significant spatial dimensions of Northern Ireland have been represented and interpreted by

participants within the regional, urban and rural planning arenas. The paper is structured as follows: firstly, I introduce and illustrate the organising ideas which have informed this critique; secondly, I review the imagery and language of a number of prominent planning publications that over the period since the 1960s have contributed to the Northern Ireland spatial planning discourse; and thirdly, I draw out some of the implications for ongoing research in this area.

### Organising ideas

Much of what planning is concerned with revolves around the shaping of documents that give selected representations of space and place. They may encompass options for action, particular costs and benefits, and arguments for and against proposals.<sup>1</sup> Put simply, these communicative events offer analysis and prescription, but in so doing, they provoke scrutiny, debate and varying critiques around whose interests are being best served. Within Europe this reality is well evidenced by two alternative interpretations of how its macro scale spatial development can be represented: the blue banana (or dorsal) and the bunch of grapes. These images gained notoriety during the 1990s and although they are stylised abstractions of the way things are, they quickly became for some people a contested view of how things might be. The blue banana metaphor presents a simplified metropolitan core–rural periphery analysis of Europe that dismayed those beyond its configuration seeking EU funding assistance, while the bunch of grapes metaphor speaks to spatial inclusion and connectedness—everywhere is on the map. The important point here is that metaphors are being used to capture the spatial imaginary and to aid understanding of one phenomenon in terms of another.<sup>2</sup> These metaphors in the context of Europe are of course heavily power laden, but their organic tone preaches strength (the dorsal) and vitality (the bunch of grapes) to engender acceptance.

What we are dealing with here is communication and, as noted by Schulz,<sup>3</sup> this can only succeed if messages are encoded and formatted in a way that is

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<sup>1</sup> J. Forester, *Planning in the Face of Power* (Berkeley, 1989).

<sup>2</sup> O.B. Jensen, and T. Richardson, 'Being on the map: the new iconographies of power over European space', *International Planning Studies*, Vol. 8, No.1 (2003), 9–34.

<sup>3</sup> W. Schulz, 'Reconstructing mediatization as an analytical concept', *European Journal of Communication*, Vol. 19, No.1 (2004), 87–101.

suitable for perception and information processing. He observes that “every medium has a bias affecting the reception of its messages and transforming the recipients’ modes of consciousness”.<sup>4</sup> In other words messages are shaped in accordance with “the requirements of production routines” or as we might say more prosaically “he who pays the piper calls the tune”. My argument here is that the way planning is represented can affect and transform recipients’ perceptions, preferences and beliefs. Internet dissemination and access reach ever wider audiences, new graphic design tools provide for message enhancement and both communication and reaction create an ongoing spiral of noise over who holds the better argument. Within the sphere of spatial planning the visual and written languages that are used may range from impressionistic representations of policy ideas to explicit policy proposals and they may be designed to demonise, persuade, recruit and control. As noted by the Dutch National Spatial Planning Agency,<sup>5</sup> plans are a favoured means of getting everyone facing in the same direction towards an often abstractly formulated long range goal. It is against this backcloth that I now move on to examine significant elements of the imagery and language of spatial consciousness in planning within Northern Ireland.

### **Regional planning perspectives**

The arrival of town and country planning proper in Northern Ireland is commonly taken to accord with the appointment in 1960 of the Edinburgh-based planner, Robert Matthew, to prepare the Belfast Regional Survey and Plan.<sup>6</sup> The choice by Government of the Belfast Region as the spatial focus for the plan says much, however, about the political economy of Northern Ireland at that time. The longstanding dominance of the heavy engineering and traditional textiles sectors within the industrial structure of the region was clearly changing and by 1960, per capita output had dropped to 63 per cent of the UK average.<sup>7</sup> These enterprises were heavily concentrated in the predominantly Unionist and Protestant eastern part of the region where unemployment levels tended to be lower compared with the western and

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>5</sup> Cited by Jensen and Richardson, ‘Being on the map’, 22.

<sup>6</sup> J.H.Caldwell, and J.V. Greer, *Physical planning in rural areas of Northern Ireland* (Belfast, 1984).

<sup>7</sup> T. Wilson, ‘Introduction’, in R. Harris, C. Jefferson, and J. Spencer (eds), *The Northern Ireland Economy* (Harlow, 1990).

southern, more rural parts of the region, that were predominantly Nationalist and Catholic.

In his final report, published in 1963, Matthew recommended: the imposition of a stopline around the Belfast urban area in order to limit its expansion into the surrounding greenscape and hold its population to around 600,000 by 1981; the development of a new city, subsequently to be known as Craigavon, focused on Lurgan–Portadown; the designation of seven towns within the eastern part of Northern Ireland as centres for major development; and the concentration of industry within the remainder of Northern Ireland into six key centres.<sup>8</sup> Accordingly, the Northern Ireland administration was ready at that time to embrace the British policy orthodoxy of new towns, growth centre planning, and the development of roads and industrial estates, notwithstanding very considerable controversy around these locational decisions and the alleged neglect of the west of the region. Essentially this early strategic planning activity revealed a spatial focus on the eastern part of Northern Ireland.

This early foray into strategic planning was very much a politically driven project and contrasted with the next major effort during the 1970s when the planning governance environment was quite different. A local government reform report in 1970 had advanced an analysis whereby a suite of regional scale public services including planning, roads, water and sewerage should be vested in a central Ministry of Development. This would be headed by a Minister who would be accountable to the Northern Ireland Parliament. A total of not more than 26 District Councils was recommended as a replacement for 75 local authorities. New local government would have responsibility for a range of ceremonial, consultative, representative and much reduced executive functions that would be very different in composition from the rest of the United Kingdom. These recommendations were accepted by Government and were supported by legislation in 1972. In the interim, however, escalating violence and political instability in Northern Ireland generated deep concern in Westminster, and the Stormont-based Government and Parliament were suspended in March of that year. Local government elections followed in 1973 and established a single tier structure of 26 District Councils. Planning functions were absorbed into the Northern Ireland Civil Service within which it was appreciated that the preparation of development plans could not go ahead without an up-to-date regional planning framework.

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<sup>8</sup> Government of Northern Ireland, *Belfast Regional Survey and Plan: recommendations and conclusions*, CMD530 (Belfast, 1963).

In 1975 the Department of Housing, Local Government and Planning published a discussion paper with heavily stylised spatial options related to a regional development framework for Northern Ireland.<sup>9</sup> The imagery of these options was configured along a concentration-dispersal continuum and a preference for a District Towns strategy was indicated. This would result in the targeting of growth to 23 towns in the region, while providing for managed growth in Belfast. The strategy closely followed the distribution of new local government headquarters and, not surprisingly, received District Council acclaim. The Regional Physical Development Strategy 1975–1995 was issued in final form in 1977 and represented a second significant milestone in the history of strategic planning in Northern Ireland.<sup>10</sup> In theory, at least, a more equitable distribution of growth points had been established across the region and the prescription of the Matthew Plan, constructed around solutions for the Belfast city region, had been abandoned. The routines of a Civil Service planning bureaucracy wedded to impartiality, efficiency and effectiveness had secured a more balanced spread of urban-driven development opportunities between a predominantly Unionist east and Nationalist west in Northern Ireland. But, perhaps not surprisingly in the context of the time, the Strategy content said little about the deep sectarian divisions and social inequalities within the region, preferring instead to place reliance upon a methodology of statistical inquiry and evaluation techniques. Nor did the strategy, in common with its predecessor, have much to say with regard to wider spatial relationships beyond the jurisdiction of Northern Ireland. This was a strategy whose spatial consciousness related solely to Northern Ireland and its places, and whose narrative was constructed around regional population, housing, retailing and employment forecasts.

The spatiality of Northern Ireland continues of course to be contested between being part of the United Kingdom and being part of Ireland and while the current constitutional position underlines a conditional continuity of the former, there are very real citizen identities and political aspirations which favour the latter. In this complex world of differential belonging, the representation of space and place is powerfully loaded, words are carefully parsed, and images selectively chosen not least with regard to external

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<sup>9</sup> Department of Housing, Local Government and Planning, Northern Ireland discussion paper: regional physical development strategy 1975–1995 (Belfast, 1975).

<sup>10</sup> Department of the Environment for Northern Ireland, *Northern Ireland Regional Physical Development Strategy 1975–1995* (Belfast, 1977).

linkages.<sup>11</sup> The most recent foray into regional planning within Northern Ireland commenced in 1997 and the spatial strategy was published in final form in 2001 with a time horizon for implementation out to 2025. Popularly known as *Shaping Our Future*,<sup>12</sup> it too has tended to shy away from an analysis of spaces as culturally produced by opting for the relatively safer ground of space as a container within which there are real environmental issues regarding how that particular space is consumed. It cannot, however, be regarded as a 'neutral' container, since technical choices and their representation must genuflect to the power of serious politics. Any external reference points during its preparation related to consultation with relevant authorities in the Republic of Ireland (not its citizens) and appreciation for the strategic potential of the economic corridor between Belfast and Dublin. The transnational positioning of Northern Ireland was hinted at, with mention of the Atlantic Arc of European countries into which the region must connect through networks of transport, telecommunications and energy. This safe representation of European spatial connectedness was taken forward in subsequent progress papers and the draft strategy confidently spoke of 'Creating an Outward Looking Region', with world-wide linkages and important European transport and air connections. This international spatial context features in the final 2001 strategy and indeed is cited in Chapter 4, 'Strengthening Regional Cohesion in a Global Context', as a Strategic Planning Guideline – 'To strengthen and extend European and world-wide linkages'. Island of Ireland cross-border networks of economic co-operation and enterprise are paralleled by equal commitments for cooperation with neighbouring Scottish regions. The interesting point here is that *Shaping our Future*, having dealt with this considerable geo-political awkwardness, then moves on to Chapter 5 and boldly announces 'The Spatial Development Strategy for Northern Ireland'. This and subsequent chapters revert to the longstanding comfort zone of the region as container.

The contribution of high level policy intermediaries can be very significant in helping to challenge a politically driven *status quo*. Accordingly, given the deeply embedded caution of the Regional Development Strategy for Northern Ireland in regard to cross-border and island of Ireland spatial planning perspectives, the subsequent publication of a framework document for

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<sup>11</sup> M. Murray, 'Building consensus in contested spaces and places? The Regional Development Strategy for Northern Ireland', in S. Davoudi, and I. Strange (eds.), *Conceptions of space and place in strategic spatial planning* (London, 2008).

<sup>12</sup> Department for Regional Development, *Shaping our future: regional development strategy for Northern Ireland 2025* (Belfast, 2001).

collaborative action is both timely and significant.<sup>13</sup> This was commissioned under the auspices of one of the six implementation institutions established by the 1998 Belfast Agreement, thus linking it directly to the work of the North/South Ministerial Council charged with deepening co-operation and action within the island of Ireland. It is a document that is designed to operate at two levels: a substantive content related to shared development trajectories, and a further stage in the ongoing process of 'shaping the minds of those involved in spatial development'.<sup>14</sup> Thus part of the analysis examines cross-border cooperation within a wider European context and, through a series of case studies, draws out broader lessons related to economic competitiveness, sustainable development, and economies of scale. The realisation of these prizes, it is argued, depends on strong government leadership and reciprocation, but the politically relevant message is that local identity is not diluted as a result of participation in cross-border initiatives. This is complemented by identification of a collaborative framework that spans networking across multiple organisations, the closer alignment of the business and planning sectors on the island of Ireland, and the relationship between collaborative principles and potential project fields. The project opportunities that are advanced have been well rehearsed and include transport infrastructure, telecommunications, energy, cross-border planning corridor initiatives, tourism, waste management, third level education, health and wellbeing and information data-bases. But what is very important in terms of spatial consciousness in planning is the emphasis given by the authors of this report to the degree of institutional shift that is required to fully realise collaborative outputs and outcomes. The report argues strongly for a directional step-change by the two Governments involving the establishment of a new framework for collaborative spatial planning and infrastructure development.

### **Urban planning perspectives**

The evolution of urban planning in Northern Ireland has tended to mirror practice elsewhere within the United Kingdom, notwithstanding very different

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<sup>13</sup> InterTradeIreland, *Spatial strategies on the island of Ireland: development of a framework for collaborative action* (Newry, 2005).

<sup>14</sup> This phrase echoes A. Faludi, 'The application of the European Spatial Development Perspective: evidence from the North-west Metropolitan Area', *European Planning Studies*, Vol 9, No 5 (2001), 663–675 at 674.

institutional and societal realities. At the risk of being reductionist, it is possible to discern four broad modes of urban planning over the period from the mid 1960s: the urban plan as end-state master plan; the urban plan as champion of change; the urban plan as city make-over; and the urban plan as rule-book. Each genre has adopted its own imagery and language, which in part is a reflection of professional leadership, political imperative, and procedural obligation.

Following the publication of the Matthew Plan in 1963, Northern Ireland embarked upon the modernist project of building new towns—in reality two expanded towns in the case of Antrim and Ballymena, and an enormous infill project (Craigavon) between Portadown and Lurgan that initially was to be extended eastwards towards the then village of Moira. In those days physical planning was viewed as being essentially concerned with the three dimensional design of places and where the contribution of the environmental craftsman was well described in the leading academic textbook of the time, Keeble's *Principles and practice of town and country planning*. In this, town planning was defined as:

the provision of the right amount of land for each use in the right place and on sites physically suited for each use. This includes the proper spatial relationship of homes and workplaces, of homes and schools, of homes and shopping places of various levels, and of homes with places of entertainment both indoor and out; success of course depends at least as much upon the successful arrangement of the town's road system as upon the actual selection of land uses.<sup>15</sup>

The First Report on Craigavon, titled *New City Northern Ireland*,<sup>16</sup> follows closely that prescription and interestingly points to the fledgling status of the planning profession itself at that time. The list of design staff comprised nine architects, four engineers, four geographers and two quantity surveyors along with inputs from landscape architecture, economics, estate surveying, draughting, model making, sociology and clerical support. Planning is not listed as a recognised professional field! The outline plan gives representation to four 'town units' each with space for 5,000 dwellings, served by 'unit facilities' within a half mile of each dwelling, and interconnected by a combination of 'radial pedestrian systems', 'service spines' and 'city distributor roads'. This

<sup>15</sup> L. Keeble, *Principles and practice of town and country planning* (London, 1964), 127.

<sup>16</sup> Government of Northern Ireland, *New City Northern Ireland—first report* (Belfast, 1964).

indeed was the Orwellian language of an authoritarian technocracy, but whose brittleness is conveyed only later in the report when an analysis of capital costs invites comparison with Crawley, Harlow and Stevenage. The subliminal message here, of course, was the need for equality of Government investment by the UK Treasury in England and Northern Ireland, in the context of long-running financial tensions between the local Ministry of Finance and London.<sup>17</sup> Perhaps not surprisingly this plan of immense boldness was not fully realised because of the complexities of the development process, the politics of place rivalries, investment shortfalls, as well as shifting economic trajectories produced by the onset of de-industrialisation which undermined the textbook planned linkages between homes and workplaces.

In Northern Ireland the second genre of urban planning—planning as the champion of change—carried forward some of the design images of its predecessor, not least in the creation of an ordered structure for the urban environment, with its block plan layouts and signature buildings. But the key challenge, notably in Belfast, comprised a massive upgrading of housing and roads infrastructure. This required no small amount of engineering and architectural expertise in framing proposals for action, but in the context of wholesale slum demolition and the delivery of a road-based strategy, including a motorway around the city centre, it was planning that was placed ‘front-of-house’ to defend the integrity of the proposals against strong community protest. These were set out in the Belfast Urban Area Plan in a series of reports that included 18 subject studies, 13 locality studies and seven detailed Changes Maps. What makes the Plan noteworthy is the bold attempt to go beyond mere land use concerns, to embrace a wide range of social, environmental and economic challenges and to recommend implementation that would be aligned with reinvigorated governance structures and a succession of five-year capital expenditure rolling programmes. Additionally and significantly the Plan did take cognisance of the ethnic divisions in Belfast observing that:

Religion, income and class have marked effects upon the demographic structure and distribution of the Urban Area population, resulting in an almost complete absence of integrated living between working class Roman Catholics and Protestants. This voluntary segregation has continued in new Corporation housing estates, though the outer areas tend to more diversified in income structure, and socio-religious groups

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<sup>17</sup> P. Buckland, *A History of Northern Ireland* (Dublin, 1981).

are less apparent.<sup>18</sup>

However, in the Preamble to the Plan it is stated:

It would be presumptuous however to imagine that the Urban Area Plan could be expected to influence religious as well as economic, social and physical factors. Our proposals are designed specifically to facilitate individual and community choice, so that the social pattern desired by the individual and community may readily be built up.<sup>19</sup>

As noted by Boal the facilitation of individual and community choice in this manner becomes a key issue for public sector housing allocation and does not consider the possibility that ethnic factors might at some point fundamentally influence plans.<sup>20</sup> In short, the language of planning at that time gave expression to a spatial reality that previous and subsequent genres have overtly tended to stay well clear of. Arguably, the key difference from 1969 is that a non-interventionist perspective on the competing claims of ethnicity in space has been replaced by a quiet accommodation of the land use interests of 'each side' through facility duplication and the skewed management of sites for housing development. But the subsequent disintegration of Northern Ireland into the mire of the Troubles were most acutely felt in Belfast and prompted, in turn, a marked switch in the spatial consciousness of urban planning through the search for a new set of images and language.

By the 1980s after a decade of civil violence there was considerable political and technical momentum for a fresh start for Belfast and which, as noted by Gaffikin and Morrissey, was based on evidence of an upsurge in private consumer spending, the emergence of services as a feature of post-industrialism, the perceived benefits elsewhere of concentrated and high visibility regeneration, and the need to revitalise the urban core of the city in the face of a trend towards the construction of out of town shopping complexes.<sup>21</sup> The ideology of New Right Thatcherism encouraged planners to work with the market and private sector developers and to embrace the potential of investment partnerships. Thus in 1985 a decision was taken to prepare a new

<sup>18</sup> Building Design Partnership, *Belfast Urban Area Plan* (Belfast, 1969), 22.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>20</sup> F.W. Boal, *Shaping a city: Belfast in the late twentieth century* (Belfast, 1995), 39.

<sup>21</sup> F. Gaffikin, and M. Morrissey, 'The role of culture in the regeneration of a divided city: the case of Belfast, in F. Gaffikin and M. Morrissey' (eds), *City visions*. London, 1999), 164–179, at 165.

plan for the Belfast Urban Area that would fit with this prevailing *zeitgeist* and which on its adoption in 1989 was deemed highly symbolic, as Greer and Neill argued, of a city that is normal, neutral and governed with the consent of its citizens.<sup>22</sup> The fact that the published Plan was introduced by the then Direct Rule Minister for the Economy, Richard Needham MP, speaks to that agenda with his Foreword eulogising Belfast as a city of heritage and a quality natural environment, a city with a distinctive flavour, a city with scope for exciting new developments along the River Lagan, and a city with opportunities for living, working, shopping, investing and enjoying.<sup>23</sup> However, Greer and Neill suggest that what resulted was in fact:

a designer plan, produced on high quality paper, with clear uncluttered text and state of the art graphics. A suite of positive images of newly built or planned developments is projected, counterpointed by anaemic-toned panoramas of the city as it is today. This selective rendition of Belfast taps into the pride of people about the industrial past of the city while indicating that the future will be brighter, and any reference to the sectarian divisions with which the city is riven is studiously avoided in both text and photographs.<sup>24</sup>

Essentially this genre of urban planning fits well with what Holcomb has dubbed 'the city make-over'<sup>25</sup> where Belfast has been remade to fit a promotable image with quality of life and consumption at its core, but where for most residents it remains unchanged. Subsequent planning statements for Belfast City Centre, for example, *Vision for the Future* and Laganside Corporation Annual Reports, carry forward their messages of 'vision', 'pride', 'optimism', 'success' and 'legacy'. In the latter case, a solicited endorsement from the OECD,<sup>26</sup> regarding the contribution of private-co-investment in riverside regeneration, is used to provide powerful anchorage for a new global reach consciousness that the claimed transmogrification of Belfast is much more

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<sup>22</sup> J.V. Greer, and W.J.V. Neill, 'The plan as symbol: a case study of Belfast', *Pleanail: The Journal of the Irish Planning Institute*, Vol.10 (1991), 90–112.

<sup>23</sup> Department of the Environment for Northern Ireland, *Belfast Urban Area Plan 2001*, 3.

<sup>24</sup> Greer and Neill, 'The plan as symbol: a case study of Belfast', 99.

<sup>25</sup> B. Holcomb, 'City make-overs: marketing the post-industrial city', in J.R. Gold and S.V. Ward (eds), *Place promotion: the use of publicity and marketing to sell towns and regions* (Chichester, 1994), 115–31.

<sup>26</sup> Laganside Corporation *Annual report 2006 / 2007* (Belfast, 2007).

than mere boosterism. For urban planning in a city of international notoriety, these were indeed heady days to imagine and realise powerful possibilities. How dull by comparison, therefore, is the current mode of urban planning that is tied to the managerialism of site specific development control.

The completion of the Regional Development Strategy for Northern Ireland in 2001 has paved the way for a substantial re-configuring of the development plan system whereby new plans are required to be in broad conformity with the regional strategy. In essence this means that the Housing Growth Indicators for each local authority area as determined by the strategy are to be translated into a raft of local plans through the zoning of specific sites. The calculus takes account of built development from the appropriate base year, existing un-built planning permissions and windfall allowances. At the same time a raft of site and wider area policy measures are superimposed on the development plan to ensure that other sectoral development opportunities remain focused and that other land is protected against inappropriate development. What this amounts to is a process of micro-scale land management to facilitate development control decision-making and where the site related policies in plans together with the content of Planning Policy Statements can be drawn upon to defend decisions contested at appeal or in the High Court by way of judicial review.

The Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan 2015 is typical of this latest genre of urban planning endeavour, extending across six district council areas—unlike its predecessor, which had regard only to the Belfast Urban Area footprint of these districts and the surrounding greenscape setting.<sup>27</sup> This is the urban plan as rule-book, with its detailed explication of ‘designations’, ‘proposals’ and ‘zonings’ linked to mind-numbing inventories of ‘key site requirements’, ‘urban design criteria’ and ‘standards’. There are long lists of boundaries, sites, places and alignments, with the plan for Belfast District alone running to over 350 pages. The shift from the vitality of spatial consciousness in earlier urban planning genres, as illustrated above, could not be starker in this new world of colourless anonymity. The imagery and language of these previous plans could certainly stir emotions, but the current genre represented as rule-book simply precludes imagination, debate and engagement beyond a very narrow grouping of vested interests.

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<sup>27</sup> The Planning Service, Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan (BMAP) 2015, Belfast, Draft Plan (Belfast, 2004).

## Rural planning perspectives

The phrase ‘a living and working countryside’ is one that exerts powerful resonance across the island of Ireland and which can readily be found in contemporary Government rural planning statements. It is of course a contested phrase with multiple meanings and diverse preference constituencies. The current Northern Ireland Regional Development Strategy affords a complete chapter to rural Northern Ireland and sets out explicit policies to ‘help maintain a vibrant and self-generating rural community’.<sup>28</sup> Headline measures include new housing development to meet local housing need, housing choice and affordable housing, giving recognition to the continued development of long established rural communities, helping rural communities develop strategies for economic and social regeneration, improving accessibility in rural areas, facilitating rural enterprise in appropriate locations, sustaining a strong agricultural and agri-food sector, and managing the use of rural resources to achieve a more sustainable pattern of development. This language, at first sight, is a positive endorsement of a rural future with opportunity, except that the last measure introduces the scope for a wide and sweeping presumption against development in the countryside. The last sentence of what is an upbeat chapter reveals the preferred thrust of regulatory planning: ‘Where adverse cumulative impacts are identified, difficult decisions will be required at the local level in relation to the control of individual proposals’.<sup>29</sup> Essentially this chapter articulates the enduring tension in planning for rural areas between the aspirations of broad based rural development and environmental protection. Countryside dwellings as a significant and topical category of development can be used to illustrate the nuances of imagery and language embedded in planning for a living and working countryside.

An engagement by policy makers in Northern Ireland on the matter of new countryside dwellings and rural planning policy extends across the past 45 years and has produced a steady succession of consultation initiatives and revised policy guidelines that have drifted between tighter and more relaxed control.<sup>30</sup> The language and visualisation used to communicate this enduring

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<sup>28</sup> Department for Regional Development, *Shaping our future: regional development strategy for Northern Ireland 2025*, 99.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>30</sup> See M. Murray, ‘Consultation, new countryside housing and rural planning policy in Northern Ireland’, in M. McEldowney, M. Murray, B. Murtagh, and K. Sterrett (eds), *Planning in Ireland and beyond: multidisciplinary essays in honour of John V. Greer* (Belfast, 2005), 169–86.

‘spatial problem’ includes ‘unbalanced development’, ‘development pressure’ and ‘bungalow blight’. The planning vocabulary has adopted the phrase ‘ribbon development’ to describe unacceptable roadside development patterns, but its provenance is rooted in the preservation of the countryside movement in 1930s metropolitan Britain, a movement which led to the *Restriction of Ribbon Development Act, 1935*. As noted by Cherry, the practical application of this legislation urged planning authorities to secure grouping in depth.<sup>31</sup> But over time this planning phrase has been appropriated as a pejorative description of much countryside housing and as a reason to refuse planning permission. In a *Design Guide for Rural Northern Ireland*, published in 1994, official visual advice is offered on the acceptable siting of a countryside dwelling.<sup>32</sup> Its essential limitation, however, is that the image idea of preferred set back and grouping relates to a farm dwelling in the context of adjacent farm buildings. Notwithstanding health and safety issues, it is a very selective and exclusionary representation of housing demand in the countryside and does not speak to the non-farm rural dweller. It also ignores physical factors around buildability, where roadside housing may well be a necessary response to extensive poor ground conditions, for example within the area of the Lough Neagh basin.

Research and, in particular, academic research can contribute powerful images to rural planning debates in order to consciously steer policy directions, perhaps in accordance with an underlying ideology. Thus research published on behalf of one Northern Ireland issue group, Friends of the Earth, claims that 60% of the rural population live within easy walking distance (one mile) of an existing town, village or hamlet; 87% live within three miles by road; 82% within five minutes drive time; and 98% within ten minutes drive time.<sup>33</sup> The underlying policy message is that new building in the future should be directed towards existing settlements in order to avoid ‘creeping suburbanisation of the countryside’.<sup>34</sup> As a visual expression of the way things are, the mapping analysis nonetheless masks the fluidity of personal movement and belonging across the settlement pattern. In contrast, rural housing action research on community preference and environmental responsibility carried out in conjunction with the membership-based organisation, Rural Community Network, indicates

<sup>31</sup> G.E. Cherry, *The evolution of British town planning* (Leighton Buzzard, 1974), 103.

<sup>32</sup> Department of the Environment for Northern Ireland, *A design guide for rural Northern Ireland* (Belfast, 1994).

<sup>33</sup> M. Roy, and G. Ellis, Rural settlement patterns and access to development land: developing the evidence base (Belfast, 2008).

<sup>34</sup> L. Fagan, ‘PPS14—no threat to rural communities’, *Rural Network News*, 48 (2009), 6–7.

that rural people appreciate the value of having housing demand being met across a spread of local villages, neighbouring towns and open countryside. The data indicate strong locality bonds around family, kinship and friendship; the importance of self building a house on own—family land; purchasing a site as an affordable route into local home ownership; and modest dependency on purchasing a house from a builder or a developer.<sup>35</sup> In short what this points to, as noted by Jensen and Richardson, is that ‘spatial representations in words and images always carry the potential for normative understandings and power-laden strategies’<sup>36</sup>

### **Implications for future research**

The imagery and language of spatial consciousness in planning within Northern Ireland, as elsewhere, is very much a struggle over policy and operational preferences. This is conducted through the careful use of official language and imagery bolstered, in turn, by unofficial interventions with their own narratives, endorsements and visual signatures. The former may be regarded as giving expression to the levers of a cautious and, arguably, an uncertain control, while the latter through its attention seeking ambitions gives momentum to framing the discourse, influencing opinion and changing mindsets. As illustrated above, there are longstanding debates in regional planning around Northern Ireland as a spatial container and the need for transjurisdictional collaborative governance; in urban planning around its purpose and agenda; and in rural planning where the countryside is to be valued equally for its living and working communities and environmental quality. Each dimension attracts varying levels of official and unofficial engagement that is often conditioned by a sensitive reading of what constitutes the ‘right moment’.

In terms of future research trajectories the implications of this conclusion point towards the need for better understanding the construction, role and reach of image and language representations of planning challenges and policy responses in regional, urban and rural spaces. Firstly, it is important to more fully understand how spatial planning as a political, technical and administrative activity creates messages, manages the dissemination of information, and

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<sup>35</sup> M. Murray, J. Greer, D. Houston, S. McKay, and B. Murtagh, ‘Bridging top down and bottom up: modelling community preferences for a dispersed rural settlement pattern’, *European Planning Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (2009), 441–62.

<sup>36</sup> Jensen and Richardson, ‘Being on the map’, 27.

appropriates or rejects information from external interest groups, professional bodies and the academy. And secondly, we need to extend the compass of research beyond the professional planner as the subject of qualitative investigations into the world of mediatisation processes where the skills of graphic design, journalism, photography, public relations and marketing have a profound bearing on the construction of practical narrative strategies of the way things should be. The varied imagery of rural Ireland, for example, has long been mobilised for industrial development and tourism promotion,<sup>37</sup> in order to create new shared perceptions, identities and understandings. The challenge posed in this paper follows on from that media tradition and asks for better understanding of how through selected imagery and language the policy community definition of space and place realities seeks to incorporate, modify, reject or control the social representations of that reality.

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37 See, for example, L. Gibbons, *Transformations in Irish Culture* (Cork, 1996).