

Design in sprawl

How the New European Bauhaus can act as a catalyst of transformation in our existing suburbs

by Michael K. Hayes

The detachment of suburbia from design

The European metropolitan population is growing (United Nations, 2019). While this shift has often been framed as a process of urbanisation, more accurately, it may be described as one of suburbanisation (Segal and Verbakel, 2008, p. 6; Keil, 2018, p. 496); a process defined by a combination of non-centralised populations, economic development, and urban spatial expansion (Ekers et al., 2015, p. 22).

Yet despite its ongoing proliferation and prevalence, for much of the past sixty years, urban design practice has largely ignored or overlooked the suburbs as a space of potential investigation or intervention (Trancik, 1986, pp. 54-57; Southworth and Owens, 1993, p. 271; Stanilov, 2004, p. 3; Forsyth, 2014, p. 260). As a result, suburbia is a spatial condition detached from the theoretical structures which might advance its critique and re-evaluation (Vaughan et al, 2009, p. 485); a phenomenon pejoratively dismissed but rarely engaged with as a space for systematic study in the field of urban design (Schwarzer, 2000; Whitehand and Carr, 2001). Much of this development is therefore divorced from urban design thinking, instead considered a formal outcome of the intersection of economics, construction industry standards, and an array of minimum space guidelines (Southworth and Ben-Joseph, 1995; McDonnell, 2013).

Due to the urban design discipline's general disengagement with the present spatial condition of suburbia, a corresponding language of nuance (which might describe these places), as well as shared modes of analysis, are notably lacking. In the absence of such a framework, one of the more significant challenges for practitioners of urban design is in formulating an appropriate response to existing instances of suburban form (Ståhle and Marcus, 2009, p. 1). The New European Bauhaus project has the potential to redress this imbalance by investigating methodologies by which suburban space might be better understood and by proposing new way to design in existing suburbs.

Why sprawl?

The term 'suburb' is one which suggests a multitude of meanings within a range of contexts (Larkham, 2004, p. 242; Harris, 2010, p. 25). Rather than assume, however, that such broad application makes the task of understanding suburbia a near impossible one, this observation should instead be taken as instructive regarding the variety of

suburban types which exist. In other words, although existing suburban forms might share certain similarities, not all are alike (Scheer and Petkov, 1998, p. 298; Vachon et al., 2004, p. 40; Keil, 2018, p. 498).

The focus of this submission is on one particular category of suburban form: sprawl. A reason for focusing our attention on sprawl may be founded on the position of sprawl within the urban design literature of the past decade. The impact of sprawl with regard to environmental, economic, and social dynamics is well documented (EEA, 2006). From a solely urban design and planning perspective, sprawl presents challenges in terms of the provision of infrastructure and social services, transport and accessibility, and additional energy costs (Redmond, 2012, p. 8). Many of these issues are related to the shift, represented by sprawl, in the way cities consume space (Berghauser Pont and Haupt, 2007, p. 60).

A literature has emerged in recent years which attempts to ‘retrofit’ sprawl as a means of tackling some of the problems which this type of settlement form poses (see Dunham-Jones and Williamson, 2009; Tachieva, 2010; Talen, 2011; 2015). Much of this work is concerned with individual projects or sites, eschewing the wider district and metropolitan scales (Chang, 2011; Talen, 2012, p. 952). Furthermore, it is distinctly US focused, with the morphology of sprawl in Europe largely overlooked.

Notably, too, a certain extent of this research, and its proponents, approach the subject from a New Urbanist point of view.¹ As such, a normative bias – one which frames all sprawl as solely negative and in need of ‘repair’ – is implicit in a number of studies. Little attempt is made to engage with or analyse the existing spatial properties of sprawl (Scheer, 2017, p. 177), while familiar tactics, regardless of context, are employed repeatedly (Williamson, 2009, p. 728). There remains, therefore, an opportunity to develop a means of urban design intervention in sprawl, founded on an understanding of sprawl according to its distinct spatial characteristics.

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1 New Urbanism is an urban design movement which emerged in the USA during the 1970s and 1980s, formally coalescing in the 1990s with the establishment of the Congress for the New Urbanism (CNU) in 1993 (Trudeau and Malloy, 2011, p. 425). It is a neo-traditional approach to urbanism which favours the forms of nineteenth-century urban villages and twentieth-century streetcar suburbs (p. 426). Principles included in the Charter of New Urbanism (CNU, 2001) explicitly state the ‘reconfiguration of sprawling suburbs’ while New Urbanist designers have promoted infill development as a means to mitigate sprawl and ‘urbanise’ existing suburbs (Garde, 2004, p. 160).

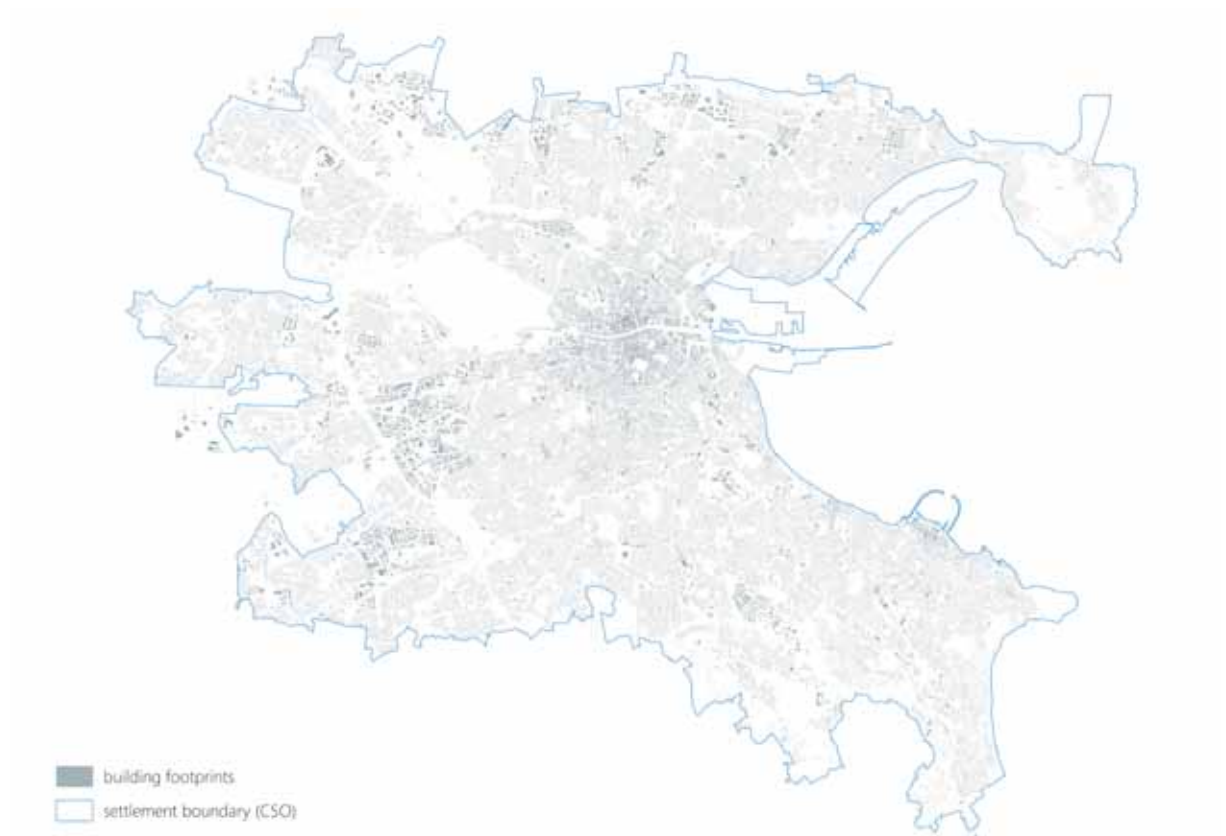


Figure 1: Map of building footprints (via OSI) within the settlement boundary of the contiguous Dublin metropolitan region (via CSO). Source: M K. Hayes (2020).

A case study for sprawl: Dublin

The contiguous Dublin metropolitan region is suggested as a potential study area for future investigations. Reasons for the selection of Dublin are due to a number of aspects. Notably, in a European context, the region has been documented as a case study for suburban sprawl due to a proliferation of poorly planned, decentralised development (EEA, 2006).

More locally, concerns regarding the expansion of the city into its surrounding hinterland have been particularly pronounced since the Celtic Tiger period (approximately from the mid 1990s to the late 2000s) in national media (see for example, Humphreys, 1999; McDonald, 2001; O'Brien, 2001; McDonald, 2002; O'Brien, 2004; McDonald, 2006), academic research (McCarthy, 2004; Williams et al., 2007), and architectural discourse (O'Toole, 2006; RIAI, 2007). While this era may have been briefly halted due to the effects of the 2008-09 global recession (Kitchin et al., 2014), more recent evidence would suggest that a propensity for low-density, highly dispersed forms of urban growth has continued to the present day (Redmond et al., 2012; Hamilton, 2019; Taylor, 2019).

Dublin, then, is a place closely associated with forms of sprawl.

In the contemporary context, this reputation serves to frame – to some extent – public conversations and policy initiatives regarding a perceived need, largely in the central urban core, for higher densities and/or taller buildings as an antidote to previously fragmentary, fringe development. The primary message is that, in order to prevent sprawl, is it necessary to build upwards (Lawton, 2017, p. 23).

This perspective is flawed, however, both regarding its conflation of building height with urban density and in its assumption that the inverse of sprawl – and its effects – might be represented in such simplistic terms. These inaccuracies have not, unfortunately, prevented such a view from being utilised in the context of Irish planning policy. Perhaps most significantly, this narrative has featured as part of the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government's (DHPLG) nation-wide removal of generic building height limits, previously set by local authorities; one of the stated purposes of this guidance being 'to assist in counteracting sprawl' (DHPLG, 2018, p. 5).²

The evidence would therefore suggest that key decisions regarding Dublin's spatial future lean on a negative perception of sprawl, assumed by a national discourse, without any reference to or analysis of its existing spatial properties. Consequently, there exists the potential to develop an urban design approach that reframes the position of sprawl within the metropolitan region as a means to better ground and shape the form of its prospective transformation.

2 For a range of views regarding this policy, and more general interpretations of the 'tall building versus sprawl' narrative, see: Kelly (2018); McNeive (2019); Ní Aodha (2019).

A brief outline

In summary, three main concerns regarding the design of sprawl have been identified:

1. Urban design, as a discipline, has tended to overlook suburban form and, as a result, is lacking a coherent framework for suburban design research and practice.
2. Sprawl, as a type of suburban form, presents a particular range of environmental, economic and social challenges – all of which may be linked to its spatial properties. Recent attempts to ‘repair’ sprawl have failed to engaged with its unique characteristics.
3. Dublin is a city notable for its extensive areas of sprawl. Assumptions – rather than evidence – regarding sprawl and its effects are influencing nation-wide planning policy. There is an absence of alternative visions for how the city might develop.

In response, a corresponding set of three recommendations is suggested to underpin the work of the New European Bauhaus:

1. A framework for analysing and assessing suburban form according to its qualitative spatial properties is required.
2. To develop this qualitative framework, a network of design research institutes is required – supported and funded at a national and EU level. Dublin is suggested as the location of one of these institutes due to its established sprawling properties. Other locations may be selected due to their own unique spatial conditions.
3. Based on the knowledge gained through this research network, individual urban design projects can be developed to demonstrate the embedded transformational potential of sprawl across Europe.

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