

Professor Kathleen Lynch, Equality Studies Centre, School of Social Justice, University College Dublin, Ireland speaking at the launch of the book, January 2008

Forty years ago, in 1968, the people of Northern took to the streets to engage in civil protests over the denial of basic civil rights. One of the most basic rights that they fought for was the right to housing; they wanted to bring an end to injustice in public housing provision. Forty years later we are gathering in Dublin for a similar reason. We are here to challenge the government and Dublin City Council over their failure to provide decent public housing to those who are urgently in need of it at a time in Ireland of unprecedented affluence.

The failure to provide housing for people from St. Michael's estate as promised over many years, highlights the limitations of democracy in Ireland today. The democratic wishes of the people should be sovereign but they are not in this case, as the needs of vulnerable citizens, including large numbers of children, have been sacrificed in the interests of profit. The public-private partnership system has failed; when there is no profit for developers and no money to be made from development by the City Council, then housing for those in need is abandoned. But surely the right to a home should not be contingent on the profit margins of developers? Surely the City Councils must not be beholden to developers and large corporate interests to fund basic services?

Housing is a basic human right and an integral right in protecting a person's right to life and a livelihood. Without a safe house and home of one's own, other human rights are in jeopardy, including the rights to bodily safety and security, to stability, and to access vital services such as education.

It is time that we had a national debate about housing, in particular it is time that we distinguished between Property and Housing; housing is a right,

property is a luxury. Housing is not an optional extra; it is the most basic need upon which the development and survival of children and families is contingent. For those with excess resources housing is indeed a market commodity, it is 'property', part of an 'investment portfolio'. For most people however, housing is a basic need, a right that needs protection by the state, something that cannot be left simply to market forces. Within a market-led system, access to housing becomes contingent on the ability to pay and for those who cannot pay there is no secure, quality housing.

5. It is time to renew our commitment to public housing, to ensure that housing for individuals and families who are in need is not make contingent on the profit margins and share prices of corporate interests. It is time the democratic wishes of the people took precedence over the influence and interest of powerful financial interests within the state.

Preface to book by Professor Kathleen Lynch

The Right to Housing as a Right to Life

The 'right to housing' is an integral element of the 'right to life': without a safe, secure and inviolable dwelling, not only is a person denied one of life's basic goods, she or he is denied access to the realisation of other rights, including the right to health, education, and privacy, and the right to found a family, and to engage effectively in economic, social and public life. The right to adequate housing is enshrined in many international legal instruments to which Ireland is party, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 25) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ESCR) (Article 11). Moreover, the UN monitoring committee for the ESCR has spelt out what is meant by 'adequate housing': it includes having

security of tenure, the availability of services and infrastructure, and housing which is affordable, habitable and accessible (Drudy and Punch, 2005: 183-4).

Given the size of the country, its considerable wealth and the relatively small population, there should be no shortage of housing, or of land for housing, in Ireland. Yet, there is, especially in our cities. That this shortage is an orchestrated one serving powerful commercial and political interests (because of the failure of successive governments to act to protect housing needs as recommended by the Kenny Report over 30 years ago) is well known. There is both ample space and resources to house everyone in Ireland if the political will was there to do it.

One major reason why housing needs have been neglected is because housing has not been treated as a basic human right requiring full State protection. Rather, housing has been defined as a 'commodity'; it has been equated with 'property' (exemplified in the proliferation of *Property Supplements* in all of the major newspapers and property-related programmes on television), an investment like any other, something those with excess wealth can 'invest in' and profit from, often with the assistance of the government, through a host of tax concessions. In contrast to the proliferation of property supplements, there are no Housing Supplements, and little attention is paid to those who cannot afford to buy a home of their own. Yet, a sizeable and growing minority of people in Ireland cannot afford to buy a home. Using national data, Drudy and Punch (ibid: 113) estimate that about 250,000 persons and 140,000 household were in housing need in 2005, and this did not take account of persons, such as disabled persons, who may be inappropriately housed.

This book is about those people who cannot afford to buy a home of their own and who live in public housing; it shows how their housing needs have been redefined and undermined in the new millennium as fewer and fewer

publicly-owned houses are built. In particular, it tells the story of a working-class community's engagement with the representatives of the State in defending their rights to housing in an urban re-generation context.

The story that is told is profoundly disturbing because of the many inequalities it documents in the 're-generation' process, including inequalities in power, resources and capacity between the State and its agents, and local communities. It explodes many myths about public-private 'partnerships', demonstrating in particular the deep lack of respect by the State for 'poor people on rich land' who are being 're-generated'. While agents of the State did engage with the local community in St. Michael's Estate about their housing needs in planning their 're-generation', when the community's needs and wishes did not synchronise with strategic political interests in freeing up publicly-owned land for 'development', the community's democratically expressed needs and interests were set aside.

The community did not accept their relegation to the periphery however; they fought back for the right to engage in designing and planning their own housing. So this book is not just about inequalities in wealth, power, status and influence as exemplified in the housing field, it is also about solidarity and hope. It is about the power and capabilities of people who are organised, and who use their democratic voice effectively to be heard and heeded within the corridors of power. It is a chronicle of hope as much as a record of class-related disrespect.

What is unique about the book is that it documents how the process of 'housing re-generation' works from the inside, from the perspective of those who are being 're-generated'. It is written from the perspective of ordinary citizens, people who only became community activists by accident of history, when they had to defend their right to a home of their own. The insider perspective is provided through the systematically documented experiences of local residents during re-generation. It is a research dialogue between the

author, residents and community workers, all of whom were party to the interpreting and editing of the work. It also records systematically the State's responses to the residents, including engagement, denials and dismissals.

The book is also a rich research resource. With the help of his co-workers and the residents in St. Michael's Estate in Dublin, Dr. John Bissett uses his considerable sociological expertise to critically analyse the process of regeneration from an egalitarian perspective. He documents and interprets the re-generation process, highlighting the power of commercial interests in Dublin city in determining the path of 're-generation'. Using a critical analytic lens, the book systematically documents the way in which the State became beholden to profit-oriented financial interests, at the expense of poorer people in society. It shows, in a very raw form, where power lies in any 'partnership for re-generation' between agents of the state and low-income communities; it rests outside that dyad. Those who exercise most power do not attend partnership meetings about regeneration but they are present at such meetings through the influence they exercise, directly and indirectly, in the funding of urban development and re-development. The book is therefore both a rich source of scientific evidence on how the process of regeneration was negotiated and delivered over several years, and a critical social scientific analysis of that process informed by local resident's understanding. It shows the circuitous routes of power, at times direct and visible, and at other times indirect and invisible.

The book is not only of value as a scientific resource, it is also instructive methodologically in terms of what it tells us about doing research from the inside. It exemplifies the merits of trans-disciplinary study, research that combines insider understanding of a research subject with academic expertise drawing on a range of disciplinary perspectives. It is a rare achievement in this regard.

Trailing the minutiae and micro politics of regeneration, the book also raises profound ethical and political questions for policy-makers and politicians. The voices of those with urgent housing needs are raised outside of their own community asking 'who is taking responsibility in Ireland for protecting the right to housing as a basic human right?'

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