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Regeneration: *public good or private profit?* by John Bisset

**New book shows how discredited PPP model auctioned off
community aspirations to highest bidder**

Written by Dr. John Bisset, a key member of the St. Michael's Estate Community Regeneration Team, '*Regeneration: public good or private profit?*' puts the Public Private Partnership model – which collapsed so spectacularly in the summer of 2008 – under a critical microscope.

Dr. Bisset's book launched on January 19th by TASC/New Island and supported by the Equality Studies Centre, School of Social Justice, University College, Dublin-not only chronicles the experiences of one community fighting for the regeneration of their estate: it also traces the changing nature of the relationship between Dublin City Council and its tenants, and offers a brief history of the urban redevelopment approaches adopted in Dublin.

Above all, however, this is the story of St. Michael's Estate in Inchicore, and the ten-year battle waged by residents trying to secure decent housing for themselves and their families amidst the greatest prosperity Ireland has ever seen. In May 2008, the dying days of the Celtic Tiger coincided saw the residents' hopes for the future dashed for a second time, as Dublin City Council announced that the Public Private Partnership between the City Council and McNamara/Castlethorn would not proceed.

The PPP collapse marked the end of the most recent phase in a story which began in the late 1990s when Dublin City Council (formerly Dublin Corporation) started work on a regeneration plan for its inner city social housing complexes. It consulted with residents and community bodies to establish the type of regeneration needed in each area. The residents of St. Michael's Estate opted overwhelmingly for 'houses with gardens' to replace the blocks of flats on their Estate. The type and size of community facilities needed to support the residents on the new Estate were also agreed, and in 2003 Dublin City Council submitted a plan to An Bord Pleanála for decision.

The Department of the Environment vetoed the plan on cost grounds, advising the Council that the way to deliver social housing in St. Michael's and elsewhere was a "Public/Private Partnership" arrangement with a private developer. The principle behind the market-driven PPP model is simple: the State would trade its land – in this case, 14 acres comprising the original St. Michael's Estate and adjoining Tyrone Place – in return for the building of a set number of social and affordable housing units and community facilities by a developer (McNamara/Castlethorn) on the site. In return, the developer would be allowed to build a set number of private residential units and retail facilities which they could sell or let on the open market. The PPP conditions also allowed developers to make a 'cash offer' to the State in addition to building the agreed social housing and facilities.

The net effect of this decision was to substantially increase the proposed housing density in each area in order to maximise the profit from the sale of private housing units, since this would be required to fund the projects.

Residents from many of the complexes, and in particular St. Michael's Estate, resisted this development but were eventually constrained to agree to new high density plans without provision for 'houses with gardens'. The vast majority of the original flats had already been demolished and it was hoped construction would start in 2008.

However, the market-led nature of the PPP model rendered the entire regeneration of St. Michael's Estate dependent on housing market projections. Each PPP project is contingent on prevailing economic conditions. As the recession unfolded, it became apparent that McNamara/Castlethorn would be unable to reap the anticipated profits from the private element of the scheme, and would therefore not proceed with the project.

Ironically, the residents of St. Michael's thus fell victim to the end of a property boom in which they had never participated.

St. Michael's Estate, together with a growing number of other City Council flat complexes, bore the brunt of what Bisset describes as the Council's shift towards an 'entrepreneurial' ideology. The entrepreneurial ideology involves the stripping down, privatisation and – in many cases – sale of State assets and services, not only in housing but also in sectors such as health and education.

As well as examining the changing City Council approach to regeneration, Bissett analyses the power structures governing the relationship between the State and local communities – a power structure with which residents of St. Michael's became very familiar as they struggled to assert a democratic and egalitarian model of regeneration in the face of the market-driven considerations underlying the PPP process.

John Bisset neatly juxtaposes and deconstructs the two different models of regeneration, noting that:

"We can discern quite clearly from the experiences in St. Michael's Estate two very different approaches to regeneration. There is the paradigm preferred by the State and characterised most succinctly in the model of Public Private Partnership. This can be described as the 'market' or 'for profit' model of regeneration. And then there is the model put forward by tenants and community groups on the Estate which was characterised by the idea that the regeneration of St. Michael's estate should be about providing substantial social housing and a range of accessible public services and facilities. This community-driven approach could be entitled the 'Public Good' model of regeneration, and has at its core the values of equality, democracy, social justice and sustainability".

While the theoretical and practical problems surrounding the PPP model are at the heart of this book, Bissett also provides a detailed history of the

various regeneration plans advanced for the estate, starting in 1998 when residents agreed to the total demolition of St. Michael's. He takes us through 2001, when residents agreed to the City Council's 'Moving Ahead' plan (subsequently rejected by the Department of the Environment in favour of the PPP model), and the story then moves on to 2005 when the PPP tender process was formally advertised in the Irish Times. In 2007, McNamara/Castlethorn were chosen as preferred bidders, and less than two years later the St. Michael's PPP project collapsed along with four other McNamara/Castlethorn PPP projects.

The timeliness of this publication is illustrated by recent events: just before Christmas, a sixth PPP regeneration project – Croke Villas in the North Inner City – collapsed, leaving another community devastated. There has also been recent speculation that the McNamara-led consortium Leargas – selected as preferred bidder to build the new Thornton Hall super-prison – may seek to extract further cash concessions from the Government. And the PPP story is set to rumble on: the government's own PPP website (www.ppp.gov.ie) lists over 80 outstanding projects ranging from housing to roads and courthouses to schools.

John Bissett has clearly shown that the private sector cannot deliver the fundamental services required to sustain communities through PPP's. His book also illustrates the extent to which the State relied on PPP's to deliver social housing while abjectly failing to develop a 'Plan B' to secure the future of communities in the event that the PPP model fell victim to macro-economic developments. ***'Regeneration: public good or private profit?'*** offers an invaluable resource to those engaged in similar projects, as well as anyone interested in the broader issues of equality, justice and democracy in Ireland.

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