



Insider's look at the broken promises of public-private urban regeneration

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Regeneration: Public Good or Private Profit?
By John Bissett
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JOURNALISM THESE days is coming down with acronyms but of all the terms being bandied about, few are as vague and not very descriptive as "PPPs" or public-private partnerships.

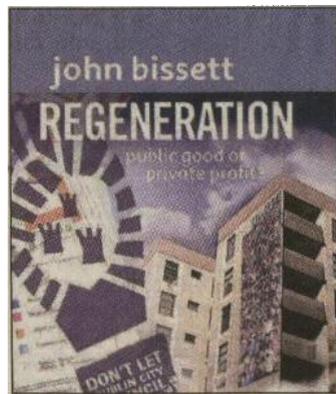
The Government defines PPP as "a contractual arrangement between the public and private sectors, with clear agreement on shared objectives, for the delivery of an asset or service that would otherwise have been provided through traditional public sector procurement".

PPPs were a fair-weather solution to an Irish problem, designed to speed up the provision of infrastructure during the boom years.

The deal was that the State provided land on which developers built a badly needed

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public asset – roads, hospitals, schools – which they then ran for profit for an agreed period. The arrangement meant the State didn't have to provide the large sums needed for big projects, while the developers made handsome profits as the Celtic



Tiger purred on. For the rest of us, the benefits were less straightforward; reports have shown, for example, that new schools built under PPPs are more expensive than the traditional route while partnership projects in health have been slow to materialise.

However, the real flaws inherent in PPPs only became apparent when Dublin City Council tried to offload its responsibility to provide social housing to the private sector by inviting developers to do this work in return for valuable tracts of urban land.

The trick might have worked had the property bubble persisted; as it was, it collapsed spectacularly when prominent developer Bernard McNamara pulled out of five separate PPP projects with the council last year.

In the welter of coverage about McNamara's business affairs, the human story of thousands of

ordinary Dubliners was lost. Communities such as **St Michael's Estate** in Inchicore or O'Devaney Gardens near the Phoenix Park, who had been waiting for years for decent housing and had patiently engaged with the council and the PPP process over long periods, had their hopes dashed.

They were left to continue living in run-down, semi-demolished areas riven by drug dealing and anti-social activities, war zones of social deprivation and official neglect.

John Bissett's book tells the story of the failed regeneration of **St Michael's Estate** from the inside. A community worker with the local drugs taskforce, he joined the group regenerating **St Michael's Estate** in 2001 and has shared the roller-coaster journey of the local community since then through successive plans and broken promises.

St Michael's was built as a mini-Ballymun in 1970 on the site of a former barracks that had turned into a slum. The estate suffered the same problems as its northside cousin as the council placed growing numbers of problem tenants there and social problems multiplied. By the late 1990s, everyone, including the local population, was in agreement that the blocks had to be demolished.

As long ago as 2001, the council published its first plan for the area, with a core recommendation that the blocks be replaced by

houses with gardens. Two years later, however, the Department of Environment threw out the original plan. "It was PPP or nothing," Bissett writes.

There followed years of meetings, plans and disputes, but little actual building.

The council came back with a revised plan for 850 apartments and little social housing, which was rejected by the community and councillors. Eventually, a third plan was hammered out by agreement and expressions of interest were sought from developers.

McNamara emerged as the winner from four bids, but the bell was already tolling for the boom. Last May, after days of denials by the council and the developer to this newspaper, the project

collapsed in a welter of acrimony and mutual finger-pointing.

The result, Bissett writes, was "an extraordinary sense of déjà vu" for those living on the estate. "This was the third time in five years that a plan had collapsed, it wasn't supposed to happen again. Just like the *Titanic*, PPP was supposed to be unsinkable."

But sink it did, and today the local community is struggling again to get the council to take its responsibilities seriously.

Today, just 18 families remain on the estate, but as Bissett concludes, "they have continued to fight tooth and nail for a democratic and egalitarian model of regeneration".

Paul Cullen is an *Irish Times* journalist