SubUrban to SuperRural: Ireland’s entry to the 2006 Venice Architectural Biennale - Irish Tour 2007

University of LIMERICK
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SubUrban to SuperRural, Ireland's entry in last year's Venice Architecture Biennale and widely regarded as one of the key exhibits there, is returning to Ireland for a nationwide tour, commencing in Belfast.

Highlighting Ireland as a global case study in extreme suburbanisation, ‘SubUrban to SuperRural’ is an ambitious project curated by FKL architects that asked nine Irish architectural practices to look ahead at the next 25 years at our preoccupation with living on the land beyond the city's hold, and to arrive at some predictions and possible solutions for the next generation.

The exhibition is intended to offer plenty of food for thought and to spark debate here at home among the general public about how we can improve our quality of life.

Curated by FKL Architects and commissioned by Shane O'Toole, the exhibition’s Irish tour is presented by the Irish Architecture Foundation and Culture Ireland.

A Nation’s Obsession.
One third of all homes in Ireland have been built since 1995, the great majority of them outside the major urban centres. This free-market, unsustainable solution to housing throughout the island has resulted in sub-urban sprawl: choking our urban centres, devastating the countryside and destroying our traditional sense of community. But are there new models for development that have been overlooked?

Curated by FKL Architects for the Irish Architecture Foundation and supported by Culture Ireland, the Arts Council, the Devey Group, the RIAI and Tegral, Ireland’s exhibition in the 2006 Venice Architectural Biennale features nine projects and scenarios that imagine and illustrate a vision of how our SubUrban island can into a ‘SuperRural’ one between now and 2030.

What might an alternative Ireland look like in 2030? Seaside holiday villages that are only visible when occupied, floating cities complete with shopping and leisure amenities and an efficient railway infrastructure that will halve the commuting time across the country are just some of the new and innovative ideas to emerge from the nine Irish architectural practices involved.
SubUrban to SuperRural, widely acknowledged as one of the key exhibits of the 2006 Venice Architecture Biennale, highlights Ireland as a global case study in extreme suburbanisation, but FKL’s well-chosen motto also offers hope that the modern regeneration of nature might replace the fragmentary degeneration of the city.

Richard Burdett, Director of the 2006 Venice Architecture Biennale, said of SubUrban to SuperRural: ‘The context of the planet becoming more urban by the day is extraordinary: for the first time, more than 50% of the world’s population now live in cities. What is fascinating about the Irish story is the erosion of rural space, and the fact that the Irish exhibition has dealt with this issue is polemical. To see this exhibition that hits right on the mark of the Cities, Architecture and Society theme makes me very happy, and I feel it is one of the key exhibits in [the] Biennale’.

SubUrban to SuperRural
Commissioner: Shane O’Toole, Irish Architecture Foundation
Deputy Commissioner: Ciarán OGaora
Curators: FKL architects (Michelle Fagan, Paul Kelly, Gary Lysaght)

One third of all the homes in Ireland have been built since 1995, 80% of them outside the major urban centres. Most of these homes sit on their own piece of land, with gardens to front and rear. Owning your own home is a reality for 80% of Irish citizens: the private house is an immensely successful, free-market consumer product, fuelled by our constitutional protection of the rights of private property, our innate desire to live on the land, our national obsession with the car and a deficit of infrastructure, integrated planning and political will unequalled in the developed world.

The singular solution to housing throughout the island has resulted in sub-urban sprawl - a vast, mono-functional organism that is choking our urban centres, devastating the countryside and atomising our traditional sense of community. It is not uncommon to spend 15-20 hours per week commuting, inevitably by car. In little over a decade, the Emerald Isle, with the sixth lowest population density in the EU, has become a case study in extreme suburbanisation.

Ireland’s population is projected to grow by up to 38% by 2030 and the government’s primary strategic infrastructural response has been to propose yet more roads. In the midst of this rush for more of the same, the absence of any accepted alternative expectations presents a rare freedom to re-imagine Ireland’s future at a time of immense change and evolution within society. Are there new models for development that have been overlooked?
Accepting the reality of road-based infrastructure and low-density housing, can Ireland evolve new conditions in which to live? Conditions offering variety, social integration and environmental sustainability? Can we learn to value land again for its intrinsic qualities and not simply as a site for more houses? Can we create a new condition that is not a pale, less-than-urban condition but a ruddy hybrid of the rural and the urban, something more-than-rural - a *SuperRural* condition?

The emerging generation of Irish architects has been given the challenge to test this paradigm shift through research and the formulation of specific projects that imagine and illustrate a vision of how our *SubUrban*. island can evolve into a *SuperRural* one between now and 2030.

**Michelle Fagan, Paul Kelly and Gary Lysaght FKL architects**

For full biographies of participating architects please consult the SubUrban to SuperRural catalogue

**Boyd Cody Architects: 26+1**
A vast, ex-bogland landscape, as big as greater Dublin, which would be equivalent to the 16th-largest county in the Republic and currently has a population of 0 (versus 1.2m for Dublin), will come free in the midlands Boora Complex by 2030. What would you do, faced with future food and energy shortages, with a new county if you could start from scratch?

**Bucholz McEvoy Architects: Learning Landscape**
A mapping of 19c/20c national schools in the midlands and the work of the Land Commission prompted two thoughts - that big moves can transform the landscape and the life it supports; and everybody lives an urban life now. As Ireland's future lies within a global economy, trading on ideas (which we haven't managed to date), can we invent a 'learning landscape' - something as powerful as Singapore but where, instead of living in skyscrapers, people can continue to live on the land while contributing to the global knowledge economy?

**dePaor Architects: Tall-house**
At current levels of output (20,000 per annum, on average), 500,000 new one-off houses will be built in the landscape between now and 2030, consuming 250,000 acres and a road frontage equivalent to 4 times the coastline of Ireland that would take 10 days to drive past. It's just not sustainable, so why not change the planning laws to ban all footprint extension outside urban areas as and from 2006? From now on, you can only build up or down - not out. Development pressure soon leads to demolition of bungalows and the development of new typologies - tall-houses - that curiously look not dissimilar to the tower-houses of old.
**FKL Architects: Hinterland**
Develop the hinterlands of the national motorway network planned under Transport 21 for housing, so that everybody can live sustainably in the country but still work in town. Individual plots of 1.5 hectares within 3.3km of the motorway would support a house, vegetables and bio-fuel crops to support a local car culture that links to hubs, whence people commute to towns by bus on a motorway/dual carraigeway QBC.

**Henchion+Reuter Architects: Demographics**
If the 1.6m population increase expected by 2030 were concentrated strictly within a 'penta-zone' linking Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Galway, Sligo and Belfast, it could support high-speed trains, similar to those currently in Denmark, that would 'shrink' Ireland - travel time from Dublin to Sligo would go from 3h20m to 48 minutes!

**Heneghan.peng.architects: ElastiCity**
Dublin-London is the world's second busiest air route. Short-haul flights are fuel-inefficient and may not be viable by 2030. Using oil-rig technology, build a bridge from Rosslare to Fishguard: high-speed trains travel Dublin-London in 2.5 hours and on to Paris. The power of this 'magnet' turns Dublin into an elastic, stretched city along the Irish Sea, instead of a blob spreading out over the midlands.

**MacGabhann Architects: Tideaways**
Holiday homes are killing the Golden Goose of tourism. Tideaways, based on an analysis of the Rundale system, includes seasonal homes in the sea on a pontoon that are towed into derelict Donegal harbours for winter storage and hillside 'sinkable' houses on a hydraulic system, linked to the pontoon, that rise and fall with the tides. When nobody's at home, the empty sinkable house collapses on its hydraulic ram, disappearing from sight into the ground. Its grass roof becomes part of the landscape you can walk over.

**Dominic Stevens Architects: Fluidcity**
The Shannon-Erne River system can support a population of 240,000 (compared to the 80,000 of Limerick, Athlone, Rooskey and Carrick today). People live in the countryside, facing the river. Much like the travelling cinema bus today, a river-borne caravanserai arrives once a week, bringing the city to your doorstep...

**ODOS Architects: Vertical Sprawl**
A cautionary tale, told in the form of a comic book from 2030, of what happens when horizontal suburban expansion is no longer possible. In 2030, the sky is the limit...
“Our twin obsessions with the car and owning a house on its own plot of land beyond the city’s hold have reshaped the face of the Celtic Tiger. But the reality forged by our desires is increasingly under pressure, not least from the social and environmental toll of commuting. *SubUrban to SuperRural* highlights Ireland as a global case study in extreme suburbanisation, yet the curators’ well-chosen motto and the provocative speculations of a talented generation of architects offer hope that within the span of a single generation, the modern regeneration of nature might replace the fragmentary degeneration of the city. But be advised: dreams only become reality when society - meaning you, me, the neighbours and our politicians - decides to act in its own best interest.” - Shane O’Toole

http://www.architecturefoundation.ie/

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