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## High-rise as only Answer is Tall Tale

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# High-rise as only answer is a tall tale

It is easy but misleading to claim that Dublin can only have higher density through high-rises

**D**UBLIN IS growing so fast that soon we will have to decide whether we want to continue to grow further out at the edges, or to move up in the middle, thereby creating a high-rise, high-density city centre. "Up or out?" appears to be the choice, and presented like that, it seems like a no-brainer in favour of "up".

Notice the way that "high-rise" was slipped in there with "high density". It is very simple to promote the notion that high-rise is synonymous with high density. But in trying to accommodate its future growth, is it desirable – or even necessary – for Dublin to become a high-rise city?

We have to be vigilant about words and terms from the outset.

To many Irish suburban homeowners, a four-story building can seem tall and threatening.

To most professional planners and urban designers, the six- to eight-storey blocks of the dense inner cities of most of Europe, including our own Georgian Dublin, are normal – and low-rise.

On the other hand, many architects and developers would have you believe that anything up to 15 storeys (50 metres) is normal – or "mid-rise" in the euphemistic language of professional or economic ambition.

In fact, they are all right, but the extent to

which they are right depends very much on the context.

Discussions about density and height need to be very carefully framed to ensure a constant recognition of the range and diversity of the types of places that make up a city. The majority of the suburbs are made up of low-density two- or three-storey buildings in a delicate, if placid, environment, much valued by many – especially those with families – and which needs to be sustained by developments that are consistent with this setting.

There are, however, much more dynamic and robust areas of the city that are tall, dense, mixed and, as a result, very exciting. These are attractive locations for work, recreation and increasingly for homes that offer easy access, minimal commuting and a wide choice of high-quality urban amenities, entertainment, economic opportunities (jobs!) and lifestyles. People who live in these areas have made a choice to accept the lack of greenery, overshadowing and noise in exchange for the benefits that occur wherever density increases in “nodes” around shops, cafes, flats, public transport and services.

Great cities offer choice, so we need to respect the existing character and lifestyles of people who want suburban, or even semi-rural, living. Dublin’s suburbs are already extensive and mostly well-established, so our attention must return to these urban nodes and the inner city, where the challenge is to increase the capacity of the city to accept more people. Do we do this by making our cities denser, or taller? Indeed, do we have a choice and, if so, what is the right choice?

In considering this debate we could do worse than imitate Roman trials which used to try to solve difficult cases by asking the question, *cui bono?* – to whose benefit?

It is not easy. Making the city denser is difficult, messy, time-consuming work. It involves eking out new sites from derelict or under-utilised land, being imaginative in the design of new buildings on awkward sites, threading infrastructure through existing streets, and dealing with the anxieties and objections of lots of neighbours. It is hard, thankless, slow work that is never really finished.

The quick fix, of course, is the once-off, high-visibility, big project – tall and elegantly designed. All of the hard work is done by the private sector developer and it arrives with a satisfyingly large planning contribution fee and the promise of a continuing stream of commercial rates. It is difficult not to be tempted by this easy way out.

High-rise buildings are attractive to developers because of the higher yield from a smaller plot of land. Many architects and developers also like them because of the opportunities for self-aggrandisement. They can seem attractive to insecure public representatives and officials who think that a city needs tall structures to show that they are important.

Admittedly, they are useful for some very specialist types of uses, usually hotels and corporate headquarters, but mostly as “trophy

towers” to house the rich. And that’s it really.

The high-rise building is like the bold child of the city, constantly seeking attention, greedily grabbing every urban issue and claiming that it alone can bring solutions, and that it must be allowed to have its way, while at the same time causing strife all around as it shrilly dominates debate and reasoned discussion.

The alternative, the dense city – of not more than about six storeys high – accommodates family homes, flats and houses, shops, services, amenities, catering, entertainment, education, health care, churches, clubs, Garda stations and pubs, public and private, new and old, grungy and posh. All human life is there. Best of all these buildings join up to make streets. And streets full of life, diversity, chance and choice join up to make cities. And cities make opportunities and excitement and innovation and jobs.

In effect, height benefits a few while burdening many. Density, on the other hand, benefits many while burdening a few.

A city is created business by business, home by home, building by building, decision by decision. It is burnished by road sweepers and signwriters, by shopkeepers and housewives in their daily chores. It is built by bankers and planners and architects and contractors. It is made by many, owned by many, maintained by many, used by many, meaning many things to many people. The city is alive and varied, mostly unnoticed and uncelebrated, but also loved by many.

The future of Dublin is full of the possibilities of diversity, choice and the chance for all of its citizens to look forward to a city where they can live their lives with the freedom to avail of opportunity, excitement, security and pleasure. But the price of freedom is vigilance, and we must always remain alert to the danger of a debate being hijacked by the vested interests of a few who will try to blind us with false hopes and bully us into believing that high-rise development has a critical role to play in solving the challenges ahead. Much more sophisticated solutions are required.

There is every reason to believe that the planning authorities of the Dublin area understand the issues at stake and can assemble imaginative and well thought-out plans and policies to increase the city’s density without succumbing to the temptation to rely on high-rise solutions. The debate has only begun, and we should all take part in it so that all our voices are heard. Confusing high-rise with high density is a mistake that doesn’t have to happen.

**CONOR SKEHAN**  
**and LORCAN SIRR**

# The high-rise is like the bold child of the city, always seeking attention, claiming it alone can bring solutions

Conor Skehan is Head of the Department of Environment and Planning, and Dr Lorcan Sirm is Head of Research at the Faculty of the Built Environment, Dublin Institute of Technology. The issues raised in this article will be discussed at a conference tomorrow at Croke Park organised by Dublin City Council called *Maximising the city's potential: creating sustainable communities in Dublin*



**High-rise buildings are attractive to developers because of the higher yield from a smaller plot of land and the opportunities for self-aggrandisement, but they do not join together to form streets or communities**