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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.

Dublin is growing so fast that soon we will have to decide whether we want to continue to grow further out at the edges, or 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-storey 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 bene? – 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
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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
shriekly 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 by business, by business,
home by home, building by building, decision by
decision. It is incinerated 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 Sirr 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.