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Eroding Planning Powers Leaves us at the Mercy of the Market

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JANE POWERS
GARDENS

A Celtic bee sanctuary – the director's cut

Film-maker Vivienne de Courcy employed the 'queen of wild' to get her back to nature, and she's still buzzing

If you have a typical mowed lawn, it doesn't support a single bee, but a clover lawn can support myriad pollinators," says Vivienne de Courcy, writer and director of the film, *Dare To Be Wild*. "Imagine a clover lawn, and then imagine we could create a hundred of them – a sanctuary for our friends, the bees."

De Courcy's movie, which opens in cinemas in Ireland and Britain on September 23, tells the story of Irish garden designer Mary Reynolds' near unbelievable journey to a gold medal at the Chelsea Flower Show in 2002. Her show garden, *Teammann Si: a Celtic Sanctuary*, built when she was just 28, was an idealised recreation of a Wicklow landscape, and a celebration of nature and Irish mythology.

Her gold medal (one of only three awarded among the 19 show gardens that year), her unique vision, her sincerity and her vivacious charm launched Reynolds into the big-league gardening world with an effervescent whoosh.

Around the same time, de Courcy, an Irish lawyer who had left behind a high-rise apartment in Chicago, was searching



De Courcy, above, commissioned Mary Reynolds, inset right, to create a 'Celtic zen' garden, with landforms that echo the contours of the island, right, insect-friendly lawns, left, and a body of water to reflect the setting sun, far right

PEOPLE OF GOODWILL CAN GATHER IN THE GARDEN TO ILLUMINATE SOLUTIONS FOR HUMANITY. WE DO A LOT OF MEDITATION HERE



west Cork for a place to make a home, unaware that her path would soon cross with the young designer, and that her own life would change dramatically. "I had a bit of money and all I wanted was a place in west Cork where I would have a garden and a landscape to look out on," she says.

"I spent about four years looking and I finally found a place overlooking Roaring Water Bay: a heart-shaped field surrounded by a tall fuchsia hedge, a typical Irish hedge." De Courcy had distinct ideas for the "Celtic zen" garden she wanted at her new home in Baltimore: there were to be no right angles, only soft curves. There was to be a fairy glade and a body of water around the house to reflect the setting sun.

There were to be moulded landforms echoing the contours of the islands in the bay and, importantly, these were to be planted with clover – for the bees.

"My ancient west Cork grandparents were beekeepers: Jeremiah Hurlley and his daughter, Francie, who was studying land husbandry. That was before 1900. She brought the whole concept of beekeeping to her valley, Coomhola Valley" – not far from Ballylickey.

De Courcy sent out her design brief to three "famous international designers". "I'm not going to say who they were," she says. "To say the least, the things that

came back had nothing to do with my design brief. But if you go back to 2004, there was a different trend going on then."

One of her friends, hearing of her frustrations, advised: "You want Mary Reynolds. She is the queen of wild."

So, de Courcy contacted Reynolds, who some days later "rocked up in a green tulle skirt and a massive pair of workman's boots. She was wearing what I call her

"lawn jacket" – acid-green, like an Irish lawn on a summer's day".

After the visit, de Courcy heard nothing until she received drawings in the mail.

"It was beyond my wildest dreams. I just loved it," she says. According to de Courcy, Reynolds called it the garden of great heart. The garden project went on for months, with Reynolds visiting, staying overnight and chatting for hours. Her story

of the rocky road to Chelsea fired her client's already fertile imagination and led – after many years – to the making of the film, de Courcy's first. Ironically, the film took the fledgling movie-maker's energies away from the garden. "It hasn't really gone anywhere in the last six years. I was killing myself on this project."

De Courcy plans to recommit to the garden, which she admits has "gone a bit

haywire around the edges". A hard winter killed the clover, and various other parts need rescuing. Reynolds' reflecting ponds by the house, however, are still beautiful, sending the west Cork twilight back into a glass room so that it thrums with mystical illumination.

De Courcy, who admits to being a bit of a dreamer, is filled with tales of the magic of the garden's making. For example,

during the digging of the fire pit, at the bottom of the property, she says they found the "remains of a 'fulacht fiadh' – where the ancient Celts had something like a cooking zone".

Reynolds is more pragmatic. "It was just a spring," she insists.

Even if it has no ancient origins, the fire pit is central to the garden's evolving folklore. "Many a night that we've sat there till dawn telling tall tales," says de Courcy.

"The passage to it is lined with huge monolithic stones that remind me of the cliffs here in Baltimore. I call them the cliffs of the warrior goddesses. People have to choose one of the monoliths and make a wish – and they all do, even the cynics."

The entire garden, says de Courcy, is a healing place "where people of goodwill can gather together to illuminate solutions for humanity. We do a lot of meditation here". In between the meditation and the dreaming, plans progress for more tree planting. "We're going to plant hawthorn. We'll have them rooted in very young so that they will be moulded by the wind of west Cork."

As for Reynolds, she looks forward to the garden being finished. "I understand it's going to be a forest garden. It needs more trees: that's what the land wants. It will get there in the end."

Grow for it

Roughly speaking

The kitchen gardens at Ballymaloe Cookery School have been given a special award by the European Garden Heritage Network. The jury was impressed that such a successful international "Garden of Eden with a cooking school" was not found in France or Italy, but in "rough Ireland".



Fair trade

The Irish Specialist Nurseries Association's final plant fair of the season takes place today (September 18) at Fota House, Carrigtwohill, Co Cork from 11am to 4pm. It ends a busy season of plant fairs for the association, which has also held events in Dublin and Cork. Admission is €5.



Jane digs...

The gardeners' blog from Gravetye Manor in Sussex, once home of the great Irish gardener and writer William Robinson. It is packed with photos and videos of the goings on at the garden. Visit gravetye Manor.wordpress.com



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Eroding planning powers leaves us at the mercy of the market

There is little evidence to show that the planning system in Ireland hinders the delivery of housing, yet it is regularly blamed for preventing developers from building. Consistent with our political tradition of "anecdote as fact", no credible evidence is ever presented to prove these allegations that the planning system – and indeed, planners themselves – are a blockage.

The elephant in the room is, of course, owners sitting on land with planning permission who won't build, or who won't sell if they can't afford to build. Critics of the planning system are few in reality, yet they are vocal and influential. Diluting the system is a sop to the development industry but challenging these landowners requires more guts.

Most people appreciate the need to use land wisely and to regulate what can be built and where. They realise that good environments will not be delivered by the market on its own: since when does the market have much regard for

local amenities, liveable room sizes, sustainable communities, green spaces, walkability and community safety, for example?

Three recent events have, however, demonstrated the state's unfortunate attitude towards planning and planners.

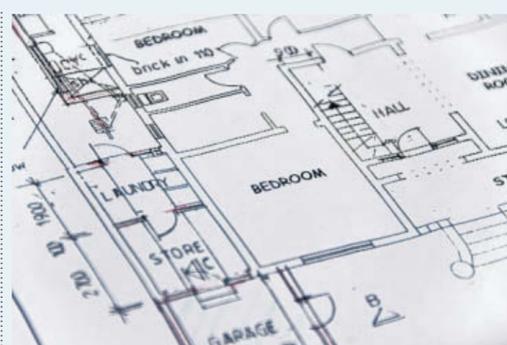
First was the developer-led, civil service-facilitated decision to nationalise (and therefore mostly reduce) minimum apartment sizes. It negates planners' ability

to set standards appropriate to their own area, and indeed negotiate with developers. This exercise was backed up by post-hoc research of dubious quality. When these size reductions were criticised by Dublin city council's own planners, the department's response was to slap their wrists and then gag them, by forbidding comment (personal or professional) on the topic. The second event was the

decision to instigate a review of An Bord Pleanála, the planning appeals board, even though it was one of the few state bodies to emerge with its integrity intact from the heady days of the Celtic tiger. The time and money could have been better spent reviewing the continued self-certification of building, and introducing better consumer protection for buyers of new houses and apartments.

Third was the recent decision to refer all planning applications for more than 100 homes directly to An Bord Pleanála, thereby bypassing the local planning system. This move reduces opportunities for public engagement and ignores an EU directive (2003/35) which says the public must be able to challenge decisions with procedures that are "not prohibitively expensive". The only challenge to An Bord Pleanála is through the High Court, which is hardly cheap.

The disregard for the role of planning is particularly unsettling as much of it emanates from the department in charge of planning (now housing, planning,



There is room for improvement in the state's attitude towards planners

community and local government). This department has a bright minister who knows well that a constant reduction in the powers of planners means we will be left with just market forces. A cynic would think that was the plan.

There's also a notable trend of incremental centralisation of

planning powers and functions back to the department from local government, which will lead to inefficiencies as well as undermine democratic processes and public participation.

Other arguments against planning do not stack up either. The claim that the planning system is slow and bureaucratic

merely looks at costs but ignores the wider benefits. It's also a staffing issue, not one of planning.

The argument that the system is an attack on property rights is also incorrect. If it does anything, planning protects property rights. Also, think of the huge environmental, social and economic costs to society from a lack of planning. It is the absence of regulation that impinges rights, not the other way around.

Then there's the claim that the planning system is elitist, with educated professionals imposing their expertise on the rest of us, sometimes at a cost. What might happen if we applied this logic to "elitist" hospital consultants, for example, or civil servants?

The lurch towards developer-led initiatives and the dilution and centralisation of the planning system is a worrying trend. The housing minister needs to get a handle on the benefits of the system rather than allow the erosion of a valuable, evidence-led and democratic function that can bring big social and economic benefits if used properly.

LORCAN SIRR ON THE HOME FRONT

