



## Irish utopian realism?

Gavin Brown and Angus Cameron

### review of

NAMALab (2011) *NAMALab*. Dublin School of Architecture Press: Dublin. (HB, pp. 215, €20.00, ISBN 978-0956850225)

Following the banking crisis of 2008, which hit the Irish economy particularly hard, the Irish government created an organisation to ‘warehouse’ some of the country’s more troubled building developments – primarily in Dublin. The National Asset Management Agency (NAMA) became the dumping ground for Ireland’s large pool of urban toxic debt. This took the concrete form of a series of buildings in various states of completion and/or disrepair to be ‘managed’ by the state. In practice this means holding onto them, preventing them from falling down or being squatted and eventually selling them off to recoup as much of the lost capital as possible. Similar schemes have been used in other countries (USA, Spain, Greece, etc.) in an effort to prevent large scale bankruptcies, protect strategic sites and generally to prevent urban decay. Not all such countries, however, have an equivalent of NAMALab.

Entirely unrelated to NAMA itself, NAMALab is an ‘architectural and urban research unit’ established jointly by the Dublin School of Architecture and the Dublin Institute of Technology in 2010. Created originally as a vehicle for final year architecture students, NAMALab grew into something more akin to an urban political movement – a bold attempt to (literally) redesign the responsibilities of the state in the interests of the Irish people. The book

reviewed here records the history and outputs of NAMALab during its brief, but productive and provocative existence.

NAMALab's mission was at one level very simple: whilst all these buildings are in state hands, put them to good use rather than simply leaving them empty. More than that, however, NAMALab also sought to engage the public's imagination in the process of urban reinvention – democratising both architecture as a collective public practice but also the Irish state's response to the financial crisis. As such, NAMALab wrote a manifesto that goes far beyond a few interesting architectural projects. The manifesto consists of five statements (I2-I3):

- 1 – to make the spatial reality of NAMA transparent to the public,
- 2 – to present information in order to stimulate debate for a broader social change in Ireland,
- 3 – to look beyond the economic value of NAMA's assets,
- 4 – to design alternative propositions for these sites that will benefit society,
- 5 – to declare that Architecture can no longer be slave to short term speculation.

That architecture students should place their own discipline on this list might be expected. However, this also places NAMALab – clearly knowingly – in a long tradition of visionary and campaigning architectural and urban planning theory – from the early garden cities movement, through the likes of the Bauhaus and Le Corbusier, to the advocates of the post-modern urban forms. Unlike these earlier movements, however, NAMALab addressed a very real and imminent urban problem rather than an exercise in blue-skies urban thinking. And because of the scale of the problem (NAMA's assets in 2010 were valued at €72.3 billion) and the significance of Dublin to the Irish economy as a whole, NAMALab's architectural intervention in the city was simultaneously an intervention in the national political economy of Ireland.

Despite this, at one level, NAMALab could be read as no more than a local thought experiment – an interesting and timely, but ultimately futile tilt at the narrow-minded bureaucracies of the Irish state. The casual way in which NAMA itself seems to have completely ignored NAMALab certainly suggests that the project lacked political purchase. But bigger questions remain. Whatever its fate in Dublin, does this model of architecture-led social redevelopment have possibilities elsewhere? Can the narrow cast of urban value – market-based real estate and nothing else – be broadened as their manifesto suggests? Does this really represent a different way of thinking about the urban economy?

The NAMALab portfolio showcases proposals for the renovation of buildings in seven areas of Dublin, ranging from the city's retail and business core, through areas where earlier urban regeneration initiatives had failed or stalled, to the inner suburbs and satellite towns. The designs propose an eclectic mix of residential developments, business premises and community resources of various kinds. Most respond to the imagined needs of the city and its population in a time of austerity; while a minority appear to yearn for the heyday of the Celtic Tiger and propose 'business as usual' solutions. There are competing utopian visions at work here; and, between them, the proposed architectural interventions draw on different aspects of Irish politics and culture, past and present.

Elizabeth Gaynor proposes a 'community house' between the heavily gentrified area of Smithfield and the more established, socially mixed communities of Stoneybatter and Grangegorman. Her vision is for a meeting place, a site of informal education, where these diverse communities can interact and learn from each other to devise strategies for inclusive social progress. This facility, mixing student accommodation, a coffee shop, and after-school clubs appears to owe a debt to older traditions of religious urban settlements, just as it looks to the future.

A very different vision is offered by Wendy Adams' proposal for a 'house of entrepreneurship'. Responding to growing unemployment in Ireland, and acknowledging a trend towards self-employment as a response to redundancy, she designed a 'one-stop stop' for business incubation. Although clearly intended as a practical response to the hardships of austerity, this proposal seems to still be framed by the individualised aspirations of the boom years.

In contrast, Teresa Carro's proposal for a new 'ethnic market' on the least prosperous stretch of O'Connell Street relies on a different economic model. She envisions a cooperatively run space bringing together small traders from different cultures. This proposal seeks to acknowledge, celebrate and capitalise on the increasingly diverse populations that were attracted to Dublin during the boom. She too seeks to foster a space of interaction and encounter across social difference, and relies on the cooperative model in the hope that this allows competing interests to be held in balance.

Some of the most playfully critical proposals amongst the NAMALab portfolio are those that imagine new uses for sites in the Dublin Docklands, a symbol of the pretensions of the property boom. The unfinished shell of the intended new headquarters of the Allied Irish Bank is turned into a public art gallery displaying the substantial art collections of major corporations in Paul O'Sullivan's

imagination. Kenny Ward seeks to make the Docklands productive in new ways by turning the Grand Canal Dock into an urban trout farm.

Ward is not alone in seeking to foster productive urban agriculture and stimulate local food production within the city. There are proposals for urban farms and community gardens integrated into other developments. In contrast to the excessive consumption of the boom years, several architects prioritise the development of new, multi-purpose facilities for recycling. The linear temporalities of accumulation are reworked in these proposals in ways that reimagine the focus of the Irish economy and its relationship to the consumption of natural resources. Two projects proposed for Dublin Bay seek to foster new relationships with the local environment in other ways. Rachel Cribbin's design for Booterstown Marsh encourages the city's inhabitants to slow down and appreciate the fragility of this marshland environment and the rhythms of the migratory birdlife that gathers there twice a year. On the north shore of the bay, Breffni Greene imagines means of revitalising the Dublin tradition of sea baths from the late 1800s with a new series of saltwater bathing pools at Clontarf.

As all this variety suggests, NAMALab's experimentalism tends to run counter to any more unified vision of what a revitalised Dublin might be. Both the individual projects and the book cataloguing them carry a similar tension – are we trying to restore a lost prosperity in interesting ways, or are we looking to go in a different, more inclusive and more sustainable direction altogether? It would, of course, be ridiculous to expect a student project to resolve such a question – even one as enterprising as this and with considerable academic and other support. And if NAMALab have not found a solution, at the very least they have posed the question in a more interesting, incisive and public way. They are not the first to have done so – as noted above there have been other architecture-led redevelopment projects. But at a time when the future direction of many Eurozone states is in question, as indeed is capitalism itself, NAMALab's cautious urban utopianism is an important reminder that there are more imaginative possibilities than simply 'business as usual'. The failure of the Irish state – in the form of NAMA itself – to even engage with, let alone support, NAMALab speaks volumes about the signal lack of imagination in government.

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