3. SPATIAL JUSTICE AND HOUSING IN IRELAND

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The right to housing is internationally recognized, as by the United Nations, whose conventions have been ratified by most national governments (Edgar *et al*. 2002). In consequence, housing is often considered within a social justice framework that is concerned with inequalities in rights across people, differentiated by class, gender, race, and so on. But housing can also be considered from a spatial justice perspective; that is, considering the inequalities and disparities between places (Soja 2010). Whereas social justice seeks a redistribution of rights and resources across people, spatial justice seeks a redistribution between locales. Of course the two are strongly aligned, with poor people living in poor places (Pringle *et al*. 1999), yet similar groups of people living in different places can have markedly different experiences in terms of the quality of housing units and access to basic utilities; where one lives or works can affect access to social goods and life chances (Dorling, Chapter 1, this volume; Kearns, Introduction, this volume). These spatialized economic and social inequalities are rooted in the structural and territorial processes that underpin capitalist economies, and widen under conditions of crisis, austerity and neoliberal policies as adjustment mechanisms are applied (Agnew, Chapter 2, this volume; Harvey, in Morrissey, Chapter 11, this volume).

In this chapter, we examine social and spatial injustices with respect to housing in Ireland, focusing on three concerns. The first is social housing, examining access to such housing in general and the provision of habitable and safe units given the collapse in regeneration initiatives. The second is the phenomena of unfinished estates and substandard private housing stock. The third is the issue of mortgage arrears and negative equity in the aftermath of the collapse of the Irish economy and property market. In the final section we examine why these social and spatial injustices are likely to persist given the structural forces of austerity at work in Ireland that reproduce and deepen social and spatial inequalities.

Social housing

Throughout the twentieth century Irish local authorities were important providers of housing for lower income families and individuals (Drudy and Punch 2005). Over time, the tenure itself has become stigmatized, as outlined in the recent Government Housing Policy Statement:

> Housing in Ireland has been characterised by a persistently hierarchical structure for several decades. This paradigm of housing has private home ownership at the top, with supported home-ownership (tenant purchase of local authority housing, affordable housing) next, self-financed private rented accommodation further down, and State supported rental accommodation at the bottom (rent supplement/ social housing tenancies). This structure and the value judgement that underlies it – which implicitly holds that the tenure which must ultimately be aspired to is homeownership – has had a considerable role in leading the Irish housing sector, Irish economy, and the wider Irish society to where they are today (DECLG 2011c, 1).

However, social housing also has many benefits for its tenants, including relatively low rents, (generally) greater security of tenure, and for most tenants a permanent home within a community where they have strong family and neighbourhood connections.

Access to social housing has reached crisis point in Ireland in two main senses: there is not enough of it, and what there is is often in very poor condition. Both are clear expressions of social and spatial injustices in housing provision within the state. With respect to the amount of stock, there are two primary issues. First, the total amount of stock has been dramatically reduced in recent decades as a result of neoliberal housing policies, including the sale of housing stock (privatization) and prioritization of private market support measures (Hearne 2011). In 1961 social housing comprised 18% of all residences; in 2011 this figure had been reduced to 8% (129,033 units) (CSO 2012c). Second, there is increasing demand for social housing due to dramatic household growth over the past 20 years, coupled in more recent years with the economic crisis that has seen unemployment rise to over 14%. The number of households in need of social housing has thus increased from 43,684 in 2005 to 98,318 in 2011 (see Table 3.1), in large part because

TABLE 3.1 Housing Needs Assessment 2011 (Housing Agency 2011, 12)

HOUSING NEEDS	**98,318**
Homeless persons	2,348
Travellers	1,824
Persons living in accommodation that is unfit or materially unsuitable	1,708
Persons living in overcrowded accommodation	8,534
Young persons living in institutional care or without family accommodation	538
Persons in need of accommodation on medical or compassionate grounds	9,548
Older persons	2,266
Persons with a disability	1,315
Persons not reasonably able to meet the cost of the accommodation they are occupying or obtain suitable alternative accommodation	65,643

households are occupying properties they cannot afford, many of which are substandard and are leased by amateur landlords (in 2011 74% of landlords managed just one property; Sirr 2013). This crisis of affordability is also revealed in the numbers of households in receipt of rent supplement, a payment to those who cannot afford private rented rates. 97,260 households were receiving rent supplement in late 2010, an increase of 63% in the previous three years. Spending on rent supplement rose from €70 million in the mid-1990s to €500 million in 2010.

Table 3.1 also demonstrates that homelessness is a growing problem. The Housing Needs Assessment of 2011 revealed that the number of homeless households had risen from 1,394 in 2008 to 2,348 in 2011. Furthermore, there were 3,808 people in accommodation for the homeless in 2011, of whom 1,648 (including 457 children under the age of 15) were in emergency accommodation (Housing Agency 2011, 12).

Much of the social housing that the state has retained is generally acknowledged to be in poor condition. Many local authority estates located in Ireland's most disadvantaged urban areas suffered from inadequate and ineffective local authority maintenance and management and intensifying social and economic disadvantage in the 1990s. They came to be characterized by substandard housing conditions, social problems, high unemployment, drug addiction and associated gang-related crime, and low education participation rates. Tenants and residents of the estates campaigned for physical and social improvements, expressing a strong commitment to their local community (Bissett 2008; Fahey *et al.* 2011; Hearne 2011). The perceived solution from 2001 onwards was Public Private Partnerships (PPPs) that were intended to leverage the rising value of the estates' prime development land to provide new social housing stock. PPPs entailed the transfer of the public land to a private developer who could build and sell owner-occupier housing and commercial/retail units in return for providing a reduced amount of new social housing and some community facilities on the remainder of the site, with, in some instances, a social services fund (Hearne 2011; Redmond and Hearne 2013). This reflected regeneration trends across Europe, with urban renewal focusing on entrepreneurial, market-led approaches that would create social transformation (gentrification) centred on replacing poor people with higher income newcomers (Van Gent 2010).

Indeed, all aspects of planning and development in Ireland became market- and developer-led, underpinned by a neoliberal ethos and entrepreneurial practice (Kitchin *et al.* 2012; Mahon, Chapter 4, this volume). The use of PPPs for regeneration would, it was argued, create a better social mix, diminishing concentrations of social and low-income housing (DEHLG, 2005). A National Regeneration Programme was developed in this period primarily based on private finance from developers (although there was considerable exchequer funding in Ballymun), comprising Limerick, parts of Dublin City and regional towns including Sligo, Dundalk and Tralee. These were supplemented with state-funded area-based social inclusion programmes implemented through national anti-poverty schemes, notably the community development programme, and youth and education services (Fahey *et al.* 2011).

However, the financial and property crash of 2008 revealed the extent of over-reliance of the regeneration projects on private sector funding and a booming housing market. As property prices plunged, the private residential and commercial aspects were no longer deemed economically viable by private finance, and the PPP projects collapsed as private developers withdrew from the contracts. Only one project had been completed at the time of the crash (Hearne 2011). This left thousands of local authority tenants living in substandard conditions and many hundreds permanently relocated in preparation for regeneration (see Table 3.2 with regard to eight Dublin estates). Conditions in the estates subsequently deteriorated further, including severe structural problems such as sewage invasions, mould and dampness causing health problems, and serious antisocial behaviour as a result of emptying of the estates in preparation for regeneration (see Figures 3.1 and 3.2).

TABLE 3.2 Occupancy rates on PPP regeneration estates in Dublin City, 2008 and 2013 (Hearne 2011, 2013)

ESTATE	ORIGINAL UNITS	UNITS OCCUPIED JULY 2008	UNITS OCCUPIED MARCH 2013
Croke Villas	87	38	17
St Michael's Estate	346	14	0
St Teresa's Gardens	346	300	108
Charlemont Street	181	141	70
Bridgefoot Street	143	0	0
Chamber Street/ Weaver Court	60	2	0
O'Devaney Gardens	278	178	50
Dominick Street	198	108	62

Unfinished estates and substandard, newly built housing stock

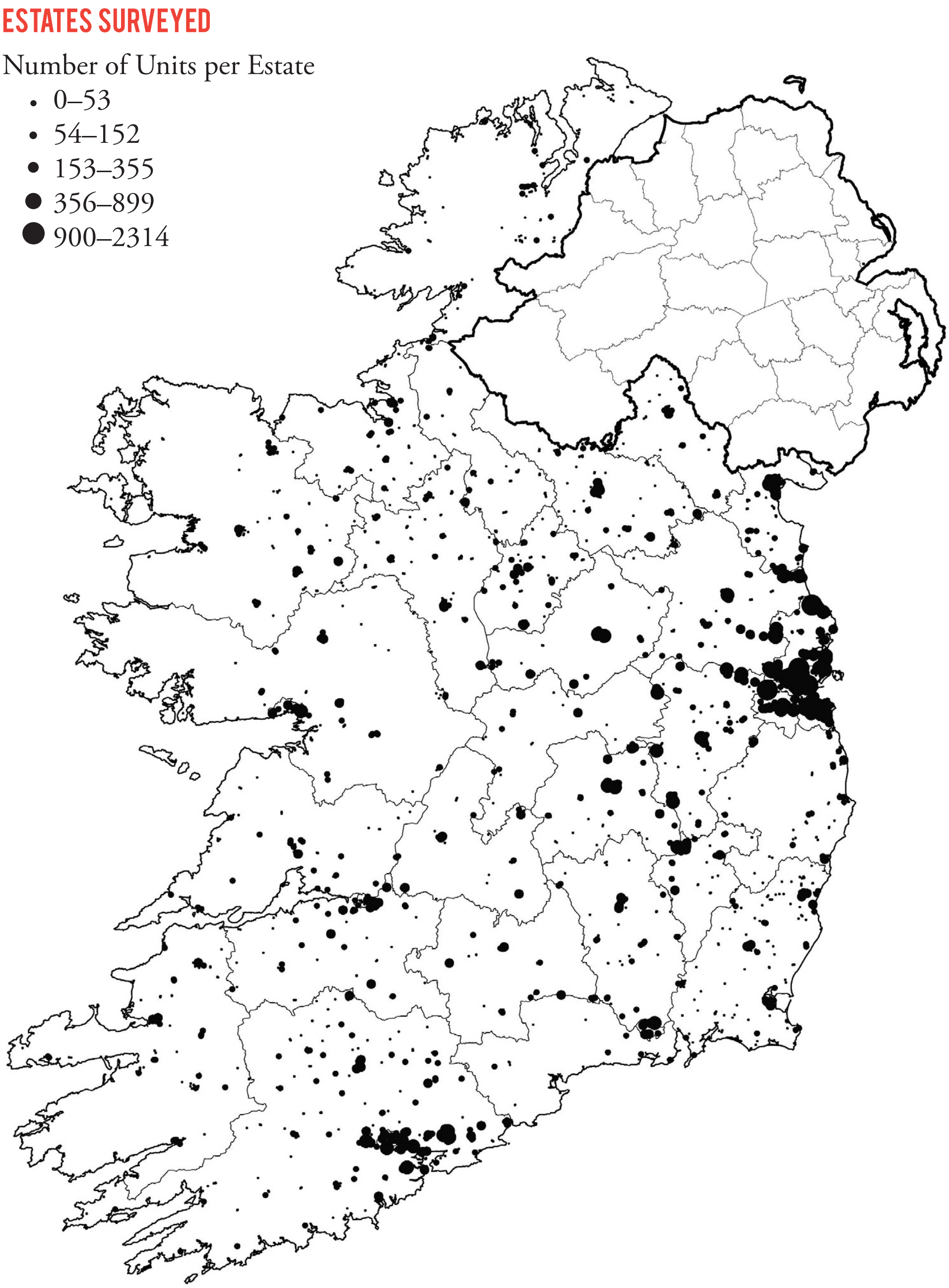
At the height of the property bubble in Ireland, the country was experiencing a building frenzy. In 1993 21,391 new units were built; this grew steadily year on year to peak at 88,419 new units in 2006

FIGURE 3.1 Living in half-empty estates: St Teresa's Gardens local authority estate in Dublin's inner city (photograph by authors)

FIGURE 3.2 Living in substandard conditions: sewage invasions in Dolphin House local authority estate, Dublin's inner city (photograph by authors)

Pic low res

FIGURE 3.3 Locations of unfinished estates in Ireland (DECLG 2011a)



Source: DoEHLG, National Building Agency

(DECLG 2010). As the economy and market started to turn, development continued, with 78,027 units being completed in 2007 and 51,724 in 2008. Moreover, this additional supply was surplus to demographic demand (Kitchin *et al.* 2010). With house prices falling and too many units *vis-à-vis* households, the Irish landscape sprouted what were colloquially termed 'ghost estates' (McWilliams 2006; see Figure 3.3). In October 2011, the Department of Environment, Community and Local Government, in its National Housing Development Survey, reported that there were 2,876 documented unfinished estates in Ireland, present in every county in the state (DECLG 2011b). There were 122,048 units on these estates, of which 18,638 dwellings (15%) were recorded as complete and vacant and further 17,872 units (15%) as incomplete. 2,066 unfinished housing developments still required building work in terms of finishing off units or completing services such as roads, footpaths, lighting and sewage treatment. Of these, 1,822 developments were recorded as having no current building activity. The 2012 survey appeared to show a significant drop in the number of unfinished estates, to 1,770, but this was principally achieved by changing the definition of what constituted an unfinished estate, excluding those with issues of oversupply only (Kitchin 2012). In fact, very few estates were dramatically different in material terms one year on, beyond being tidied up rather than completed and areas under construction being fenced off.

Those people who had bought off the plans at the height of the boom or before the market started to nose-dive often found themselves living on estates that did not match their vision for their new home and neighbourhood. Instead, they occupied estates that had issues of vacancy and/or incompleteness, both of which produced a series of ongoing health and safety issues (Kitchin *et al.* 2014). Vacancy encouraged antisocial behaviour and vandalism, with empty units being used for parties, brothels, the selling of drugs, squatting, and so on. Incompleteness includes the lack of pavements, poor road surfaces, sewage contamination, poor water quality, unsecured construction materials, open excavation pits, uncovered manholes, partially completed buildings that could be unstable, no street lighting, no open or play areas, and isolation from neighbours. For estates in rural areas, in particular, there are issues over access to services such as schools, crèches, medical centres and public transport. In cases where an estate management company is meant to be in place to manage the services, low levels of occupancy make such companies unviable, meaning that service provision is patchy or non-existent (Mahon and Ó Cinnéide 2010). Moreover, residents in these estates are living with the stress of an uncertain future with regard to works being completed, massive negative equity (in excess of 60% from peak), and a reduced sense of place and community.

In addition to the issue of unfinished estates, it has become clear that there are build quality issues with respect to many housing units built during the boom. Some units are substandard in terms of build control compliance and many are noted for their poor soundproofing, lackadaisical finishing, and quick deterioration. Building control and standards were deregulated in Ireland in 1990, with local authority planning enforcement undertaking inspections on only 10–15% of sites and not at all stages of development. Developers and builders self-certifying building standards compliance, coupled with a high-volume housing boom that demanded 'build a lot, fast', led to corners being cut on many developments. Two of the highest profile cases are Priory Hall in Dublin and the Gleann Riada estate in Longford. In the Priory Hall case, 187 apartments were deemed unfit for human habitation due to serious fire hazard breaches. In late 2011, all the residents were ordered to vacate the units until such time as the problems were fixed. Over 18 months later, the residents were still living in temporary accommodation, while required to pay mortgages on homes they could not occupy; their plight was resolved only in November 2013. In the Gleann Riada case, an entire apartment block was demolished in mid-2012, having never been occupied. The houses in the estate have problems of carbon monoxide, methane and hydrosulphite gases leaking into them from ruptured pipes underneath, and these have resulted in a couple of explosions (RTÉ 2012b). In addition, there are estimated to be in excess of 20,000 homes, though the DECLG so far recognizes only 74 estates with 12,250 units, whose foundation hardcore is contaminated with pyrite, which expands leading to the crowning of floors and the buckling of walls (DECLG 2012). These pyrite-affected units are predominantly located in Dublin City, Fingal, Meath, Kildare, and Offaly.

There are clearly issues of social and spatial injustice being experienced by those living on unfinished estates or estates plagued by building quality issues in terms of the conditions they endure relative to other locales and the extent to which their homes are safe, secure and habitable. More than five years into the crisis, however, unfinished estates remain a feature of the Irish landscape and are likely to do so for quite some time, and the issues faced by residents of poorly built units and estates affected by pyrite remain largely unaddressed.

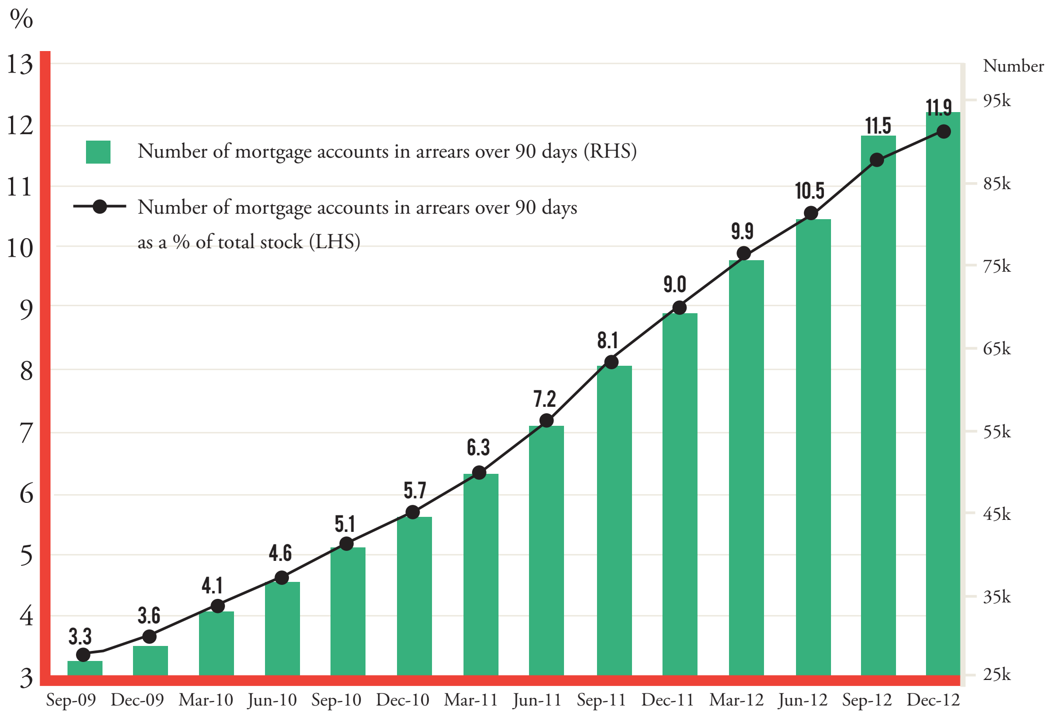
Negative equity and mortgage arrears

Between 1991 and 2007 the average new house price rose by 429% in Dublin and 382% for the whole country, with average second-hand prices rising 551% in Dublin and 489% for the whole country in the same period (DECLG 2010). In Q3 1995 the average secondhand house price was 4.1 times the average industrial wage of €18,152; by Q2 2007 secondhand house prices had risen to 11.9 times the average industrial wage of €32,616 (Brawn 2009). Between 2007 and the end of 2012 prices nationally dropped 48% for houses and 62% for apartments (CSO 2012j). The consequence of such a drop has been to place those that took out a property loan from c.2000 onwards in negative equity. The Central Bank estimated in 2010 that 34% of residential mortgages were in negative equity, with 52% of buy-to-let mortgages in a similar position (Kennedy and McIndoe-Calder 2012). By mid-2012 it was estimated that more than 50% of residential mortgages were in negative equity (RTÉ 2012a).

Moreover, due to the deterioration of the general economy and the rise in unemployment and underemployment, mortgage holders, especially those who bought at the height of the boom, have been struggling to pay their monthly payments. Of the 792,096 total residential mortgages in the state in December 2012, 143,851 were in arrears (18%); with 94,488 more than 90 days in arrears (12%) (Central Bank 2013; see Figure 3.4). There were an additional 42,031 residential mortgages that had been restructured (e.g., term extension, reduced payment, interest only) but were not in arrears. 28,421 (19%) buy-to-let accounts were in arrears of more than 90 days as of December 2012. However, repossession and voluntary surrenders were low, with just 38 residences repossessed on a court order and 96 surrendered in Q4 2012, though this may be set to rise with the relaxation by the Central Bank on the code of conduct of banks in dealing with those in arrears.

Negative equity and mortgage arrears create two types of spatial injustice: first, they create a spatial trap that restricts mobility and, second, they affect some places more than others by dint of the age and type of housing stock and the demographics of its occupants. Because the value of the property is less than was paid for it, owners cannot sell and move to another property without realizing a loss. This trap might

FIGURE 3.4 Number of mortgages in arrears for more than 90 days (Central Bank of Ireland 2013)

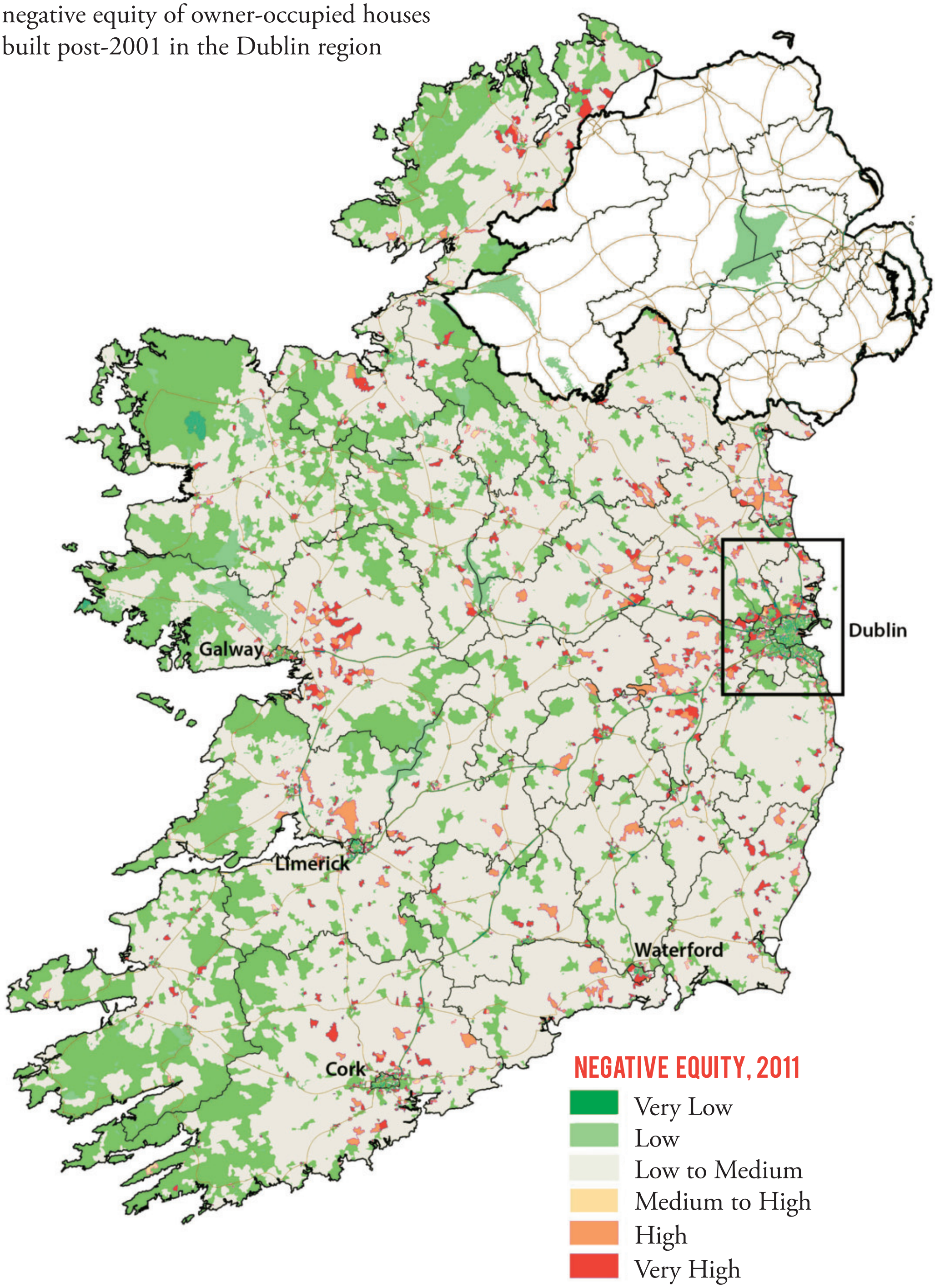


be a problem in that the property might not be suitable for the family situation any longer, or the owner needs to move to seek work. Negative equity thus has labour market consequences. Even if the owner is prepared to sell at a loss, the property market is barely operational in most of the country, with very few properties selling, exacerbating the spatial trap. One can get an indication of the areas likely to be experiencing relatively high rates of negative equity and mortgage distress by using the 2011 census to map the percentage of properties built since 2001 and with an outstanding mortgage (though this ignores negative equity in the secondhand housing market).

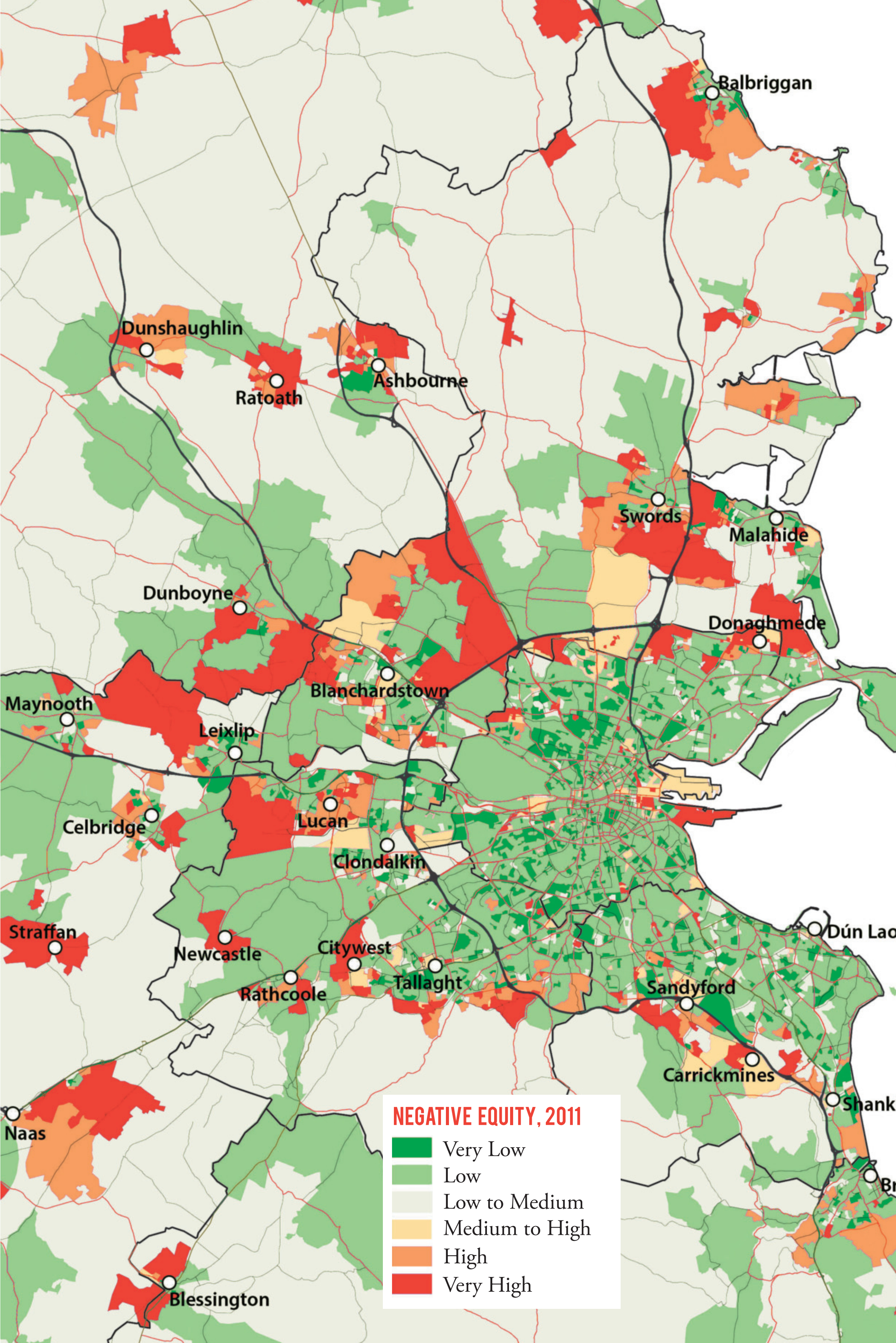
This map (see Figure 3.5) suggests that while issues of negative equity and arrears are prevalent across the whole country, the commuter suburbs of the principal cities are most likely to be badly affected. Counties such as Meath and Kildare experienced high rates of newly built properties and new household formation all through the boom,

FIGURE 3.5(A) Projected rate of negative equity of owner-occupied houses built post-2001 nationally

FIGURE 3.5(B) (OPPOSITE PAGE) Projected rate of negative equity of owner-occupied houses built post-2001 in the Dublin region



Developed by All-Island Research Observatory (airo.ie)


Balbriggan
Dunshaughlin
Ratoath
Ashbourne
Swords
Malahide
Dunboyne
Donaghmede
Blanchardstown
Maynooth
Leixlip
Lucan
Celbridge
Clondalkin
Straffan
Newcastle
Citywest
Tallaght
Rathcoole
Dún Lao
Sandyford
Carrickmines
Shank
Naas
Br
Blessington
NEGATIVE EQUITY, 2011
Very Low
Low
Low to Medium
Medium to High
High
Very High

but especially in the latter years when the inner suburbs became too expensive for first-time buyers and those trading up to a family home. Given that the state was not active in building new social housing in this period, housing in these areas was bought either by households or by buy-to-let landlords, who in the Irish case are nearly all small, family investors rather than institutional investors. Given the drop in house prices, just about every property built post-2001 in these areas will be in negative equity to some degree, with those built in the latter years of the boom having lost up to 50% of their market value. Beyond the stresses for those that are spatially trapped and fearful of losing their home, negative equity and mortgage arrears restrict the pool of properties available to the market and limit any recovery in the housing market to first-time buyers, those prepared to realize a loss, those whose property is not in negative equity, and those who have spare investment capital.

Framing Ireland's housing injustices

Between 1993 and 2007 the Irish economy experienced the Celtic Tiger years, with growth in GDP soaring year on year. The unemployment rate fell to the lowest in Europe, with the number of people at work almost doubling between 1992 and 2007 (CSO 2013e). The population grew at a rapid pace, through natural growth, returning migrants and immigrants. Consequently a housing boom grew in tandem, driven by rising demand and being an investment sink for new-found wealth. Both the wider economy and housing policy were shaped by the adoption of neoliberal policies, complemented by political clientelism, cronyism and localism (Kitchin *et al.* 2012; Kearns, Introduction, this volume). Government policy promoted the free market, minimized regulation, and privatized public goods such as social housing (Mahon, Chapter 4, this volume). The state loosened the regulation of both the finance and construction industries, introduced widespread tax incentive schemes to stimulate development, thus subsidizing construction when none was needed, changed the parameters of stamp duty, lowered capital gains tax, allowed developers to forgo their affordable and social housing obligations, and promoted a *laissez-faire* planning system that presumed development. Banks competed to lend investment capital to developers and mortgage credit to customers. Rents were left to the open market, with few rights of tenancy or protections for tenants. Local government actively encouraged, competed for, and proactively facilitated new development. At the same time, it sought to withdraw from social housing, shifting public housing provision to a subsidized private rental market (in 2010, ~95,000 households received rent supplement allowance; DECLG 2011c), or where it did invest it did so through PPPs. Consequently, the social housing stock contracted.

In turn, property became a key driver in the Irish economy, a significant component of GDP growth, a major sector of employment (13% of all workers), and a major source of tax revenue. By 2006 VAT, capital gains tax, stamp duty and development levies constituted 17% of the Irish tax intake (White 2006). The government thus had a significant stake in the housing model as constituted, dominated as it was by the private sector (banks, developers, speculators, landlords), and heavily favouring their interests (Honohan 2010; Kitchin *et al.* 2010). This model fostered speculator capitalism (Agnew, Chapter 2, this volume).

The same government that had been in power all through the boom remained in office until 2010, overseeing the state's initial handling (from 2008) of the unfolding financial and property crisis, and setting Ireland on a path to austerity. Not surprisingly, in addressing the crisis the government did not shift radically in its broad ideological thrust. Initially, the bursting of the housing bubble was explained as a consequence of the wider global financial crisis, and later as a consequence of corrupt practices. The model itself was, and continues to be, thought of as fundamentally sound. The objective in crisis management, therefore, was to stabilize the economy using neoliberal tools – bailing out private interests, privatizing public assets, and implementing austerity policies that reduce public services and shift wealth from individual citizens to private corporations. In so doing, the Irish state pursued two broad tactics: first, collectivizing private debt into public debt in the hope of cauterizing the problem and forestalling a full collapse, thus reinstilling market confidence; secondly, undertaking a programme of minimal-effort, minimal-cost initiatives giving the impression of policy-at-work, but to a large degree merely kicking the problem down the road for the market to correct when it rebounds.

The first tactic took two interrelated forms in Ireland. The first was the bank guarantee in November 2008, wherein the state guaranteed all the potential liabilities of the Irish-owned banks, followed by the bank bailout when those guarantees were drawn on as the banks collapsed and were nationalized. The second was the establishment of the National Asset Management Agency (NAMA), signed into law in

September 2009. The initial premise of NAMA was to relieve Irish banks of their impaired assets, providing them instead with government-backed bonds which they could use to borrow from the European Central Bank, thereby injecting liquidity into the Irish banking system. It had the effect too of protecting both the banks and developers from going bust quickly. In total, €73.6bn of loans on impaired property assets was transferred to the agency for a cost of €31.8bn for the Irish taxpayer (43% of the loan value). Two-thirds of loans relate to Irish development and land, the rest to properties principally in the UK, the US and continental Europe. The agency operates largely as a black box (being exempt from freedom of information regulations), is staffed by bankers and property experts mainly recruited from the companies it has bailed out, and, given its size, it significantly overshadows the Irish property market and its operation. The primary focus of the agency is to restore the market and ensure that the state recovers its investment in the portfolio it manages. It has not been charged with addressing issues of spatial justice or public interest (as was the US Resolution Trust Corporation, an equivalent agency to NAMA).

The second tactic is meant to address some issues of spatial justice through specific policies and initiatives, but in reality it consists of applying sticking plasters and waiting to see if the patient recovers on its own or can last long enough for the doctor, in the form of the market, to reappear. Here we discuss what the state is doing to address the spatial injustices discussed above.

During the period of austerity from 2008 onwards the social housing budget has suffered severe retrenchment. For example, exchequer funding for the National Regeneration Programme has been reduced from €121 million in 2008 to €80 million in 2013, a 34% reduction (Redmond and Hearne 2013). Similarly, since 2008, the capital expenditure for social housing has been reduced by 80% (from €1.3bn to €275m), while there was a 90% decrease in housing output from local authorities between 2007 and 2011 (McManus 2013). As a result, regeneration plans have been completely abandoned for some estates, and redeveloped and rescaled in others. Disadvantaged areas have also been affected by the reduction in government funding for voluntary community organizations, including community development projects, youth services, and community drugs projects. It is estimated that by the end of 2013, the voluntary and community sector will have contracted by 35% on its 2008 level, leading to a loss of 11,150 jobs in the sector (Harvey 2012).

The community employment scheme was also significantly altered, as its training budget and the length of time for participants were reduced. The abolition of additional payments for those with disabilities and lone parents severely impacted on the vital role that these schemes play in the social regeneration of their areas. These cuts have been compounded by the reduction in resources and the employment embargo for essential, area-based, social public services, such as the Gardaí, local authority estate managers and local health services (Hearne 2013). Meanwhile, the rent supplement scheme continues to grow even though it is a massive subsidy to private landlords. As part of the austerity budgets the rent limits for the receipt of rent supplement have been reduced and a greater contribution sought from the tenant, despite average national rents increasing, and higher increases still in Dublin (Daft.ie 2013). These changes require the (often vulnerable) tenant to renegotiate with landlords who are in an already powerful position. Moreover, substandard accommodation within the private rented sector continues to be a cause for concern (Threshold 2013).

The over-emphasis on relocation of residents and demolition, instead of focusing on sustaining the living conditions for existing communities, has resulted in the removal and dispersal of working-class communities, thus irreversibly dismantling the original social structures. The destabilization, decay and destruction of communities is a significant and irreplaceable loss to the social, historical and cultural fabric of these areas. The residents that remain are left waiting in poor conditions and are, generally, those suffering the most intense social and economic inequalities such as high levels of vulnerability, poverty and disadvantage; they include the elderly and lone parents (Hearne 2011). It appears that social housing will continue to be undermined under the current administration, despite the urgent need.

One policy that was designed to address both the social housing waiting list and unfinished estates is the Social Housing Leasing Initiative (SHLI), launched in September 2009 to complement the work of NAMA (DECLG 2009). The SHLI seeks to rent vacant units in unfinished estates in order to house households on the waiting list. The units are rented on 20-year leases, but are tenanted, managed and maintained by the local authority, with the rent guaranteed for the whole lease period regardless of occupancy. At the end of the lease the house reverts to the landlord. The scheme has been extended to voluntary housing associations. Regardless of the fact that the state is effectively paying a mortgage and acting as a landlord but not gaining ownership, the scheme has barely made a dent in the social housing waiting list, nor resolved vacancy in unfinished estates, though it has provided a guaranteed income to some developers. While housing associations and other charity organizations initially campaigned for the allocation of vacant units on unfinished estates for social housing purposes, as the remote location of many of these estates became known they began to express misgivings, indicating the potential of this strategy to create further spatial injustices. The housing association Respond!, for instance, while discussing its intention to purchase 4,000 recently built houses to provide community-based housing, stressed that it was 'seeking to purchase in viable communities, not ghost estates' (Shanahan 2010).

In addition to the SHLI, the other main policy with respect to unfinished estates is Site Resolution Plans (SRPs), formally adopted as policy in October 2011 (DECLG 2011c, 2011e). SRPs are a partnership approach to addressing outstanding development issues on estates. It seeks to use negotiation and existing legislation to persuade the owners and developers of estates to create and implement an action plan. This plan is drawn up by a panel of stakeholders (developers, banks, local authorities, residents, estate management companies, Health and Safety Authority, etc.). SRPs are non-mandatory, voluntaristic, deregulated, lack compulsive mechanisms, have timeframes that are suggestive, and possess no conflict resolution mechanisms beyond the panel. They are meant to be organized and driven by local authorities, which are being given no additional resources for such a role. To a large degree the lack of finance to complete estates and developer insolvency is ignored, and the government fund to support SRPs is €5m – a paltry sum to address the multiple problems that exist across the 1,770 estates that require further development work. Rather, this fund is designed to address pressing health and safety issues, leaving other issues to be corrected by the market at a later date. In the meantime, residents continue to live with such spatial injustices.

Households experiencing mortgage arrears have been similarly left in limbo. A 2012 report commissioned by the Money Advice and Budgeting Service (MABS), which drew on a series of interviews with households accessing its services, presented a candid and often alarming picture of the effects of stress on those experiencing mortgage arrears – marital and familial strife, serious depression and, in the case of one interviewee, attempted suicide (Norris and Brooke 2011). The report makes clear that for those in mortgage arrears, financial problems are a source of constant worry that perforates all aspects of their day-today existence. However, while the mechanisms of the bank bailout and NAMA have effectively protected banks and developers from insolvency, proposals for some type of mortgage 'debt-forgiveness' have been consistently met with warnings of moral hazard (Cooper 2010). The severity of the drop in house prices augurs poorly for any prospect of market recovery in the short to medium term. The mortgages these households are repaying no longer correspond to current realities, and it is probable that house prices will not reach anywhere near the peak levels of the boom within the lifetime of borrowers. The severity of this disjuncture seems to suggest that these problems cannot be remedied by the corrective forces of the market. As the MABS report points out, doing nothing will be more costly in the long run than taking measures to address the issue.

The approach from the Government, however, has been haphazard and has served the banks rather than households. Indeed, while advocacy group the Irish Mortgage Holders Organisation had hoped that the Central Bank's revised Code of Conduct on Mortgage Arrears (Central Bank of Ireland 2013) might include stronger protections for households in arrears, it has instead given lenders more power to harass borrowers by lifting the limit of three contacts per calendar month and has failed to install adequate proscriptive measures to protect, for example, borrowers who are being forced off advantageous tracker mortgages as part of the restructuring process. In the absence of guidelines that are more appropriate to the current reality, the banks have been restructuring mortgages on a case-by-case basis. But, like the policies addressing unfinished estates, this strategy merely staves off rather than resolves the crisis.

Moreover, in that the housing market is now highly fragmented, with some recovery in parts of Dublin but with none in other areas, the geography of mortgage arrears is also likely to be characterized by spatial inequalities. There is a strong possibility that there will never be a market for some properties, and with employment increasingly concentrated in urban areas, many households may find themselves trapped by negative equity in areas with burgeoning unemployment and few opportunities. Although there have been relatively few repossessions to date, it is expected that they will increase in the future. In March 2013, in response to this, Finance Minister Michael Noonan suggested that he could 'envisage repossessions in the buy-to-let sector' (O'Halloran 2013). While this statement seems to imply that families will not lose their homes, repossessions on buy-to-let mortgages put additional strain on the private rental market, thus reducing the tenure security of some households in this sector. As such, the lack of decisive action on mortgage arrears exacerbates the existing imbalance between tenure options, while intensifying social and spatial injustices.

Conclusion

The catastrophic fallout of the property crash has had a series of social and spatial repercussions for households that are only beginning to become apparent. During the Celtic Tiger period housing policy was increasingly neoliberalized. The privatization of social housing and the rolling out of PPP regeneration schemes in many instances served to erode existing social housing infrastructures. This was coupled with lowered barriers of entry to the mortgage and buy-to-let market. In tandem these processes led to a greater proportion of households being catered for through the private sector. The result of the Celtic Tiger economic and property boom, then, was the contraction rather than expansion of housing tenure options, with owner-occupation being generally seen as the only secure form of tenure (O'Connell and Finnerty 2012).

During the crisis the neoliberalization of housing has been deepened. The broad tactics of the Irish state have saddled the general populace with the debt of the failed banks and developers, yet do not substantively address the housing injustices that many of them face, and do nothing at all to alter the fundamentals of how the Irish housing market is constituted and works, assuming that future housing will be the preserve of the private market and will work to the benefit of private interests. As such, the property crash has left in its wake a housing system not only inherently unequal, but now fundamentally unfit for purpose. In other words, present policies perpetuate and entrench social and spatial injustices, making them increasingly difficult to dislodge. The danger is that the imbalanced spatial and institutional landscapes deposited by the crash, left to the whims of the market, will calcify into a nation increasingly characterized by geographically uneven development.

The need for (and indeed right to) decent social housing cannot be questioned given the housing waiting list figures and the high dependence on rent supplement. Providing social housing and regeneration can be a win–win scenario. Delivering it on a large scale offers the potential for real economic and social stimulus for local communities and for the wider society and economy. It seems counterintuitive not to be giving social housing a much greater role in the current period. There is also a historic opportunity to change the culture and popular perception of social housing from a stigmatized tenure to one to which many people would be glad to have access, with affordable, high-quality and safe homes in decent neighbourhoods.

The greater role assigned to voluntary housing bodies in government policy in recent years has the potential to support this development. However, there is a danger that forcing voluntary housing bodies to rely only on private finance will push them in a commercial direction, repeating the failure of the PPP experience. Similarly, the overreliance on private market mechanisms to remedy the problems posed by unfinished estates and mortgage arrears, along with the continued support for banks and developers over the needs of households, testifies to a bewildering short-sightedness on the part of the government. The Department of Environment, local authorities, and voluntary housing bodies, along with the funding agencies including the Housing Finance Agency and government, have a responsibility to respond to the crisis in a manner way beyond what is currently being undertaken. The ideological opposition to social housing and obsessive support of the private rented and property market must be put aside to develop alternative approaches that place the primary value of housing as a home and a right, and not a commodity.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Martin Charlton and Justin Gleeson for their work on producing the negative equity maps and Gerry Kearns for his review, comments and editing of the chapter.