The lost city: recovering the Cork City Architect, Eamon O'Byrne

DENIS LINEHAN

In March 1947, Eamon O'Byrne arrived at his desk in City Hall, Cork, to take up his new role as City Architect and Town Planning Officer. Educated at University College Dublin, he had previously worked for nine years in Dublin Corporation. His dual appointment as City Architect and Town Planning Officer made him a powerful player in shaping Cork city. Over the course of 25 years, he designed and managed the development of over 5,000 units of public housing and directed the creation and planning of several new neighbourhoods. He designed fire stations, swimming pools, libraries, shaped the city's boundary extensions in the 1950s and 1960s, established the greenbelt, oversaw slum clearances and ran the Corporation's architectural office. He was a member of the Town Planning Association of Ireland and also a busy figure in the Architectural Association of Ireland, hosting on its behalf international visitors like C.E. Kidder-Smith and Lewis Mumford in Cork. He retired in 1973 having shaped, directed and designed a housing regime that never stopped building. At the end of his career, he was appointed to the board of An Foras Forbartha , the national planning agency.

In all, his work reveals an individual who built connections consistently throughout his career across the overlapping fields of urban planning and architecture. Yet today he seems entirely forgotten. Though it is all there, hiding in plain sight, his city seems lost. None of his work is celebrated in any architectural histories of the city or noted in the diverse histories of municipal housing in twentieth-century Ireland.[1] The short notice about his contribution to Irish architecture that appears in the Irish Architectural Archive stops with his appointment in Cork. Yet, by any measure, his contribution was very significant. Thousands, if not hundreds of thousands of people have lived in the homes and neighbourhoods he created. Moreover, as well as planning and designing within the institutional and design constraints imposed by the Department of Local Government, he also developed a distinctive and modern social housing typology. During the major expansion of public housing in the 1950s and 1960s, he devised at least six different prototypes. He

1 – Monopitch houses at Spriggs Road, Gurranabraher, Cork
(all photos by the author / all drawings courtesy Cork City & County Archives)

was able to imagine and develop houses, maisonettes and flats in a variety of arrangements, and offered accommodation ranging from bedsits to four-bedroomed dwellings and high-rise apartments. His innovations in this regard are important as they broke the mould of the public housing typologies devised by the Ministry that dominated the urban landscape, and reveal an architectural character influenced by some international trends in post-war modern architecture, yet attuned to the rhythms and expectations of Cork.

In this essay I will reclaim from both fieldwork and the archives, O'Byrne's impacts on Cork city, and explore his contribution to public architecture. I will consider ways in which O'Byrne developed agency within a dense context that circumscribed his creative input but also offered him opportunities to develop distinctive architecture. What I hope to find is an architecture of becoming – one showing distinctive innovation and development, yet shaped by the city's political context and labour movements, attentive to neighbourhoods, and alive to Irish debates on modernisation. In taking this approach, I will pay particular attention to the condition of the 'city architect' position whose autonomy required constant negotiations with tenants, labour unions, builders and politicians in a vexed system. The opening section explores some of the key contexts that shaped the development of municipal housing after World War II in Cork, while subsequent sections consider different aspects of O'Byrne's planning and house design in the 1950s and 1960s.

CRISIS AND CULTURE

The twentieth-century histories of Cork supply ample context in which to demonstrate the lively and vital matters that shaped the development of municipal housing. As is often the case in Cork, and indeed other comparable European cities, its scale and size did not reduce its complexity. The sometime tortuous routes involved offer insights into the materials, social life and architectural knowledge that shaped the housing landscape. O'Byrne's appointment was made just before the First Inter-Party Government (1948-1951) – comprised of a coalition between Fine Gael, the Labour Party, Clann na Poblachta, Clann na Talmhan and the National Labour Party – put a major focus on housing. Their 'Ireland is Building' programme promised 100,000 houses by the end of the 1950s. The public culture created in this period of modernisation and nation building underscored the political demands for new housing and consistently pressed for urban expansion. When O'Byrne arrived in Cork in the late 1940s, he encountered a city with a highly evolved housing lobby whose debates often reached a high intensity in public meetings, media reports and in the chamber of Cork Corporation. The City Manager, Philip Monahan, was a leading and complex figure in this culture, driven by a strong sense of social justice, independence and pragmatism.[2] Leading a team that included the City Engineer, Stephen Farrington, the City Housing Officer, E.A. Byrne, and the City Medical Officer, J.C. Saunders, together they drove through a major expansion of the city's public housing and slum clearance in the 1930s.

By the end of the 1940s the housing situation in the Cork was especially dire. In 1945 E.A. Byrne estimated that 3,000 new dwellings were needed to address the housing need.[3] By 1951 this estimate was increased by J.C. Saunders, who reported that 4,126

new dwellings were needed to address the pressing housing needs of about 20,000 people. The city's underdevelopment was not particularly out of step with the rest of Ireland, with the Census of the late 1940s returning 80,000 people living in one-room dwellings and 300,000 homes with no sanitary facilities. However, the Corporation was found wanting in delivering new homes, especially since significant progress had been made in Dublin, Limerick and Waterford, and even small towns like Mallow had built more homes than Cork after the war.

In 1951 the Corporation was subjected to a short governmental enquiry about the situation. Following a tour of the city's slums with the Lord Mayor, the parliamentary secretary to the Minister of Local Government declared that 'thousands of decent men and women were living in rat-ridden hovels which were a disgrace to the country'.[4] Soon after, the Minster for Local Government criticised the Corporation's management of the housing programme. The output of masons, and the choices made to acquire unserviced land on the northside, came in for particular criticism. The Minister also pressed the Corporation to reduce the size of new homes to the minimum of 800 square feet and adopt new system-building technologies.[5]

The response from the Corporation was to complain about shortages of material, skilled workers and funding. Like Dublin Corporation, the city was locked out of the Loans Fund, which financed housing in the rest of the country. It was also at this time running an overdraft of about £1 million.[6] New money would have to be borrowed from local banks or raised by issuing bonds through the Cork Stock Exchange. However, the pressure from the Government led to an increase in tempo for the Corporation's housing programme. A key part of this strategy – and a critical one in terms of appraising his contribution to the city – was that O'Byrne was made directly responsible for the acquisition of sites for housing, and his staff in the Corporation's architectural office was increased. While the problem of short-term contracts would continue to plague the staffing of this office throughout the 1950s, the planned expansion was significant and included two assistant architects to work on housing and town planning, and a clerical officer to deal with administration. By the end of the 1950s, the Corporation had developed around 450 acres for housing and related services under his supervision. Housing approval was centralised, constrained by legal processes, the preparation of technical drawings, the issuing of commercial tenders and contracts, and the availability of finance, all which needed to be mobilised and assembled by a limited amount of professional staff. Consequently, the production of houses took between three and five years from the time of an initial proposal.

BUILDING NEIGHBOURHOODS AND THE ONE-AND-A-HALF HOUSE

Like his peers in other cities and towns in Ireland, O'Byrne developed the large estates of municipal housing using the designs provided by the Housing Section of the Department of Local Government. These drawings were first devised in the 1920s, notably *House Designs prescribed by the Minister for Local Government under the Housing Act, 1924* (Dublin, 1925). These schemes offered limited scope for creative intervention. The grip the Ministry had on these designs cannot be

underestimated, as clearance to proceed with any development in Cork, as elsewhere around the country, needed their approval. In his first work on the Ballyphehane, Churchfield and Spangle Hill (later renamed Faranree) schemes built under these directives, no significant change to the housing typology occurred. What is key, however, is that while limited in house type, he did articulate a range of town-planning strategies to improve the liveability of these new neighbourhoods. O'Byrne made good choices about density in suburban areas in the context of the Ministry's rules. As had been the practice in Dublin in districts like Marino, in addition to building in social mix, O'Byrne's focus on neighbourhood-unit planning is evidenced in plans he made to encourage local shops and services and, in many instances, the use of small squares, cul-de-sacs and U-shaped pocket spaces, such as Desmond Square, off Mount Sion Road. In 1955 he designed shops for new housing estates, and suggested that these be built in advance. One of the most successful of these developments was Pearse Square in Ballyphehane, finished in 1957, and where, in the following years, shops like Tex Style (ladies' and children's wear), Mac's Meat Market and a local Spar traded successfully. At the same time, not everyone was convinced about the value of this strategy, and complaints were made about the low housing density, large gardens and a '60ft concrete highway' running through the district which was 'too lavish a scale'.[7] However, mixed-use neighbourhoods were encouraged in contemporary debates on urban planning, such as in the Dudley report published in the UK, which recommended that neighbourhoods be created through the considerate use of housing design and layout and containing a mixture of flats and houses. It's clear that he had the support of the City Manager, Philip Monahan, for his schemes. Monahan had argued in 1948 that 'the larger housing schemes should be peopled by a characteristic sample of the working class community including reasonable proportion of the well-to-do and the poor. Such a grouping of families is a source of social strength.'[8]

In addition to attending to these principles of neighbourhood-unit planning, another key way in which O'Byrne addressed the urbanism of these new areas was to break with the house plans approved by the Ministry and generate his own designs, as a means to relieve the monotony of terraced housing whilst also catering to different kind of tenants. In 1957 he drew up plans for his one-and-half-storey house for the Knockfree housing scheme and Marieville in Pouladuff. In spite of the Ministry's appeal to strip down the complexity of house-building, O'Byrne went in a different direction, using wood cladding and decorative elements, and developed a house that contrasted sharply with the standard two-storey houses common in other schemes under construction at the time. Sometimes referred to as 'Dutch bungalows', it used a dormer typology, which was not a common house-type in the city. The roots of the form lie in the Low Countries, which had revived the type in German municipal housing in the inter-war period. Somewhat folksy, it was not a regionalist tradition, nor was it intended as a bespoke one-off. We find this house-type, sometimes with small variations, in municipal housing in Mayfield, Togher and Ballyphehane mixed in with other examples of O'Byrne housing (Plates 2-4).

The house was semi-detached, characterised by a steep roof and of high quality,

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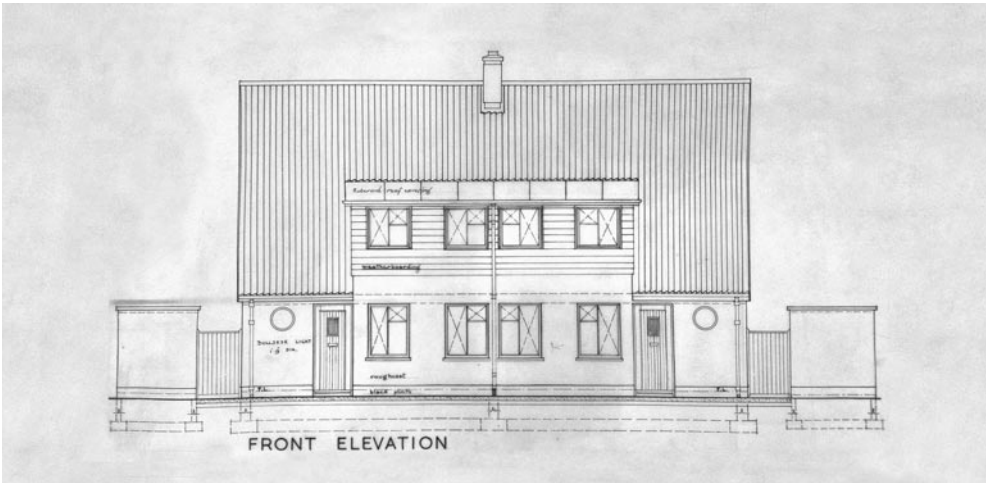
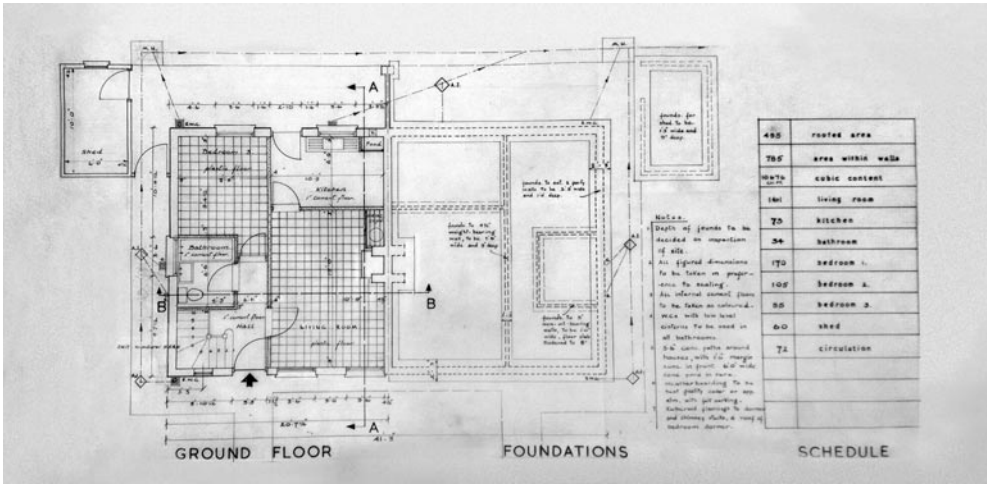
2, 3 – One-and-a-half-storey houses: front elevation and ground-floor plan
4 – One-and-a-half-storey houses on Baker's Road, Gurranabraher


FRONT ELEVATION


GROUND FLOOR
FOUNDATIONS
SCHEDULE
485 roofed area
785 area within walls
cubic content
161 living room
75 kitchen
34 bathroom
170 bedroom 1.
105 bedroom 2.
85 bedroom 3.
60 shed
72 circulation

with several crafted elements such as the 'best quality cedar or elm' wooden cladding, underlaid with felt sarking.[9] In keeping with O'Byrne's signature attention to the thresholds of many of the dwellings he designed, a particularly appealing inclusion was the bullseye window located next to the front door, also used in the 1956 Fastnet Public Utility Society houses on Well Road, Douglas. Despite appearing large, its area was just 780 square feet, below the Department's minimum area of 800 square feet. The layout is carefully organised, with a large living room, kitchen and bedroom downstairs and two bedrooms upstairs via a turning staircase. Compared to the flat and monopitched roofs that O'Byrne would design soon afterwards, the roof area is substantial. The location in Knockfree, near Churchfield, on slopes with wide vistas of the city below, lends the area a bucolic character, and this is certainly how they were presented in the *Building Survey* of 1963.[10]

O'Byrne would again make use of decorative wood and tiles in his other buildings, particularly the small single-storey dwelling – essentially a modern terraced cottage – he designed in the mid-1960s and built throughout the city. A good example is found at Belleview Crescent, near St Luke's (Plate 5).

5 – Terraced urban cottages: front and rear elevations

INNER-CITY SLUM CLEARANCE AND NEW ARCHITECTURE

As much as the focus of Corporation housing was on greenfield sites, such as in Ballyphehane or Spangle Hill, the reconstruction of the inner city was also of critical concern. City councillors and local organisations such as the Cork Workers Council constantly raised the crises faced by the poor in these districts. There were large areas of dereliction in Ballythomas, proximate to Shandon Street and The Marsh, and large slum areas in Blackpool and Barrack Street in addition to other pockets in the old city. In this regard, the long-standing debates about the characteristics and solutions to the Cork slums provided an immediate context for O'Byrne's intervention. To a large extent, his projects in the inner city addressed a fifty-year-old project which had commenced in the years before Independence in the first wave of town planning and housing reform enacted in the city. Arguably, it was slum clearance and the architecture that resulted from accommodating displaced people that came to symbolise the progressive ambitions of the Corporation and the State, and defined O'Byrne's social housing for the ten-year period after 1953. However, it is important to note that for some considerable time the solution to the slum conditions in The Marsh had been sought in the development of flats. In 1936, R.J. Dalton, a Catholic priest and ardent advocate for the poor and for better housing, devised an elaborate scheme to erect blocks of flats for The Marsh's slum-dwellers on the site of the defunct Muskerry railway station, proximate to

the Western Road. Dalton advocated for the construction of 24 houses and the same number of flats, based on a successful scheme in Lambeth, London, using seed money from a fund to be created by employees of the Sunbeam factory. The *Cork Examiner* reported loud applause from the audience when:

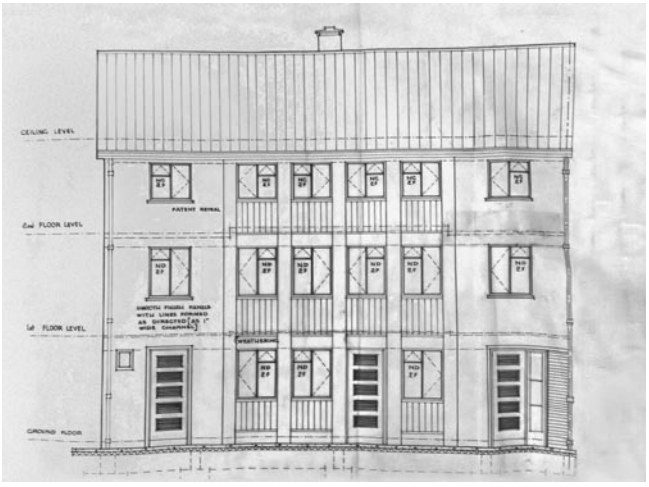
> Father Dalton said that it was a wonder to him how those people can keep their faith and morals as they do. Referring to flats, Father Dalton said that schemes had been successful in Berlin, all over the Continent, all over England, and in Dublin, and why, in God's name, he asked, should they not be successful in Cork too.[11]

However, despite clearing about eleven acres in the district by 1948, the Corporation took a cautious approach to the development of high-rises and flats. These were expensive to build at a time when materials were not always readily available. In spite of these reservations, eventually the pressure to reclaim the city centre for housing (especially as there were complaints to councillors about the inaccessibility of the new Corporation suburbs for some) prevailed, and O'Byrne was instructed by the city councillors to present a scheme for Peter Street.

While the scheme in The Marsh was small, it is worthy of close attention as eventually dozens of these type of dwellings, in several variations, were built across the city during the late 1950s and early 1960s. Though the first designs for maisonettes were prepared for a scheme on Wolfe Tone Street on the northside the year before, it would seem that design work for the project in The Marsh began in May 1953. As a type, maisonettes were widely in use in housing schemes in the UK and Europe. As part of the Festival of Britain for example, in the Lansbury estate in London, maisonettes were showcased as an important element of post-war housing reconstruction. Whilst unspectacular and modest in scale, they were appreciated in the architectural press for offering opportunities to create dwellings for single people, smaller families and the elderly. O'Byrne's adoption of the type is probably one of the earliest in Ireland (Plates 6-8).

Interestingly, the immediate response to the design of the maisonettes from the Department had been to stall. There were initially long delays to the original proposal for Wolfe Tone Street. And when it came to the Marsh scheme, the Ministry used the request to pressure the Corporation to report on their progress on the city town plan and to clarify their proposals for residential densities in the area, which it appears even they were unsure off. The Ministry's caution related to an unsanctioned and unproven new dwelling-type and unresolved assumptions about housing density for inner-city sites. The impact of the delays eventually made it to the Dáil. In the summer of 1954, the Fine Gael TD Stephen D. Barrett pressed home the case with the new Minister of Housing, Patrick O'Donnell, suggesting that a least 13,000 people were living in Cork in abject conditions. He argued: 'We in Cork feel that the sensible way to tackle the problem would be to build on the derelict sites and also to destroy the horrible and filthy hovels which there are in some parts of the city and build there instead of buying new land farther and farther away from the centre of the city'.[12] In the end, sense prevailed and the Ministry signed off on the design, and resolved the issues about housing density.

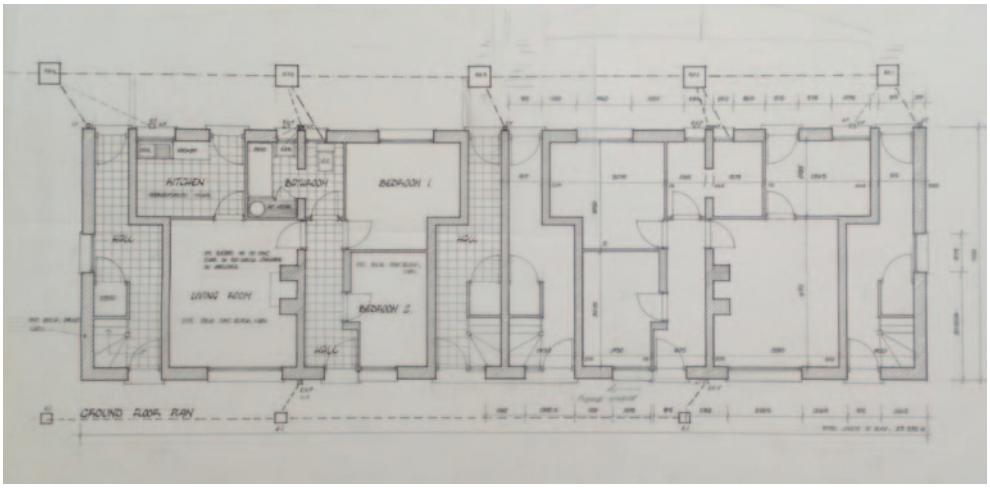
O'Byrne is credited with the design, assisted by D.J. Maguire, but interestingly the Corporation had sanctioned the contracting of a consultant architect Mr E.P. O'Flynn



6 – Maisonettes at Grattan Street, Cork

7 – Maisonettes: front elevation

8 – Maisonettes: ground-floor plan



– a long-standing practice in the city with wide experience – who seems to have managed the various tenders, operated on site and devised the colouring scheme. In a drawing published in the *Cork Examiner* showing a small child with a hoop and a man in a flat cap on the corner, the emphasis was upon their normative appeal. They were new but not too different. The maisonettes had individual front doors and as such obviated the necessity to create costly stairwells and access decks.

As with most of O'Byrne's designs at this time, he took a low-cost model and included modest decorative items. The use of wooden panels and the window-box on some of the dwellings provided variation and offered opportunities to tenants to individualise their homes. The attention to the colour scheme added to the variation. By attending to some of the aspirations of tenants, he reflected a deeper appreciation of the threshold and window as expressive and social spaces in Cork society across the classes. Distinct from the chaotic rooms and circulation of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century tenements they replaced, the dwellings provided a rational plan of staircases and rooms which were praised for their comfort and finish. The maisonettes were said to 'provide a contrast between the old and the new in one of the oldest parts of the flat of the city'.[13]

> In these dwellings, as in all of the Corporation's housing schemes, comfort and finish is aimed at and this target has been achieved to a high degree. Built-in presses, well laid-out kitchens, washbasins with hot and cold water, laid on and electric-plug points in every room are some of the features that would commend them to even the most discerning. Again, the nine-inch external walls are lined throughout with insulating material to give added comfort in winter conditions.[14]

In picking the maisonette, which created denser three-storey living, it might be suggested that O'Byrne adopted the anti-historicist stance typical of Modernism. Unlike the four-storey maisonettes built later by Dublin City Corporation and that featured parapets and 'butterfly' roofs reminiscent of the rooflines of Georgian houses, O'Byrne's design made no reference to tradition. Yet despite their modernity, the maisonettes did have a relationship with the streetscape. Three-storey houses, many of them higher, were quite common in The Marsh and elsewhere in the city. The nearby early eighteenth-century terrace at Fenn's Quay was taller and of a similar density. In July 1956, eighteen families took up residence in the two blocks at Grattan Street and Peter Street. These families were used to the rhythms and scale of tenement living, and probably found a similar deep pattern in the new structures. The transition from tenement to flat, with access via their own front door, no garden and a balcony, made the building intelligible to tenants. They found themselves living in a familiar building volume in an inner-city location with which they were intimately familiar.

Other aspects of these maisonettes did announce their modernity. The scheme addressed the spirit of modernisation which, in addition to the An Tóstal festival (for which, incidentally, O'Byrne organised a small exhibition of new architecture in the Crawford School of Art in 1955), was very publicly expressed in initiatives like the 'Buy Cork Expo' of 1953. In April 1955 the *Cork Examiner* noted that 'Now that Housewives are spring cleaning and local firms planning to brighten up the city for An Tóstal ... it is gratifying to learn that the Corporation's housing schemes are taking a new and varied

appearance in keeping with the same spirit.'[15] Their modernity was more deeply illustrated by the ways in which O'Byrne was able to position the new dwellings as an essential component of the Corporation's public housing provision throughout the 1960s. While far from a novel architectural proposition, O'Byrne's maisonettes are important as they engage directly with the problem associated with building anew in derelict inner-city areas and signalled the beginning of a break with the standard designs offered by the Department. The scheme in The Marsh was small, but its success paved the way for other innovations that lead to the development of O'Byrne's social housing typology, which he used in both reclaimed areas of the inner city and new neighbourhoods on its periphery. This development broke the grip of the Department of Local Government on housing design in Cork, and established O'Byrne as a reliable and flexible architect. They became prototypes, with small variations, for housing in the city, such as the Ballythomas scheme, Mount Sion Road and Desmond Square in Greenmount, and on Pearse Road, The Lough.

In the early 1960s, O'Byrne enlarged his housing typology, now distinguished by a prominent external staircase with supporting pillars capped with a classical canopy, faced in wood. Making the staircases external changed the building form, with small flats on the ground level and a duplex on the first and second floors. The external staircase also reduced the internal circulation space, making them roomier. While the window-boxes that were used on some of the maisonettes in The Marsh are lost, O'Byrne created the small social space of the staircase and porch, used variously to store children's bikes and toys, potted plants and the deckchairs of tenants for sunny days. Small gardens and sheds were supplied to the rear. In some variations, he included wooden cladding on the second floor, with smaller windows, similar to the step-down in the size of fenestration found in the inner-city Georgian terraces. Whilst essentially an innovation of the 1955 maisonettes, these were more commonly called flats, and were used at Gregg Road, in the Farrancleary housing scheme, Blackpool, at Churchfield and Ardmanning, Togher. Particularly in Togher and Ballyphehane, these maisonettes were grouped together with other kinds of dwellings, including bungalows, terraced houses and O'Byrne's design for a monopitch house discussed below.

FLAT-ROOF AND MONOPITCH HOUSES

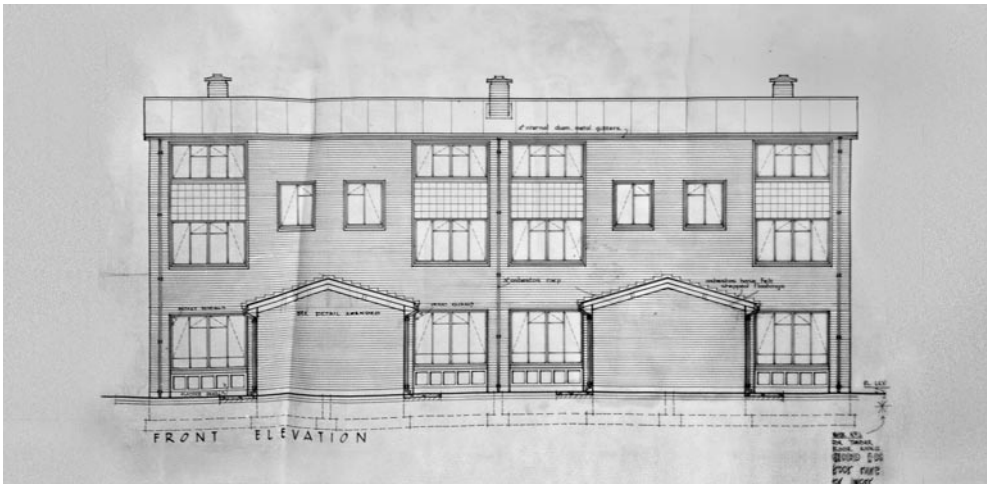
Although the opening of the first maisonettes in The Marsh in the summer of 1956 was overshadowed by the polio epidemic, the crisis galvanised the Corporation's campaign to act on the city's slums and, indeed, may well have accelerated their access to loan schemes. Several examples of these innovations in affordable house design are worth looking at in more detail. All of these designs include monopitch houses, three-storey townhouses, cottages and five-storey flats. There are other incidental or one-off buildings, notably a unique split-level house on Henry Street in The Marsh. These dwellings develop several new aspects of construction and design, addressing in some instances issues around system building, but also held on to established domestic arrangements and expectations. In the context of the modest but emergent Modernist architecture in Cork at this time, the flat-roofed houses and maisonettes were a departure

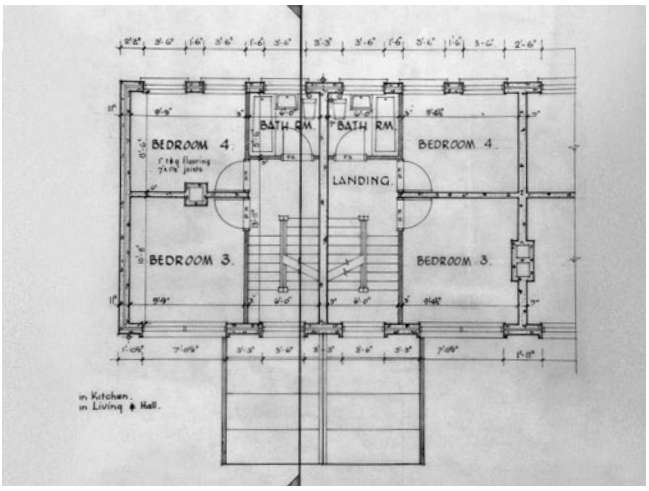
from traditional typologies and, in the context of the Lemass-ian revolution that overtook Ireland in the late 1950s, were strong symbols of modernisation. These buildings represented a bridge to post-war European affordable house design, but also one carefully aligned to the possibilities and constraints of the building environment in Cork.

Two major slum clearances occupied the city from the late 1950s onwards and each of them drove further innovations in O'Byrne's housing design. The first of these resulted from the clearance of Warren's Lane and St Finbar's Lane, proximate to St Fin Barre's Cathedral. A 1959 enquiry by the Minister of Local Government had declared 112 houses unfit for habitation, and by 1962 the bulldozers were on site and 120 dwellings had been erected by the end of 1964 using the Direct Labour Unit of Cork Corporation. There is little evidence of the previous social world at this site today, an erasure reflected in the renaming of the streets as Gregg Road and Noonan Road in 1965 (Plates 9-11).

At this site O'Byrne made ample use of the new flats, but also introduced a new design for a three-storey, four-bedroomed terraced townhouse. Though ostensibly comparable to other three-storey townhouses in the city, this housing deviated from the traditional typology, not least in O'Byrne's first use of a flat roof. Its modernity was, however, mollified by the use of traditional brick, a material which brought it into line with the post-war European Modernism that Danish architect, Kay Fisker, had encompassed within the concept of Functional Tradition. In design terms, it contained no frivolous reaches to traditional or vernacular elements; rather, the lines are clean and new. The façade was animated by placing a large panel, which was decorated by a strong block of yellow tiles bordered by others in white and navy, between the first- and second-floor windows. White and yellow were reminiscent of the colours of the Papal flag that was hung up all over the city during the annual Eucharistic procession held on the Feast of Corpus Christi in June. The houses were designed to comfortably accommodate larger families of six or seven, which would not have been unusual at this time. Inside, the floor plan provided a large kitchen and living-room downstairs, and four bedrooms on the first

9 – Three-storey townhouses at Dean Street, Cork





10, 11– Three-storey townhouses: front elevation and second-floor plan

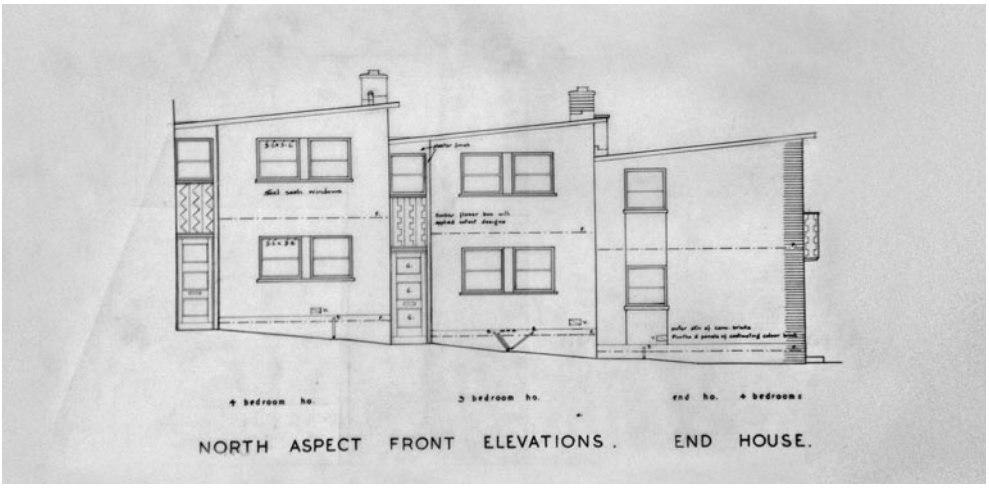
opposite

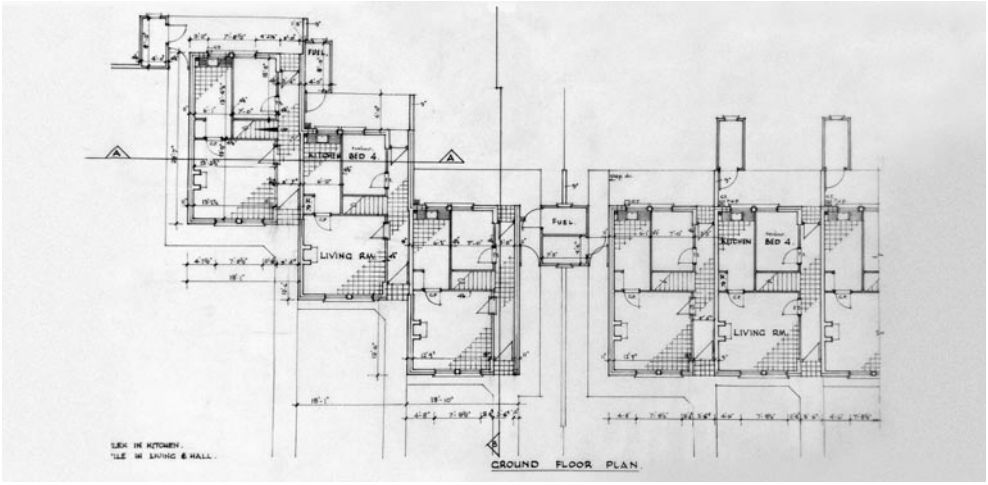
12, 13 – Monopitch houses: front elevation and ground-floor plan

(all drawings: Cork City Archives)

and second floors. The kitchen was large (127 sq ft) in comparison to the kitchen in the Mount Pleasant scheme (94 sq ft) that O'Byrne had managed during 1951. The UK's Parker Morris Committee, which had developed new guidelines for public housing, allowing for larger rooms to accommodate the technologies of modern life – television, white goods and so on – may have played a role in this increase. The bathroom and toilet on the first floor (33 sq ft), though, was smaller than the Mount Pleasant scheme, suggesting a rationalisation of domestic space and a carry-over from continental house-plans, which tended to reduce spaces in public housing schemes.

A large porch of dark-grey brick, laid down by Corporation masons in a neat stretcher course, doubled as a storeroom. It was interrupted occasionally with the darker brown brick used in the main body of the house, an unnecessary but clearly decorative intervention, expressing delight in the manner of a well-cut school uniform and enriching the building's tonal variety. These porches reflect again O'Byrne's interest in the threshold that he demonstrated in nearly all his buildings, but their labelling as storeroom also





suggested that he was anticipating the needs of potential occupants, as many people from the Warren Street slum made a living as small traders in the city markets. Their design adds beneficially to the building, complementing the symmetry of the façade and modulating its height. The porches are especially enhanced by their roofline and were built with a little more drama than indicated in the drawings. There is a suggestion of something Japanese, notably in the way the roof's A-line is given a modest but enthusiastic upward tick at each end. With more certainty, this detail compensates for the flat roof, which O'Byrne animated modestly with the use of coloured concrete block in the chimney.

The success of the Warren's Lane scheme paved the way for other innovations, notably the development of O'Byrne's prototype for another flat-roofed house, the monopitch house. At two storeys, the monopitch house was a smaller, less complex and cheaper dwelling to build, which ensured they were used extensively across the city in a variety of situations, sometimes making creative use of the city's hilly topography. In this regard, this structure offers more insight into the ways O'Byrne was responding to both housing

14 – Monopitch houses at Spriggs Road, Gurranabraher

pressures and growing demands for rationalisation. With their distinctive monopitched roofs, tiled with green interlocking pantiles, examples of these houses can be found on Spriggs Road off Sunvalley Drive (Plates 1, 14), in the Farrancleary scheme in Blackpool, and in the Ardmanning scheme in Togher, all substantial schemes built between 1964 and 1966. The first drawings we have from O'Byrne date from 1961 and envision a compact terrace of three houses constructed principally of concrete blocks. Party walls were 9" solid and 'Aeroboard' insulation was used between the rafters. In terms of flooring, the ground floor was concrete and covered with a brand of 'thermoplastic' tile called Accoflex in the kitchen and Accotile in living room and hall. This material, which was cheaper than wooden flooring or than employing tilers, was quick to install and serves as an example of O'Byrne's modest rationalisation of building practices (Plates 12, 13).

There were three different types of dwelling in these plans – a three-bedroom and a four-bedroom house, and an end-of-terrace house with corresponding variation in the relative size of kitchens and living-rooms. For example, the living-rooms in the different houses ranged from 156 to 209 square feet. In the four-bedroom houses the extra bedroom was on the ground floor. The differences in the size of living-rooms and kitchens anticipated the uptake of these houses by tenants with different family sizes. Between the first drawings dating from April 1961 to the final version from November 1963, O'Byrne rationalised the design, shaping a more cost-effective prototype. In the first drawings, the roof is entirely flat in some designs, there is some decorative detail around the front door, and provision is made for external wooden flower-boxes and detailed brickwork on the edge of the end-terrace house. In addition, a decorative mural was envisioned above each front door. If murals like these are included to convey meaning, the geometric designs on the drawing locate O'Byrne in a very modern field of influence. There are echoes of Eames or Festival of Britain styles in these designs. Their presence over the door suggest the architecture offered a new and rational way of living. However, presumably to reduce costs, in the second drawings dating to November 1963 he removed most of these extra elements. New additions now included internal doors in bedrooms with 'glazed panels

in obscured glass', in part to illuminate the stairwell. Though it has been a matter of contention with craft unions, these drawings also detail steel sash windows and back doors made from quarter-inch marine plywood.

In design terms, these were significant innovations when compared to the terraced houses devised by the Ministry of Local Government. Most probably, the house design draws upon precedents found in some threads of European post-war public housing that, in contrast to sometime large scale, high-rise and Brutalist interventions, practiced modest takes on Modernism. A particularly well-known example are the monopitch terraces developed by Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew in the early 1950s for the Chantry neighbourhood of Harlow new town in England, which themselves had affinities to Scandinavian design. Though there is no evidence of a direct connection, it is worth noting that there are also some similarities in form and layout between these houses in Cork and site plans and housing-chains devised by the Danish architect Arne Jacobsen in his work at the Søholm Row housing at Klampenborg, Denmark, built in the late 1940s. O'Byrne's staggered terraces mirror Jacobsen's spatial arrangements, and by attending to the topography, most notably at the Farrancleary development in Blackpool, his grouping (or massing) offered a visual experience that contrasted with the monotony of most terraced housing.

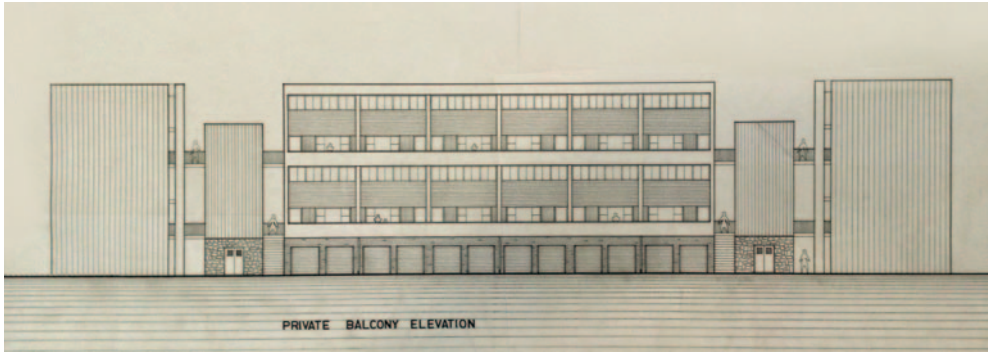
CONCLUSION

By 1962, Cork Corporation claimed there were only two slum areas left in the city, at Green Lane and Walsh's Lane in Blackpool and the Boyce Street area, both on the city's northside.[16] In time, the 'secret slums', as writer Frank O'Connor put it, and the suffering of the people who endured them would fade from public memory.[17] The Corporation reported that they had demolished 1,670 houses, built 7,000 dwellings and accommodated 36,000 people in both new suburbs and in inner-city areas cleared of slum housing. In spite of reservations from the new Cork City Manager, Walter McEvilly, that the Corporation needed to step back from provision, the demand for public housing would continue to grow.[18] Under O'Byrne's direction, in the early 1960s plans were made for more large schemes, notably in Togher, Blackpool and The Glen. O'Byrne led the slum clearance in Blackpool and made plans for the construction of five-storey maisonettes at Walsh's Avenue, Green Lane (Plate 15) and Thomas Davis Street. Altogether, on a four-acre site he planned to deliver 76 maisonettes, 31 bedsitters and twelve garages. Furthermore, he had plans to build a ten-storey tower in The Glen. Had it been built it would have matched in height some of the tower blocks eventually constructed in Ballymun in Dublin in the late 1960s. One drawing for the five-storey flats that O'Byrne proposed for this district in January 1965 survives. The figures in the drawing are interesting as they walk, stand and look out of windows and over balconies. Their strikingly modern character is very different to the image of a child spinning a hoop and a man in a flat cap pictured in his drawing of his first maisonettes in The Marsh. The Corporation did not proceed with either of O'Byrne's schemes, and the National Building Agency used a government loan to replace O'Byrne's plans with the false glamour of a prefabricated and system-built housing scheme.

Looking back over his work in Cork, O'Byrne's contribution to the city was clearly significant. Whole neighbourhoods bear his imprint. His position gave him a powerful role as a place-maker in the city, moving between and sometimes fusing the scale of urban planning and architecture. He was a keystone urbanist who set up a long-term strategy, leading the way on slum clearance, designing the city's libraries and fire stations, creating new urban territory and devising appropriate and mostly affordable housing which responded to both the needs of tenants and the pressures of a State house-building apparatus. Whilst grounded by the constraints and opportunities offered by the city, he also defined himself as an architect. His work was remote from the world of international competitions and academic discourse, but instead focussed upon the production of housing, well-being and urban reproduction, devising affordable housing schemes that were economic in construction, comfortable and modern. Though the standard terrace or semi-detached house as envisioned in prescribed Ministry of Local Government schemes still remained part of the development mix, his neighbourhood planning and housing designs reveal an image of the city that was progressive, typically European and modern. A walk along the top of Baker's Road today will reveal different versions of his housing typology, materials in use, different social mix, variations in set-back from the road, and garden provision that speaks to this attention to neighbourhood character. In a modest way, and at an entirely different scale, it is possible to identify in his work an affinity with Modern architecture and planning associated with CIAM, which urged architects and planners to deal with the housing crisis through repetition and combination of key typologies. In his case, it involved the use of terraced houses, bungalows and flats in new neighbourhood units like Ballyphehane and Churchfield.

From the evaluation of some of the examples of this work in this essay, it appears that O'Byrne shared the aspiration and design template of tempered Modernism which the *Architectural Review* had in the1950s defined as 'New Empiricism', a perspective which Ellen Rowley argues figured large in the Irish architectural imagination in the 1950s.[19] In taking this route, as has been noted about the development of some public housing in the post-war period in the UK, O'Byrne's work was often restrained. Whilst he slowly rationalised building materials and techniques, he often had little option but to

15 – Five-storey housing at Green Lane / Walsh's Avenue, Blackpool: private balcony elevation (1965)



use conventional construction processes. This situation was sometimes shaped by funding shortages, the scarcity of building materials or the dispositions of unionised labour. Additionally, as argued by Jackson and Holland (2014), pressure to deliver homes to people in desperate need reduced in some contexts any support for experimentation, which could prove costly and time-consuming and lead to poor outcomes for tenants.[20] When we place his work alongside that of his contemporary, the Cork County Council architect Patrick McSweeney and his designs for County Hall, Bantry Library and public housing in Douglas, O'Byrne probably comes out as the less experimental. Yet, as Deane Evans notes, 'good design can be the critical difference between an affordable development that succeeds – one that satisfies its residents and neighbours, enhances the community where it is built, and continues as a stable part of that community for decades – and one that does not.'[21] Where it has been well maintained and managed, O'Byrne's work largely falls into the first category. It is time for his contribution to be properly recognised and explored so that the lost Cork of Eamon O'Byrne, a city that hides his work in plain sight, comes back into view.

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ENDNOTES

1 See, for example, Cathal O'Connell, *The State and Housing in Ireland: ideology, policy and practice* (New York, 2007); Ruth McManus, *Dublin 1910-1940: shaping the city and suburbs* (Dublin, 2002); Ellen Rowley, *Housing, Architecture and the Edge Condition* (London, 2018).

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9 Cork City Archive, CP/AR/MPD/2010/530, architectural drawing for Knockfree Housing Scheme, November 1957.

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12 Stephen Barrett, Committee on Finance: Local Government, Dáil Éireann debate, 24th June 1954, vol. 146, no. 3.

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16 'Statement on Slums', *Cork Examiner*, 28th Aug 1962.

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18 'All Change For Cork Housing Schemes?', RTÉ Archive, originally broadcast on 11th Oct 1963; available at www.rte.ie/archives/2018/0925/997956-corporation-housing-in-cork.

19 Rowley, *Housing, Architecture and the Edge Condition*, 400.

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21 Deane Evans, 'Bringing the Power of Design to Affordable Housing', *Cityscape*, vol. 16, no. 2, 2014, 87-102.