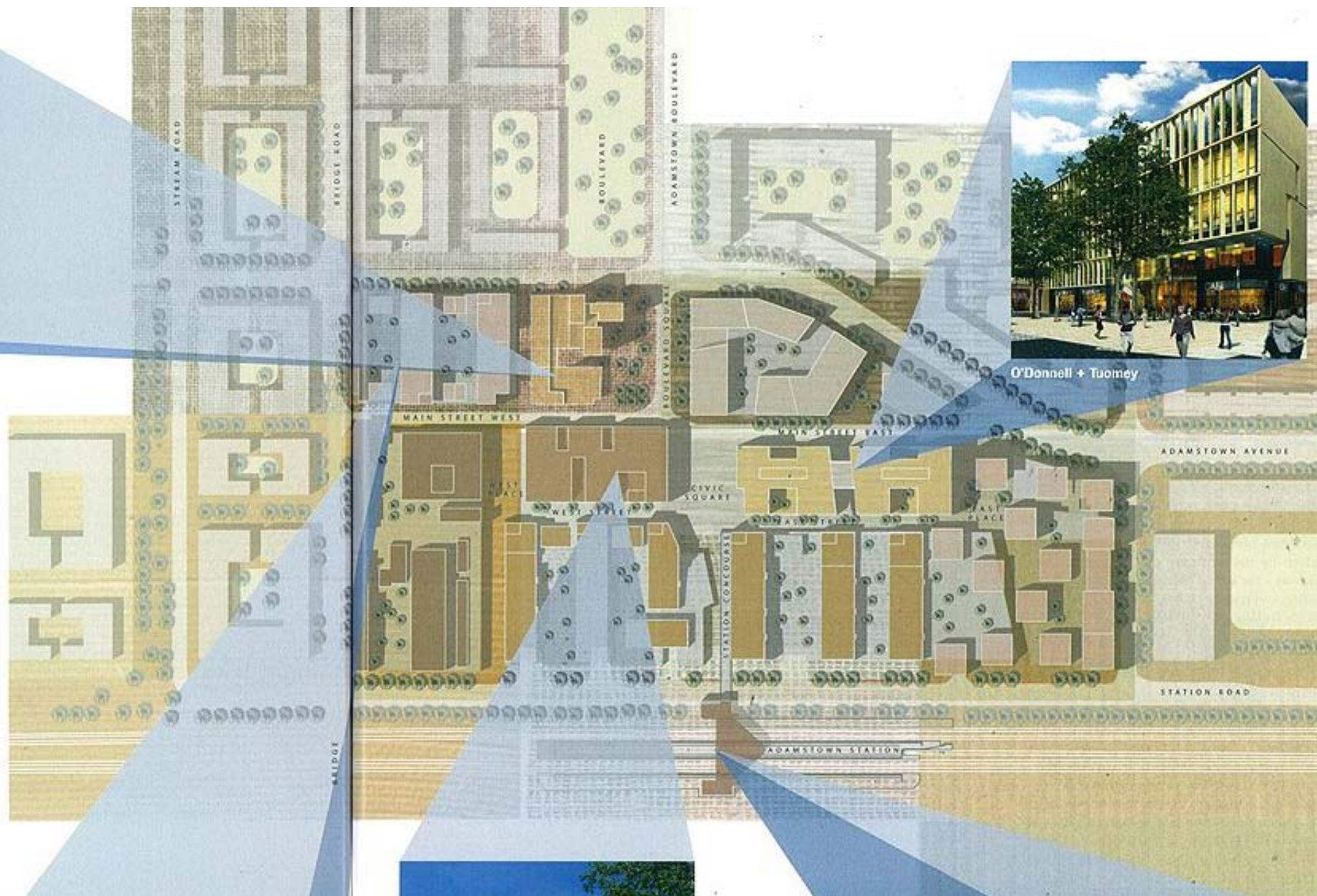




O'Donnell + Tuomey



O'Donnell + Tuomey



Ten miles west of Dublin, Metropolitan Workshop is making the most of the last roar of the Celtic Tiger by building the new town of Adamstown. But will it be able to create a sense of place for the 30,000 people projected to live there by 2015?

By Hugh Pearman

## My kind of town

Ireland finds itself at an intriguing moment, in some ways reminiscent of Britain in the new-town era of the 1960s. The 'Celtic Tiger' period of economic growth, stretching back to the mid-1980s, has resulted in the most sustained period of population increase since before the tragedy of the Famine in the late-1840s and the mass emigration it engendered – the consequence of which was a halving of the population, which fell at its lowest to about 3 million. Today it stands at 4.35 million and is forecast to pass 5 million by 2021. Combined in recent years with the resolution of the Northern Ireland problem and the consequent economic resurgence north of the border, this growth has to be managed. That means building, and lots of it. But where, and how?

Ireland has a national development plan which envisages spending €184bn between

2007 and 2013. Of this, €33.6bn is earmarked for social infrastructure, including housing, and €25.8bn for 'human capital', including schools and higher education. Another tranche is set aside for the transport network, with new roads and railway corridors being planned. On top of this public investment comes a less quantifiable but still huge amount of private sector money, especially in housing and commercial buildings.

Public and private sector come together in the projected 30,000-strong, 11-neighbourhood community of Adamstown, effectively a new town on a greenfield site just 10 miles west of Dublin. Originally masterplanned by South Dublin council, and given Ireland's first strategic development zone or SDZ status, Adamstown is a brave attempt to create a 'predict and provide' integrated community, built by a private-sector consortium, Chartridge



Henry J Lyons Architects (HJL)



Grafton Architects



BOP





Developments, according to a clear master-plan. Unlike much suburban development, it will not be car-dependent. Indeed – as with London's Metroland in the interwar years, driven by the existence of the Metropolitan Railway – the arrival of the Adamstown railway station and transport interchange, designed by BDP's Dublin office, took place in 2007, some time before there was much of a community there.

If you take the hourly train from Dublin's Heuston Station – a journey of only 12 minutes – you will find little else there yet but some early outlying housing estates, a school to serve them, and a pioneer population of around 1000. Two bus services also link it to the centre. But by 2015 it will have a population of 30,000, making it equivalent in size to towns such as Drogheda or Dundalk. Following that, it is expected to double in size to the south. Key to the development of the town – enshrined in SDZ legislation – is the insistence that infrastructure, amenities and services (everything from schools and shops to parks) should keep a step ahead of residential expansion.

This is where London-based Metropolitan Workshop comes in. Founded in 2004 by architects David Prichard and Neil Deely, previously with MacCormac Jamieson Prichard, MW and Adamstown have been growing up together. In 2005, having previously worked on MJP's Ballymun regeneration project, they won the competition to masterplan Adamstown Central, and have been working on it ever since. (MW is now also working on an even larger community, the 60,000-strong Swords district north of Dublin near the airport).

At Adamstown, however, they have a clean sheet rather than having to deal with a legacy of existing residents and buildings. They have not been designing in isolation but developing plans for the centre alongside a roster of six leading Irish architects for the main buildings, themselves selected in competitive interview. The main design team thus consists of Grafton



Architects, O'Donnell + Tuomey, Duffy Mitchell O'Donoghue, O'Mahoney Pike, HKR Architects, HJL Architects, and Metropolitan Workshop themselves. Simon Henley of Buschow Henley (noted for his academic study of parking structures) has been brought in to co-ordinate the car parking here. Trains and buses notwithstanding, it is still thought that at least half of journeys – and probably many more – will be made by car. Landscape (Gross:Max) and lighting (Speirs and Major) designers are also closely involved, along with engineers Arup for the sustainability plan. (At the time the designs received approval, it was 40% ahead of building regulations in energy terms.)

Deely explains that the aim from the outset was to make the centre clearly central – of higher density than the surrounding areas, and with an interlocking set of facilities along with hundreds of homes and a lot of office space. It includes an 'inner arena' 260m long by 80m wide where the main central facilities are placed. The whole atmosphere of the project

has been different from the UK, he notes: 'Wherever you work in Ireland, there's a joie de vivre,' he says. 'Everyone's enjoying themselves.' He singles out his developer client, Jude Byrne of Castlethorn Construction, for buying wholeheartedly into the 'archiplanning' strategy he has been pursuing. And he reckons the Irish practices – some of them familiar with co-operative working from their early days as 'Group 91', regenerating Dublin's famous Temple Bar district – have a different attitude to most of their UK counterparts. 'Chemistry is important, and they all came along prepared to share ideas.'

The scale of the place, notes Deely, is around the same as Mahmød's West Harbour, the Dutch new town of Almere, or a French bastide town such as Montpazier. Obviously there is no point trying to ape these very different places – one still shudders at the attempts of British post-war planners to create wet-climate versions of their French and Italian holiday retreats, as one does at today's endless name-

Far left: Adamstown is due west of Dublin, linked by rail.  
Left: proof that different architects can work fruitfully together.  
Below right: perspective section of Grafton Architects' library and civic centre.  
Bottom: BDP's station, waiting for the commuters to arrive.







checking of Barcelona – but they do provide clues in terms of linked public spaces, proximity of parks, the desirability of mixed-use buildings, transport and educational infrastructure and so forth. Deely is clear that the character of Adamstown should be its own character, not a pale imitation of elsewhere, and not an architectural zoo of competing egos. He cites the way Grafton Architects (the library) and the adjacent office and retail building by O'Donnell + Tuomey have an easy visual relationship with each other. There are certain absolutes such as a 30m height limit in the centre and at a few key points elsewhere. Rather than having over-prescriptive design codes for materials, he has brought in the veteran Bergen-based architect Grete Smedal to produce guidelines for materiality and colour.

This is the eternal paradox of the new town: traditional cities acquire their character in an ad-hoc way over centuries, so how to create a sense of place overnight? Metropolitan Workshop's multi-architect approach – entirely modernist in outlook, a characteristic Ireland shares with the Netherlands – helps here, coupled with what Deely calls the 'co-ordinated variety' of Grete Smedal's input, and the careful massing of the town such that one naturally gravitates towards the centre. This is something that is so obvious in a historic town, but so often flunked in low-density new settlements.

Then comes the fact that this is a grid-based plan where the grid is gently subverted – with a hierarchy of street widths, moments where



**Top, happy coexistence:** Grafton Architects' library/civic centre (left) works visually with a residential block by O'Donnell+Tuomey (right).

**Above:** HJL Architects ingeniously surround the bulk of a cinema with homes and shops.

streets widen into squares of various sizes, make sudden jiggles, have buildings that dance along the street line rather than necessarily building right up to it. The place has a dash of eccentricity to it.

Adamstown looks highly promising and deserves to succeed. It received its full planning permission at the end of August. People are proud of it, but they are not over-cooking it. Nobody is calling this place a utopia. It is, ultimately, a slightly detached suburb of superior ambition. The proof, of course, will be in the building. And a lot of the character of the place will be in the hands of housebuilders working in the neighbourhoods outside the central area so carefully orchestrated by Deely and his colleagues at Metropolitan Workshop. Still, he dares to hope that this can be a world-class exemplar 'not only in architectural terms, but also in terms of process'.

Beyond that, Adamstown may mark the end, rather than the beginning, of an era. Years of plenty in Ireland have made it possible, and now the inevitable lean period follows. Other new settlements may have the desire, but will they have the means to follow its example? ■