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 this 30,000 people projected to live there by 2015?

By Hugh Pearman

My kind of town

In fact, 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-1990s, has resulted in the most sustained period of population increase since before the tragedy of the famine in the late 1840s and the means civilization it engendered – the consequence of which was a halving of the population, which fell to its lowest to about 4 million. Today it stands at 4.5 million and is forecast to pass 5 million by 2022. Combined in recent years with the resolution of the Northern Ireland problem and the consequent economic renaissance much of the bonds, this growth has to be managed. That means building, and lots of it. But where, and how?

Inland has a national development plan which envisages spending €3.5bn between 2007 and 2013. Of this, €3.1bn is earmarked for social infrastructure, including housing, and €350m for "human capital" including schools and higher education. Another €2bn is set aside for the transport network, with new roads and railway corridors being planned. On top of this, public investment comes 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 10,000-strong, 11-neighbourhood community of Adamstown, effectively a new town on a greenfield site just 30 miles west of Dublin. Originally masterplanned by South Dublin county and given in 2010 its strategic development zone (SDZ) status, Adamstown is a brave attempt to create a "green, walkable" integrated community, built by a private-sector consortium, Chartridge.
Developments, according to a clear masterplan, will not be car-dependent. Indeed, as with London’s Mordenland in the interim years, driven by the experience of the Metropolitan Railway - the arrival of the Acton Town railway station and transport interchange, designed by BDP’s office, will be built in 2006, some time before there was much of a community there.

If you take the hourly train from Dublin’s Heuston Station - a journey of under 30 minutes - you will find little else there yet but some new, well-signposted housing estates, and a growing population of around 3500. The north line has also been extended to the centre, which by 2016 will have a population of 100,000, making it capital city 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 - envisioned in 2002 legislation - is the provision of infrastructure, amenities and services, everything from schools and shops to parks, so as to keep a step ahead of residential expansion.

This is where London-based Metropolitan Workshop comes in. Founded in 2004 by architects Richard Whitfield and Neil Donald, previously with MacCormac Jamieson Pringle, MWW and Acton Town have been working together since, MWW is now also working on a new development that is literally 200 square feet, 3000 square feet.

Admission, however, they have a clean sheet rather than having to deal with legacy of existing residents and buildings. They have not been designing in isolation but developing plans for the centre alongside a masterplan of streets and buildings, themselves selected in competition interview. The main design team then consists of Grafton Architects, O'Donnell + Tuomey, Duffy by Mulligan, O'Donnell and O'Donnell, O'Donnell by Mulligan, O'Donnell, and O'Donnell.

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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 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?