

Northern Ireland
NEWSLETTER
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Planning for

people
place &
planet



**Friends of
the Earth**

The importance of place

Place is not simply a location – a city, town, estate, street, or townland. Place is fundamental for quality of life. Place is a complex concept. It is its people, its shops, its open spaces, its community hubs, its bus stops and train stations, its short-cuts and secret places, the rhythm of its streets, and the ebb and flow of people moving in and out.

The identity of a place is determined by a number of interconnected factors - its people's sense of connection to the physical location, how they interact with each other, with people in other places, how they move within and between, and how it changes over time. These factors determine how well people can use and live in their place, and feed back into how attractive a living space the place is, in a cycle that may be virtuous or vicious, depending on the conditions.

Manipulating these factors can have serious consequences for the health and vitality of places, even when done with good intentions. Planning policies, redevelopment projects, and displacement and relocation of people can have

unforeseen consequences – dislocation, community strife, crime, insecurity, and a degraded physical environment. If done well, however, it can produce resilient, confident communities, with a strong connection to place, its history, and its people.

The creation and nurturing of resilient, sustainable, and vibrant communities must begin with a consideration of what people care about, what their core values are, and what motivates them. We must learn from the mistakes of failed attempts, and look to good practice elsewhere. A social-ecological approach can help to make the connections between where people live, and how people live – the interaction between people's physical environment, and their attitude to that environment and how they use it.

Social-ecology is a way of looking at people's relationships and interactions with each other, their immediate environment, and the natural world. It advocates a transformative outlook on social and environmental issues, and promotes a direct democracy, active citizenship, and social

responsibility. Social-ecology argues for a moral economy that moves beyond resource depletion, the political and social structures that perpetuate scarcity, and regressive and oppressive hierarchies, towards a world that connects human communities with each other and the natural world, while celebrating diversity, creativity, equity, and justice.

Examining the implications of putting place at the heart of the planning system requires understanding the relationship between individuals and their environment. The rapid transformation of once familiar places can be seen as a major threat to self, others, or the environment. This is especially true when communities are dislocated and dispersed in order to aid the redevelopment of an area.

That means fully involving communities in the decisions that affect them. Autocratic, tick-box, prescriptive consultation exercises aren't good enough. Blank sheet planning, underpinned by a clear set of principles, can create the sort of places people want to live in – places that people cherish, that work for them, and that encourage the development of nurturing and supportive communities. Understanding the relationship between individuals and their environment, or the meanings that individuals associate with a particular place is important for developing a fully collaborative planning process.

The planning system is a powerful tool that can be positive and constructive, or negative and destructive. There is no reason why everyone can't live in a safe, healthy place that inspires, nurtures, and supports them. Planners just have to trust that people understand the place they live in, and can make good decisions.

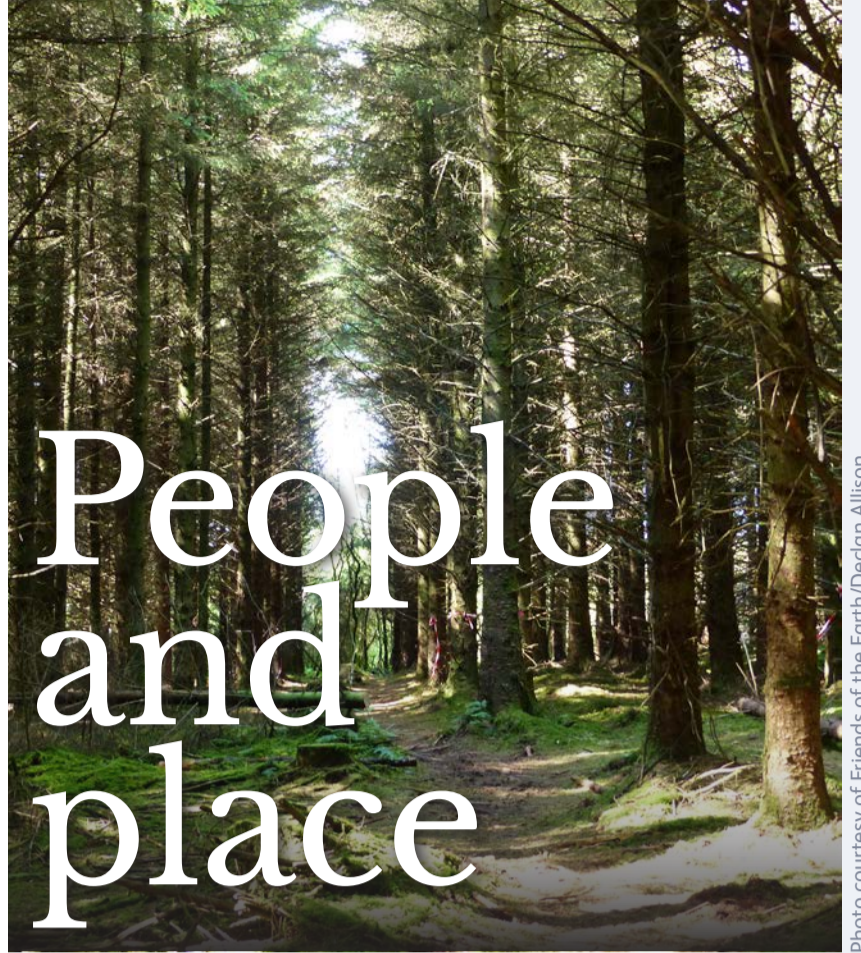


Photo courtesy of Friends of the Earth/Declan Allison

People and place

A place is essential for life. With a twist. Not all life can survive in all places. There must be reasonable match between the organism's needs and the place's ability to satisfy them. Conversely - the organism's needs include care for the place it flourishes in.

While many animals have an inborn understanding of this double bond, people exploit the environment with dangerous consequences.

As a teenager, I protested against air pollution from lorries that were not serviced properly, and against the industrial waste killing life in the river at the end of our garden. I was the only one in that small town, and the authorities labelled me an enemy of the new communist society, a bourgeois residuum. It taught me not to trust elected politicians, unless they earned my trust. Alas, they do not do it spontaneously.

In the Local Development Plan for the Mid and East Antrim Council it reads:

Safeguard mineral resources of economic or conservation value e.g. by allowing for expansion of existing quarries, and retain

the existing designated Area of Salt Reserve. There would be a presumption in favour of minerals development within designated Minerals Reserve Areas and other areas identified as suitable for minerals development. However, there would be a presumption against minerals development within areas designated for their landscape and/or environmental/heritage significance or at least within the majority of their extent e.g. within existing, expanded or new Areas of Constraint on Minerals Development (ACMD). Elsewhere proposals would be determined against existing or amended policy on a case-by-case basis.

Note the determining verb and noun: safeguard...resources - a plausible opening. And how will this be achieved? By expansion, by development, by existing or amended policy. The document does not distinguish between "wants" and "needs" - as most people do not either. I know, I gave seminar discussions on Victor Papanek's and E.F.Schumacher's pioneering books in Scotland and NI with patchy results among designers, architects and planners. Unless the council considers clean air, clean water, clean soil, renewable sources of energy, and severe reduction of waste as the ground for life first, the place we each live in has a good chance of deteriorating.

Last week I read an article - in one EU country they are debating how to save arable land. I recall Nazi Germany during the WW2 importing train loads of the dark arable soil from the then occupied parts of the Soviet Union to recondition the soil at home. Indeed: safeguard resources - but differently from what the Council paper prefers. As it is, it is not a good enough plan for now nor for the future generations.



Photo courtesy of iStock

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Regulation through agitation

In Northern Ireland, where our regulatory authorities have not served the public well, is it any wonder that citizens are increasingly calling out bad and harmful practice? Often driven by deep attachments to place and a selfless sense of public duty to protect their special places (our precious environments) – for future generations, ordinary people have become our citizen planners, our self-taught regulators, and our champions of common sense.

Northern Ireland's planning and regulatory systems exist to serve the public interest. Yet neither have been bathed in glory in recent years. Rather, systemic failure and institutional neglect pervade environmental governance giving rise to some of the worst breaches of control ever witnessed in the United Kingdom. The blind-eye turned, historically, to unregulated sand extraction on a colossal scale from the bed of Lough Neagh, or the failure to prevent unauthorised

quarrying and the subsequent creation of an illegal super-dump adjacent to the River Faughan at Mobuoy Road, are but two of the worst cases in point. That both are designated nature conservation sites of international importance, supposedly afforded the highest environmental protection in Europe, is an alarming and damning indictment of just how badly our institutions have neglected their public duty to safeguard these precious, but precarious ecosystems. Moreover, the unprecedented neglect and harm inflicted on the Faughan and Lough Neagh, the consequences of which will plague this country for generations to come, are but symptoms of a wider malaise that is now synonymous with how people characterise our regulatory authorities and which, sadly, has won Northern Ireland the unenviable label of “the dirty corner of the UK”.

Our finite natural assets, that anywhere else would be cherished for their intrinsic beauty, biodiversity, and contribution they make to the social well-being of citizens, are being sacrificed on the altar of short-term economic gain, where planning is more about facilitating private market forces and less to do with upholding the public interest. But while incompetence, complacency, or complicity are becoming the trademarks of our regulatory regimes, ordinary citizens are stepping into the void left by failing institutions that are increasingly being defined by the neglect and disaster they preside over.

So, when the systemic failure of our planning and regulatory systems inflict great harm upon society and the environment, as they have done in Northern Ireland, it is heartening to witness the growing determination of citizens to speak out in the public interest and challenge the legitimacy of these failing regimes.



Photo courtesy of Friends of the Earth/Declan Atkinson

Citizenship in action

I am not an environmental activist. I did not set out to campaign against proposals to build a mega factory farm near my home and dairy goat farm in the Roe Valley.

I didn't mind when I first heard my neighbour wanted to build a pig farm. However, when I discovered that my neighbour proposed building a unit to keep almost 2,500 sows producing up to 67,000 pigs on the one site, I became very concerned about its impact, and about our ability to live and farm next door to an industrial scale farm in this beautiful River Roe valley.

As a concerned resident, I did what most people do. I submitted an objection to the Planning Office and noticed that over 200 people had done likewise. In addition a further 10,000 people had signed petitions against this development. However, I did a bit more digging and discovered that almost all of the statutory bodies had stated they had no objections to this development.

I couldn't understand how Government bodies responsible for our rivers and the environment could arrive at a conclusion that the creation of an additional 20,000 tonnes of pig slurry would have no impact on the

River Roe and its tributaries, a Special Area of Conservation and Area of Special Scientific Interest.

So I set about seeking information from the statutory bodies on how they arrived at their conclusions. I was shocked to discover that most had not completed any assessments, including Habitats Assessments, even when they had a legal duty to do so.

I also became concerned about the potential impact of this development on the health of my family. All of the UK Government websites advised that the public health risks from slurry and anaerobic digester waste were minimal. However, I discovered a growing body of international scientific evidence of the public health risks from disease causing pathogens and antibiotic resistance caused by the land spreading of raw pig slurry and anaerobic digester waste near people's homes.

There is lots of legislation to protect our environment and public health and there are lots of regulators to ensure the legislation is implemented. However, if the community does not question the regulators, then they will only tick the box 'No further assessment required'. It is up to the community to protect their place.

The whole process of challenging regulators and the prospect of losing is stressful for me and my family, but I am not prepared to give up my seat on the bus.



Photo courtesy of Simon Wood

Save Cathedral Quarter

Perhaps the best way to describe the proposals for the Cathedral Quarter 'regeneration' in Belfast is what the French sociologist Henri Lefebvre described as 'abstract space' — space that reduces the vitality and life of our cities to the lowest common denominator in order to achieve maximum financial gain. Now, there is nothing wrong with wanting financially successful cities; but at what cost?

On the face of it, the scheme presented at the recent public consultation by developer Castlebrook Investments seems nice enough. A public square surrounding one of Belfast's most historic buildings, Rosemary Street Presbyterian church; a shiny new office block; cafes, restaurants, retail units; people sitting outside, enjoying cappuccinos in the sun. But spend some time looking at the glossy computer visualisations and it isn't long before another story starts to emerge.

What looked like a public square is really just a privately owned pseudo-public space; a privatised space, likely owned and controlled by the eventual landlord. This is a worrying trend happening in cities across the UK and Ireland where the openness of cities is being privatised at the expense of our experience and enjoyment of them.

At night-time, when the retail units will presumably be closed, this pseudo-public space, animated for a few hours a day by office workers heading to their generic office block, will be empty. Add to this Belfast's high retail vacancy rate (one of the highest in the UK at 17%), and the lack of affordable housing provision — which according to the architect will be “over there and out of the way” — one begins to wonder what, if anything, this space will do to contribute to the life and vitality of the city other than produce the atonal hum of what sociologist Sharon Zukin calls “pacification by cappuccino”.

Geographer David Harvey describes our 'right to the city' as “one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights”. It is through changing the city that we get to change ourselves and through changing ourselves that the city is changed. Our cities matter, our collective ability to shape them is a fundamental human right. But when the discourse surrounding the regeneration of our cities is reduced to the banal loveless platitude of 'it's just the commercial reality' — a phrase repeatedly used by the architects at the recent public consultation — then we must raise our voices and speak for our cities.

This is what the SaveCQ group has been helping to do. As a diverse group of architects, planners, artists, urban designers, business people, community workers, writers, teachers, social scientists; SaveCQ has been playing its part in giving the city a voice.



Nature's Keepers

Is planning working?

Have you ever thought about why we have a planning system? Some may think it is just a way of ensuring all development is built in a nice, ordered way, to protect Ulster's rolling green fields, or some may think it is just unnecessary bureaucracy. Most people do not give the planning system a second thought, unless they are caught in some tussle with the local council over trying to secure planning permission, or trying to stop someone else doing so. Indeed, what is very rarely appreciated is that planning plays a much bigger role in our society than most people realise and under present arrangements, it is not delivering what it could, or should, for the majority of our society.

The idea of a planning system emerged in the 19th Century, driven by visionaries who believed that the collective and long term intervention in housing, land markets, infrastructure, and the environment was vital in securing a stable and more just society.

This powerful idea was the reason that the planning system came to be seen as an essential component of the welfare state and established in its current form just after the Second World War, alongside the NHS, free education, full employment, and public housing. At that time, the planning system was seen as a vital tool for addressing the challenges of poverty, disease and squalor. Working closely with other initiatives such as the provision of public housing, public health standards, slum clearance, and infrastructure development, the planning system was responsible for (potentially) saving millions of lives and certainly uplifting the quality of life of many more.

It is therefore strange that most people don't see the planning system in these terms. Indeed it is rare to find someone who is willing to defend the planning system in the same way as the NHS. A key reason for this is that those early progressive aspirations of

what the planning system was for seem to have become lost amongst other competing goals – a strive for regulatory efficiency and, in particular, a need to secure development and economic growth at any cost, or at least to the cost of the environment, the climate, and the hope of affordable housing. We have lost the visionaries who were able to articulate how planning could be engaged to make a better world, and instead we have well-meaning planners working in complex administrative systems, whose goals are set by politicians who often do not realise the usefulness of the planning system for securing a better future.

It is, of course, naive to suggest that planning can be a silver bullet to fix all of society's ills and, admittedly, through poor decisions and a lack of vision, actually made some problems worse. Yet for many issues, including affordable housing, environmental protection, addressing climate change, and contributing to securing a fairer society, planning is one of the only processes we have capable of making the long term interventions that we need. We must remember that the planning system should be working for all of us and that it is democratic, rational and broadly accepted as a legitimate form of regulation.

If used effectively and boldly, planning already has the means to ensure that all development contributes effectively to meeting the needs of everyone, not just the 1%. We could use the planning system to ensure we only permit those developments that genuinely contribute to a sustainable, just future and stop those that may foster some short term economic growth but result in long term environmental and social damage that we will all have to pay for. We could also ask the developers that benefit so much from the current economic system to pay more for the public infrastructure and affordable housing that we so badly need, or to secure equal access to green space, leisure facilities and housing. Is that so unreasonable?



Photo courtesy of Friends of the Earth/Declan Allison

Friends of the Earth has a track record of fighting to save our most important nature sites. In Northern Ireland even our legally protected sites are still suffering damage from badly located development and other damaging activities. We can't afford for this to continue, as it becomes clearer that nature is essential to our wellbeing, we need to step up its protection.

Our Nature's Keepers project takes a fresh look at how we relate to nature and place. It tells the stories of a diverse group of people who have worked tirelessly to stand up for the places that are special to them, captured in photographs and videos, stories that will inspire others and demonstrate the need for decision makers to act too.

Each Nature Keeper's motivation may have different origins, but whether from a desire to protect family farmland from pollution, a passion for birds, seals, or ancient trees, childhood memories experiencing nature, or a strong cultural connection with a landscape – all the keepers have felt a common compulsion to act to protect a natural place that they feel a deep connection to.

This is a feeling that is eloquently expressed by Dean Blackwood who is fighting an illegal landfill site close to the River Faughan, an EU protected site: "The Faughan is my river. It flows through me as sure as it flows through this landscape, and for that I feel compelled to give my river a voice"

Although deeply rooted in the local, Northern Ireland's keepers are part of a growing network of people standing up for nature across the UK and Europe. In fact, NI keepers was inspired by a Friends of the Earth Europe

project. As we campaign to ensure that the environment does not lose out in the negotiations over Brexit, the stories from across Europe are a timely reminder of how nature does not recognise political boundaries – in or out of the EU, migratory birds will still rely on Northern Ireland's wetland habitats such as Lough Neagh and Lough Beg.

And for the incredible people fighting to save these places perhaps Keepers will help them feel more, not less, connected at this time. As one of the Keepers, Dermot Hickson, said of the Lough Beg landscape that inspired the poetry of Seamus Heaney, this place "belongs not just to the people of Aghrim Hill, it belongs not to County Derry, it belongs to Northern Ireland, it belongs to Ireland, it belongs to Europe, it belongs to anyone who has ever connected to the themes that Seamus Heaney talked about".

And as campaigners in Northern Ireland fight to save the precious landscape at Lough Beg from the A6 road, a battle is also being fought in Bulgaria where local campaigners are fighting to save the incredible Kresna Gorge from a road development.

Now more than ever we need to stand together. In 2015 half a million people in Europe took action for nature when the EU laws that protect it were threatened. We will continue to fight to protect nature and to restore it where it has been lost. We expect more and more people to join us inspired by the Keeper's stories. The fundamental connection with nature and with particular places that compels people to act should not be underestimated by decision makers.

Photo courtesy of Friends of the Earth/Declan Allison