



Dermot Bannon Apartment living is a great city lifestyle, but poor design has seen it shunned by the Irish. In future, we should take inspiration from the Europeans

It’s time to embrace apartment living

Last week, the Central Bank started to put in place procedures it hopes will apply the brakes to a potentially heated housing market, with the introduction of minimum deposit amounts. The aim is to arrest the start of a panic property-buying spree which seems to have taken hold, caused primarily by the lack of new homes.

While this has been welcomed by many, and there is a momentum for change, we really need to start looking at the other mistakes we made during the building boom. It’s not just the legacy of negative equity that we need to address, but we need to take a serious look at the housing stock that we have and how we can create better places to live that are flexible, sustainable and will take into account

homeowners’ and community needs for our next generation. This must be done in tandem with the bottom line that needs to be achieved with any development. And it all needs to be done before the next building wave, which is desperately needed.

During the boom, we built some architectural gems. However, the vast majority of what was constructed was standard layout three- and four-bed semis and a raft of vertically orientated duplexes and apartment developments.

Three- and four-bedroom semi-detached houses that were built at a rate of up to 90,000 units were mostly a copy clip of a house type that was flawed, with narrow long spaces, no storage, tiny utility areas and segregated rooms that did little to enhance contemporary family life.

Outside, the streets were often designed around the car and not the

community. In many cases, the green open spaces were the amalgamation of the left-over areas between buildings. If you were lucky, you got a south-facing home, but the converse of this is that your neighbours across the road had gardens in shade throughout the day – an inherent flaw in flipping and mirroring a standard plan, it can only work in half the instances.

With the cost of land set to rise in our cities, we as a nation need to embrace apartment living. The most sustainable and affordable way of living in a high-density city is in proper apartments. How we design and build our apartments is going to be key in convincing a nation who do not see apartment living as a long-term option.

Why do we hate the thought of living in an apartment so much? The mere idea of raising a family in one frightens us when the complete opposite is true

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in countries such as the Netherlands, Germany and Sweden.

Much of our apartment stock was built during the 1990s and the 2000s. And while there are a few good examples dotted around our cities, the majority of these buildings were developer-led with floor areas squeezed and trimmed to their bare minimum; private and semi-private open spaces shoved into obscure corners of the building; and balconies facing onto busy thoroughfares in the city.

We have all seen the bikes squashed onto tiny balconies. They are a poor imitation of apartment buildings built by our European colleagues – ours maintain the basics and remove all the facilities and benefits found on the continent. This was all facilitated by the Department of Environment’s minimum requirements, which were inadequate, and which were only just

about met by developers.

During the boom, these buildings were inhabited by a young workforce, delighted to be away from home and really only needing somewhere to put their heads down. These buildings were always conceived and marketed as stepping stones and never somewhere you would spend the rest of your life raising a family. Expectations were low and they sold quickly.

We need to look and learn from our European counterparts where large apartments are situated in blocks that are slap bang in the middle of the city, a short stroll, bike or tram ride to work. These spacious units are ample for any growing family, with good kitchen and dining space as opposed to the dark minuscule cupboards we have become accustomed to. They also have children’s bedrooms with space to study and socialise. These are the basics, but it is also the little things that make a huge difference to family life.

Things such as storage and tonnes of it, from bikes in a generous personal lock-up in the basement, to storage rooms in the apartments themselves, where the stuff of life – the buggies, cots, sports gear and all the other things we have been tripping over for years – can be kept. We need laundry facilities with proper drying areas – things we take for granted in some houses but never expect in an apartment. Other standard features we should borrow from our continental neighbours’ apartments include communal, energy efficient heating and on-site child care. Nearby there are proper open spaces, playgrounds, areas for families to gather but – more importantly – shops, theatres, cinemas and art galleries.

To move forward as a nation we must come to want and expect more from our new buildings for both ourselves, and our community.

Architect Dermot Bannon presents RTE One’s Room to Improve on Sunday at 9.30pm. His latest book, Love your Home, is on sale now



The terrace at Cork’s River Lee hotel, before the renovation, appeared sterile and cold

Stylishly taking the inside out

The days of ashtrays bolted beside the pub’s front door are gone. Outside spaces are now places we want to be, writes **Stephen Bourke**

In 2004 the smoking ban arrived and the hospitality sector’s response was expedient, utilitarian, and often literally bolted onto the wall. But now we’re starting to see bolder, integrated design that makes it appealing to be out of doors.

The prediction at the time was that pub smokers would quit, or smokers would quit the pubs.

RTE spent most of its report on the first day of the ban talking to those holding it together over their pints indoors, before a brief cutaway to the irredeemables gathered around wrought-iron tables outside.

The stainless-steel ash bin on the wall by the pub door defines attitudes of the time; as if bolting an ashtray to the wall would fix customers there too.

But ultimately, publicans, restaurateurs and hoteliers are

in the business of comfort – take as proof the surcharge levied by more traditional establishments on drinks in the lounge.

They were faced with the fact that a third of their drinkers were out in the cold. The business owners who innovated, and looked to their customers’ comfort outdoors, would have the upper hand in the years ahead.

“I remember the smoking ban coming in and I remember all the negativity around it, especially in the licensed trade,” said Ruairi O’Connor, general manager of Cork’s River Lee Hotel.

“I think everyone got aboard with it eventually, but the smart people got ahead of the game and created inventive outside spaces.”

The River Lee Hotel was built in 2006 on the site of the former Cork Jury’s Inn. It looks out over the south

channel of the River Lee, just at the point where the trees along the banks yield to the city centre.

Although the hotel already had parasols and patio heaters for smokers on its terrace, there was room for improvement.

“We all knew it was probably the best terrace space in the city,” O’Connor said, “but how could we capitalise on that?”

Alas, the smokers were pushed aside again. Glazed walls, a paved floor and a retractable roof define the space as part of the outdoors, begging for a warm night, but regulations mean the terrace counts as an enclosed space unless the roof is open. The new terrace does a lot to soften the blow – going outside is far more gradual a process.

Rowland Henderson, a carpenter based in Newmarket, Co Kilkenny, built the solid



The new terrace at Cork’s River Lee Hotel has a more inviting atmosphere, thanks to subdued lighting and warm wood tones

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cedar furniture. The sofas, the rough finish on the tables, and the retro vintage filament bulbs strung out across the ceiling give the space a warmth that is a welcome relief from the corporate primness of the average Celtic Tiger-era hotel.

The terrace is wired for a DJ, and O’Connor has big plans for this in the summer.

“Not blow-your-head-off [music], but maybe cool lounge evenings . . . What we want is to keep that kind of relaxed, after-dinner sort of cocktail-y feel to it. You wouldn’t want to crank it up too much.”

Spaces like the Terrace prove Irish tastes now extend beyond the door of the pub.

“Fifteen years ago we’d never have dreamed of having a meal outside in, let’s say, March,” said O’Connor.

“That whole change has brought us outside, as consumers, a lot more.”

Hoteliers not demand that architects of new venues have to fully integrate the outdoors into their designs.

Spaces in Dublin like the Bernard Shaw on Camden Street or House on Leeson Street are prime examples of how publicans are now taking the inside out.



The beer garden at House on Dublin’s Leeson Street has the feel of a sophisticated garden