

THE NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

A THESIS IN TWO PARTS:

PART I - HISTORY -

"The changing face of the Liberties"

PART II - EDUCATION -

"The Liberties used as a learning  
environment through the art class"

FACULTY OF EDUCATION

May 1982

THE NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

"The changing face of the Liberties"

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO:

The Faculty of History of Art and Design  
and Complementary Studies in candidacy for  
the Art Teacher's Certificate and the B.A.  
Degree in Art and Design Education

FACULTY OF EDUCATION

by

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May 1982



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## TITLE: THE CHANGING FACE OF THE LIBERTIES

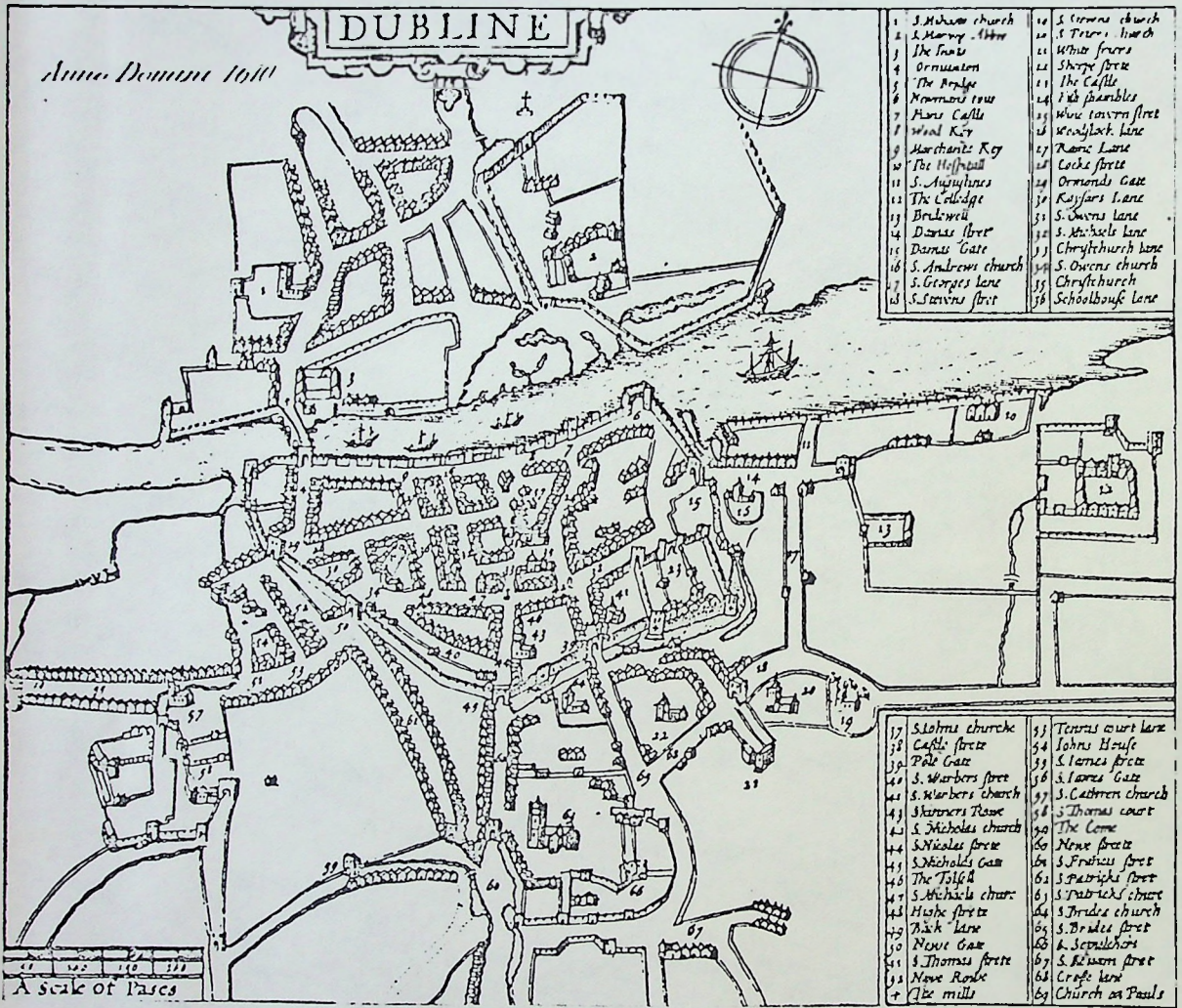
### INTRODUCTION

Although I was not born in the Liberties, I have always had an interest in the area. It was with growing dismay that I witnessed its gradual decay over the years. Every time I travelled home, I passed through the Liberties. The stage was reached when I was ashamed to look out at the dereliction of this historic area, breathing a sigh of relief when the bus reached Dolphin's Barn, away from the decaying area filled with "eye-sores".

Then, in the last few years, I witnessed the new houses going up slowly. When the North Coombe development was completed, I visited it, marvelling at how easily it fitted into the existing area, as if it had grown there. I loved the yellow-painted old fashioned lamp standards and felt that whoever designed the houses must have really appreciated the Liberties and must have visited it often to imbibe its "spirit". These houses were built to be lived in, not just to be looked at. I wondered how they came to be designed, what changes occurred in the Corporation to build such houses and not the usual "flats". When the opportunity arose to choose a subject for a thesis, I immediately decided to investigate this area thoroughly, particularly as the new College of Art had opened in Thomas St., and I would be working in the area and would therefore have the opportunity to imbibe its spirit for myself. I knew that most of this information would be first-hand and would not be found on library shelves.



I determined to go ahead, never dreaming that I would meet so many helpful people and learn so much of interest. It has been a most worthwhile and enriching experience.



1. John Speed's Map of Dublin 1610



## CHAPTER ONE

### A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE LIBERTIES

To many people, the term "Liberties" conjures up images of Old Dublin around the Christchurch and Thomas St. area. In fact there were six Liberties in Dublin, so called because they were not under city jurisdiction. The following is a brief account of each of the Liberties:-

#### 1. The Liberty of St. Thomas Court and Donore

Henry II visited Dublin in 1171 and while here he founded a monastery in honour of the murdered archbishop, Thomas a Becket. He gave a lease of lands to the Victorine Canons to build their abbey. He also gave them a special liberty owing allegiance to no one but God and King. Six years later, St. Laurence O'Toole laid the foundation stone. The Abbey soon spread to take in the lands of Donore, so it became known as the Liberty of Thomas Court and Donore. The Abbey became extremely powerful. It had its own church, courts, gallows, prisons, graveyard and later it diverted the city water supply and had its own water-course and mills. It gathered taxes and had fishing rights on the Liffey. King John later confirmed Henry's Liberty and issued a charter to this effect.

On 31st March 1539, the Abbey, its property and mills were given to William Brabazon (Brabazon St.) forever. An annual rent of 18s. 6d. was levied. William Brabazon was the King's Chancellor and Treasurer. The Brabazons later became the Barons of

Ardee (Ardee St.) and later still became the Earls of Meath (Meath St.). This is in fact how the area got its name, "The Earl of Meath's Liberty".

The liberty lands included Harold's Cross, Dolphin's Barn, Pimlico, James' St., Marrowbone Lane, Meath St., Bridgefoot St., Thomas St., and all the lanes and alleys in the neighbourhood.

## 2. Ailred's Liberty

The second liberty of Dublin came from Rome. In the year 1188, Ailred the Dane and his wife returned to their home in Dublin from a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. They both decided to found a hospital along the lines of the hospital founded by John Hircan in Jerusalem in the year 1151. Ailred became a priest and adopted the rule of St. Augustine and his wife became a nun. Their hospital was built where John's Lane church stands today. Ailred received his liberty from Pope Clement III and thus the hospital and priory were exempt from the city jurisdiction. Ailred's liberty took in his own lands of Thomas St. and part of Francis St. and Vicar's St. On the other side, the lands were bordered by the Liffey and the city walls. The hospital continued to thrive until the year 1540. Kelly's timber yard opposite John's Lane church was the priory graveyard where the remains of Ailred, his wife, and the other followers of St. Augustine lie today.







### 3. The Liberty of St. Sepulchre's

Archbishop John Comyn, successor of Laurence O'Toole and first Anglo-Norman bishop of Dublin, founded the Liberty of St. Sepulchre's. King John granted him lands near the ancient well of St. Patrick. Comyn built his palace on this site and later built a much larger church dedicated to St. Patrick in place of the smaller one already there. The church was solemnly dedicated on St. Patrick's Day 1191. Comyn then tried to abolish the Cathedral of Christchurch and operate from St. Patrick's where he had his own liberty. He failed and that is why we have two cathedrals today. He called his liberty St. Sepulchre - which was the name of his palace, because of his interest in the Crusades and the effort of the Crusaders to rescue the holy sepulchre from infidel hands. The liberty became known as "The Archbishop's Liberty of St. Sepulchre".

The Archbishop's palace is now Kevin St. Garda Station with only a few relics of its historic past remaining. The liberty lands stretched as far as Tallaght and Milltown and included the Coombe and Cork St.

### 4. The Dean's Liberty

At a later stage a liberty was granted to the Dean and chapter of St. Patrick's. He, like the Archbishop, had his own courts and owned the lands by St. Patrick's Park, Bull Abbey and Golden Lane.



5. The Lord Mayor's Liberty

The city inside the walls of Dublin was later referred to as "The Lord Mayor's Liberty". The citizens within the walls had the right of franchise. During the 14th and 15th centuries, the Trade Guilds within the city were very strong. They had the liberty of fixing the prices on their own products.

The Lord Mayor and the city Fathers met in the at Skinner's Row (Christchurch Place). The city also had a charter from King John granting them lands on the northside from St. Mary's Abbey to Clonliffe.

6. The Liberty of Christchurch

Christchurch Cathedral had its own liberty, very much connected to the markets in the area. The liberty included Fishamble St., Winetavern St. and "Dublin's Hell" - with 137 ale houses and lands on the northside around Manor St. and Phibsboro'.

As time went by, many areas in the Liberties became grossly overpopulated. It is interesting to note that out of 16 references to the Liberties in "Dublin" by P. Somerville-Large, nine references are concerned with the appalling conditions which existed there down through the centuries. In order to understand the Liberties of today it is necessary to understand something of the background history of the fight for survival of the unique area of Dublin. The following then are quotations which tell of the conditions of the area down through the centuries.

In 1685, the Liberties were visited by a man called Dunton, who described them as being "crowded with Huguenots, brawny weavers and tradesmen." (1)

The area was described as "the haphazard industrial suburb round Cork St. and the Coombe, lying mostly within the Earl of Meath's estate." (2) Because of the influx of weavers to the area, changes came about as follows - "The large weavers' colony to the south-west put a stop to fashionable interest in that quarter." (3)

The linen and silk weavers who became so prominent a section of the population of the Liberties were mostly immigrants. Since before the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685 there had been a considerable influx of French Huguenot craftsmen into Dublin, and after 1690, they were augmented by Dutch and Flemish Protestants. These workers were credited with the introduction of the type of house known in Dublin as a "Dutch Billy". These houses were built of brick, and designed to stand in continuous terraces. A great many of these houses were built in The Coombe, Cork St., Weaver Square and Marrowbone Lane. They have now nearly all vanished and those that are left are mostly in poor condition. The "Liberty Boy's" who lived and worked in houses such as these "were the most turbulent and independent section of the Dublin populace. They nourished a deadly hatred against the butchers of the Ormonds Market, who were mostly Catholic. All through the 18th century the quays and bridges would become impassible for days on end, as fierce battles ..... raged throughout the centre of the city" (4)

Dean Swift made full use of the power he had in his own



liberty. The area he ruled consisted of two and a half acres of narrow streets adjoining the Coombe and "which swarmed with impoverished people." (5)

Swift cared deeply for his people and it is said that he gave away one third of his income to the poor. One of his chief cares was the poor in the vicinity of the Cathedral. This area was the centre of the wool and silk industries. In 1699 the restrictions on imports were imposed by the English Parliaments and as a result, the area suffered economic blight. Hundreds of Huguenot weavers were left destitute.

"Their cries can scarcely be out of your ears ....it is impossible to have a just idea of their calamity unless you have been an eyewitness to it." (6)

Swift's charities included an almshouse for widows and a charity school for the poor inhabitants of the cathedral precincts. A Dr. Delaney noticed that the poor "were lodged and never begged out of their district." (7)

By the end of the 18th century the Liberties had become squalid slums. "The streets were filled with filth flung from the windows of overcrowded tenements; sometimes it came up to the level of the first floor. Covered-in cesspits, dug before the doors of houses, tended to overflow; when they were emptied, their odours filled the streets. Pollution from coal fires and from glass works clouded the air, affecting the brickwork." (8)

In 1798, the summer of the rebellion, the Rev. James Whitelaw, vicar of St. Catherine's in Thomas St.,

decided to undertake a private census of the area. He found that "The most dense population is found within the walls of the ancient city, comprehending the Parishes of St. Werburgh, St. John, St. Michael, St. Nicholas Without, the Eastern parts of St. Audoen's and the Deanery of Christ Church. Many houses contained thirty or forty people and one was quoted to him as having 108.

I have frequently surprised from ten to sixteen persons of all ages and sexes in a room not fifteen feet square stretched on a wad of filthy straw, swarming with vermin, and without any covering save the wretched rags that constituted their wearing apparel."

Whitelaw's census proved remarkably accurate. He calculated the total population of Dublin at 172,091, with a further 10,000 people comprising the garrison of Trinity, the Castle and various institutions. This made it more populated than any city in England apart from London." (9)

While poverty was rampant in the Liberties, other parts of Dublin were described by many as being "splendid" and "magnificent." According to Craig, "There was a growing tendency for the nobility and gentry to spend more time in Dublin than they had in the seventeenth century." (10) But in the Liberties "unemployment was as savage as ever it had been during Swift's time. It had fallen fifty per cent .... there were more beggars than ever." (11)

During the Industrial Revolution most of the industries in Dublin were located along the canals, beside the port or along the Liffey. The Liberties are referred to as being the centre of the slum area.



In 1822, a visitor to Dublin considered the Liberties as something out of the infernal regions. "Barrack St. was filled with public houses exhibiting a degree of depravity and consequent wretchedness scarcely to be met with anywhere else - women in the lowest state of degradation." (12)

Following the Napoleonic Wars, Dublin was affected by the general post war depression. Widespread unemployment brought poverty and unrest. The government, fearing another rebellion, employed agents or spies to keep them informed about the mood of the people. One agent's reports show how unrest and rumours of rebellion swept through the Liberties. He wrote on 20 June 1817:

"I have to inform your Worship that I have been in all parts of the Liberty and here the people say that on to-morrow Saturday the 21st inst. that their (sic) would be wicked work in Dublin with the people. I have been in the company of Mr. Pat Hart of Watling Street. He told me that on tomorrow he heard (sic) that their (sic) would be wicked work and that all the idol (sic) soldiers of Barrack St. were to turn out with the mob." (13)

The riot did not take place on this occasion but the poverty of the city was real. During the national typhus epidemic of 1817 - 19, the city suffered severely. In Cork St. in the heart of the Liberties, the fever hospital, which had been opened in 1804, was extended to hold greater numbers.

No rebuilding had taken place in the Liberties and

housing conditions were frightful. According to Dr. O'Neill, "Following the publication of Chedwick's report on the sanitary conditions of the labouring population of Britain in 18 , many writers examined conditions in Dublin and one of them described the Liberties as follows:

'The Liberties of Dublin and ports of Cork, Limerick etc. could furnish painful examples of the destruction of health and life from badly constructed or dilapidated houses, narrow streets or alleys, want of ventilation , want of sewers, want of ashpits and other accommodation necessary to prevent the accumulation of filth in and around the dwellings of the labouring classes.'

Though the scandal of Dublin housing was never emphasised until perhaps the early twentieth century it existed at a much earlier period." (14)

As well as the misery which so obviously existed in the Liberties, there was too an attractive and wild wit about the ordinary people, exemplified by the many street characters of the area, particularly Zozimus, the tall gaunt blind ballad singer whose home was in the heart of the Liberties.

I live in Faddle Abbey  
Off Blackpits near the Coombe;  
With my poor wife Sally  
In a narrow dirty room.

A Mr. Thomas Meyler has described the market in Meath Street, deep in the Liberties, as a lively scene where the merchandise overflowing the baskets and sieves all over the streets was "presided over by old





3. The Coombe - showing the new N.B.A. houses, the portico of the old Coombe Hospital and the Artisan dwellings

3. (a) The Artisan dwellings of the Coombe

and young matrons and young women and girls selling their pieces of vegetables, together with fresh cod-fish, conger eels, mackerel and Dublin Bay herrings." (15)

There is a very interesting description of the clothes market in Patrick St. written in 1907 by a Mr. A. Peters. He wrote how. "The Madame Worth ... or Madame Manning of this West End of Dublin placed her bundle of goods on the pavement of the open street .... Everything is here, dresses, petticoats, underclothing, men's trousers, children's frocks, showy blouses, all bearing evidence of having played a brave part in some showplace of the world." (16)

The only housing development of note in the Liberties in the 19th century was an effort to combat the appalling housing conditions in the area - the Artisan Dwelling Scheme, which will be dealt with in a later chapter. This century had seen the steady decline of the area while the long-lived policy of slum clearance was carried out. The population was steadily dispensed to distant suburbs and the area was left to die. Vacant delapidated sites were left gaping and abandoned in readiness for new road schemes to serve the suburbs and for soulless office blocks. The old Coombe hospital was knocked down and rebuilt near Dolphin's Barn while the original site was left neglected and overgrown. Then in the late 60's the Liberties Association was formed and things began to liven up once again in the Liberties. By the end of the 70's, the new housing scheme was being built in the Liberties. The design and planning of these houses will be dealt with in subsequent chapters. The Liberties today - from a social and economic standpoint will first be examined.



## CHAPTER TWO

### THE LIBERTIES TODAY

The development of Dublin as a national and international business centre has resulted in massive office development.. This, with modern industrial development/manufacturing, has pushed up the price of land in the inner city. Old factories that want to expand and modernise their manufacturing process have been granted by the I.D.A. to move to sites in the suburbs, or further out, where land is cheaper. This has resulted in huge job losses in the area. Irish Distillers went to Midleton in Cork; Jacobs to Tallaght; Guinness reduced their manufacturing staff; Donnelly's closed down as did O'Keefe's, and Powers moved to Cork.

The I.D.A. have built advance factory units in the Coombe which will give jobs to approximately 250 people. Some of these will be to existing factories in the area who want to expand or modernise. The Liberties Association would like to see more people from the Liberties area being employed in these factories, or at least first preference given to young people from there who apply for jobs in these factories.

The new housing, which will be discussed in later chapters, was built through the N.B.A. This is the only new building in the area since Bridgefoot St. flats were completed in 1964. The cost per unit (site and clearance included) is approximately £35,000.

The area has a mixed use - residential, commercial, industrial and public existing side by side. It is a very busy shopping area particularly at the weekends.

There is approximately 27 acres of derelict land spread from Newmarket to the Liffey in strip or corner or street sites. There is only one park area (green space) in the area, St. Patrick's Park. There are no public toilets or seat benches.

Data taken from the live register of unemployed people from Victoria St. Labour Exchange and Werburgh St. Labour Exchange in mid-May 1977 shows that there were 2,132 people registered as unemployed in the Liberties at that time.

This pattern of unemployment in the area is as follows:

Unemployment is heavily concentrated in those flat complexes which are notorious for their bad housing conditions, extremely poor environmental and recreational facilities, low levels of education and a multiplicity of social problems. The operation of a "Labelling Mechanism", a process whereby an area is given a bad name and the people who live there find it extremely difficult to get work, certainly seems to be a reason for the distribution of unemployment throughout the area.

#### Education:

There are ten primary schools, three secondary schools and one V.E.C. school in the area. Two primary schools - St. James' C.B.S. and Holy Faith Convent, The Coombe, have secondary schools.

Bull Alley Street Technical School, which is the only technical school in the area, has a drop-out rate of



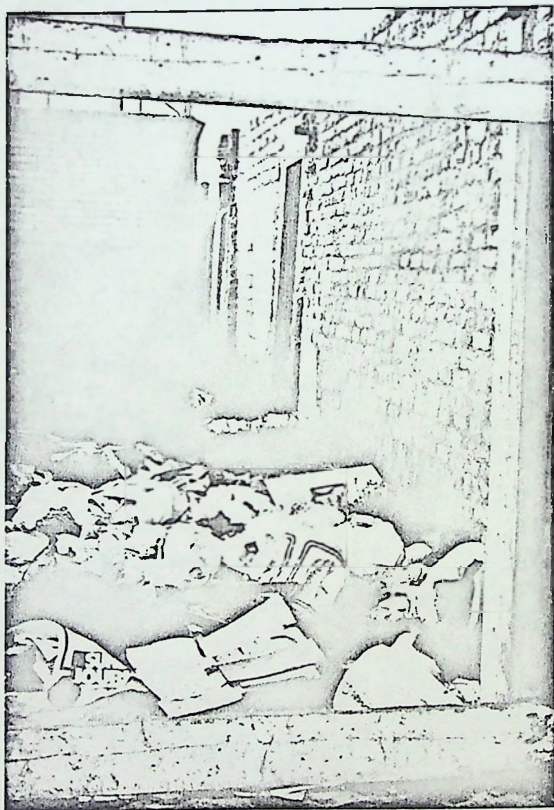
50% in the first two years. This Tech. runs a work experience programme for some of its older pupils and they also run extensive adult education programmes which last year were attended by 900 adults. (17)

In the 1971 census there were 10,580 permanent housing units consisting of approximately 35.5% rented from the Corporation, 31.2% owner-occupied and the remainder privately rented. Many of these housing units exist in older property which is experiencing problems in urgent need of attention. That the area is decaying is confirmed by the journalist Elgy Gillespie when she says: "Trying to find the Liberties is still a very difficult job. You construct it mostly in your imagination; there is little left to tax the eyesight. Such a very thorough job has been done of pulling it down that you need to know what used to be where - a depressing sort of trip until you meet one of the old timers and they help you out." (18)

#### Land Use:

A recent survey was carried out in the area with the following aims:

1. The existing land use pattern of the area and how best to reinforce it in order to continue the area's diverse character.
2. To what extent existing older property has deteriorated and what action is needed to improve it.
3. The quantity of existing derelict land and what proposals could be made for its re-use, in order to enhance the qualities of this urban locality. (19)



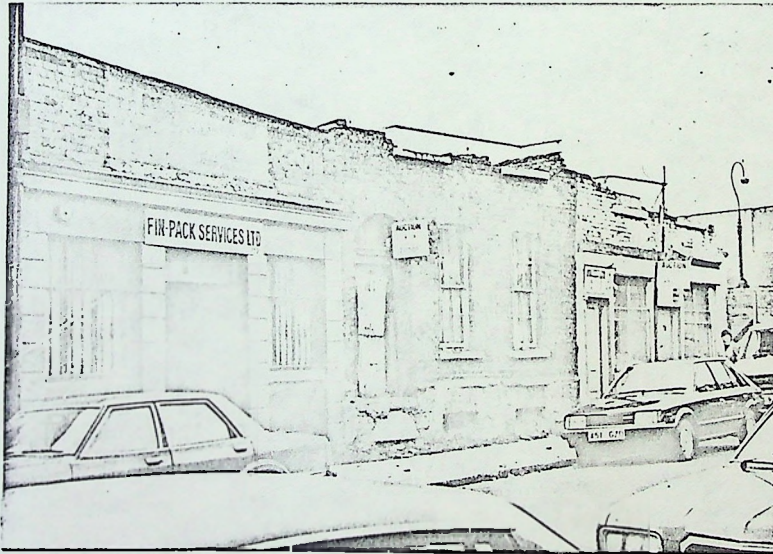
4. A derelict site in Francis St.



it was discovered that there are approximately 901 properties in the Central Liberties. In this instance the term "property" applies to anything from a single storey artisan's cottage to a block of forty flats, to the Iveagh Market buildings, to car parks on High St. Between all this are contained large retail premises, churches, schools and builders' yards. (Omitted from the survey was the recent N.B.S. Housing Development).

The survey showed that no building was considered to be in an excellent condition. The "fair to good" category consisted of buildings which had the minimum of faults i.e. broken slates, blocked gutters, repointing or redecoration. Buildings in the "poor/fair" section were shown to have greater problems of structural failure. Structures under the "bad/poor" heading were often sheds acting as temporary markets, former four-storey houses with only an occupied ground floor supporting highly dangerous facades overhead. Many of the buildings were found to be teetering on the brink of decay. A few more years without repairs and they will be in ruins.

In relation to percentages, 199 properties (22.1%) were in a "poor/fair" condition, 102 (11.3%) were in a "bad to poor state", and 65 (7.2%) were in a derelict or demolished condition. This gives us a total of 40.6% of all properties in the Liberties in, at best, a fair condition and, at worst, derelict. It was also discovered that the property in the worst condition roughly corresponds with that which has the maximum ground coverage. So, in terms of net floor area, a larger percentage than 40% is in a substandard state.



5. Francis St.



Finally examined were the number of existing "vacant" sites which could be acquired for building if the legislative powers were there. There were found to be seven acres which could be redeveloped. Even if only half of that was developed for housing there could be another seventy houses in the area. But of course it is not that simple. The Corporation owns some of it. The rest is held by private owners who are keeping it in the hope that the land value will rise even further at some late date, by trusts, whose members are often abroad or dead and whose agreement is needed for disposal, or by the Church who is not keen on asset-stripping in these inflationary days.

The fact that the N.B.A. housing has won "An Taisce" awards is a sure sign of hope in an otherwise depressing overall view of the area. If the N.B.A. housing had not materialised, the picture would be even blacker. A lot of the credit for the design and planning of the new houses must go to the local people who fought hard and long to get these houses built in this historic area, thus helping to bring some life back into the decaying inner city.

## CHAPTER THREE

### THE BACKGROUND TO THE NEW HOUSING DEVELOPMENT

The factors involved in the new housing scheme can be broken down and examined under the following three headings:

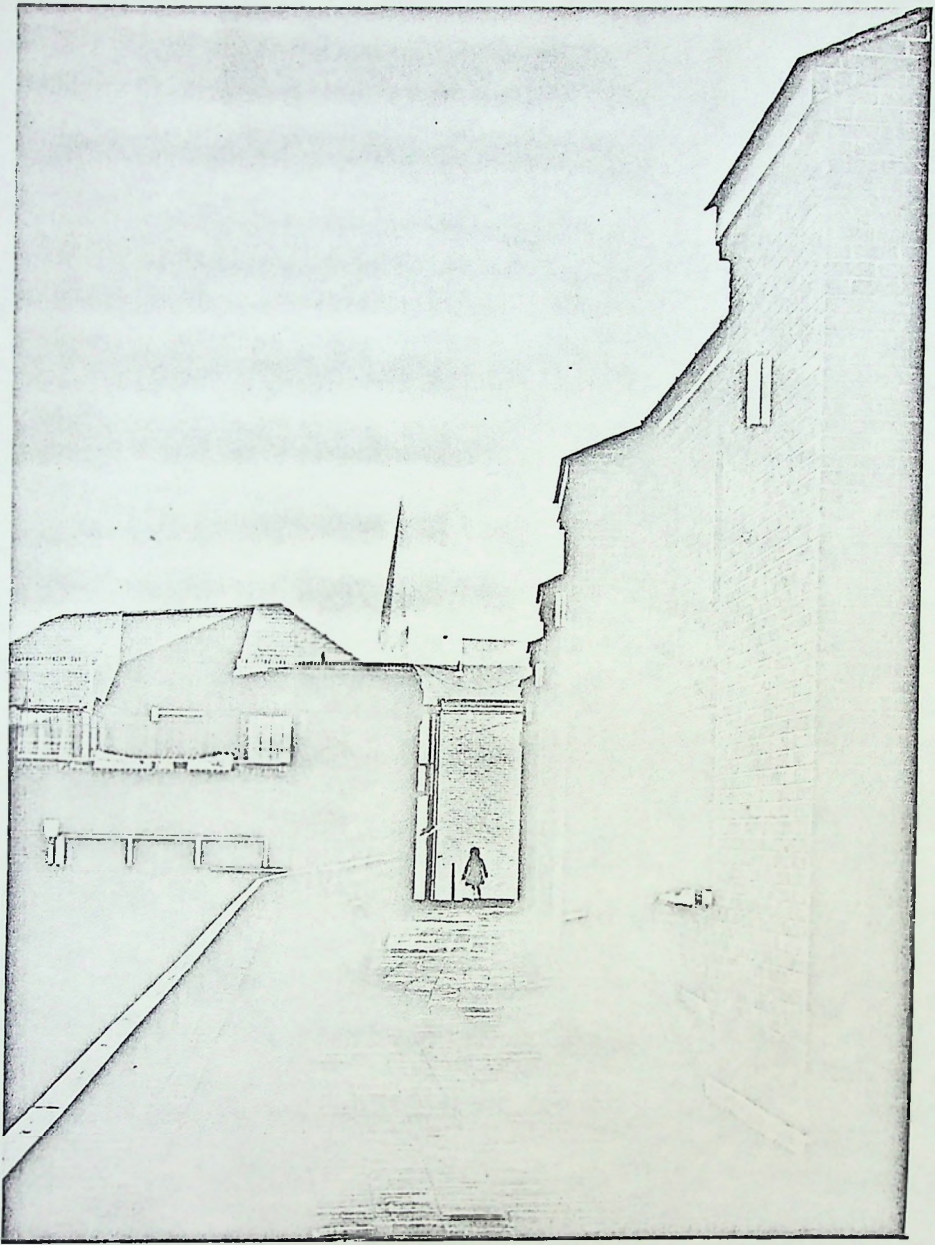
1. The Corporation
2. The people of the area including the Liberties Association
3. The architects

The Corporation, through their National Building Agency, employed the firm of Delany, McVeigh and Pike to design the new houses. At every stage in the planning the local residents were consulted and models were put on display in the area. The whole scheme proved rather costly and it is doubtful if the Corporation could afford a scheme of the same quality to be built in the inner city. The high cost (each dwelling cost £35,000) was due mainly to the high cost of land in the area.

#### A description of the new housing scheme: (20)

The development is mainly a low-rise residential one with a density of 100 persons per acre. It also incorporates new shopping facilities, a community building and light industry, while a public house and some existing dwellings have been maintained and renovated. Junior play areas have also been included.





6. The Spire of St. Patrick's Cathedral seen from  
the new N.B.A. houses on the Coombe

Topography:

The site falls gently towards the Coombe from both north and south. To the north this fall has been utilised to provide an ongrade deck across to two storey dwellings over senior citizen dwellings. The Dublin mountains, which lie to the south, are visible and numerous church spires, including that of St. Patrick's Cathedral, can be seen from the site.

Ecology:

There is virtually no existing flora. Limited planting is being provided in public spaces and private gardens. The area in question is, and has been, densely built for several hundred years.

Traffic:

The site is located in the inner city, is well served by public transport in the form of buses, and all amenities are within walking distance. The "Dublin Transportation Study 1971" indicated a potential 40% car ownership and as a result the development caters for 50% private cars. Areas of pedestrian traffic are incorporated, particularly in relation to senior citizen dwellings and shopping is served directly from the street.



Architecture:

The buildings consist of one, two and three storey dwellings catering for

80% 5 person units,  
10% 6/7 person units,  
10% 1/2 person units.

The original street frontages have been replaced by three storey dwellings with the smaller scale buildings located within the development.

The first phase of the development has the individual external recreational spaces located at roof level, screened from the north and facing south and west. All such roof patios are completely private.

Technical specifications:

The dwellings are of traditional construction with a clay brick finish. Roofs are covered with a black asbestos slate and the roof space and wall cavities are insulated with fibreglass insulation. All dwellings comply with statutory regulations and are heated by using solid fuel high capacity back boilers, with radiators to each room.

ARCHITECTS' DESCRIPTION

Title: Redevelopment at the Coombe (Liberties) Dublin 8.  
Client: National Building Agency for Dublin Corporation.  
Density: 100 persons per acre.  
Content: Phase 1 - 36 dwellings, 4 shops, community building.

Description: Two and three-storey brick dwellings built to the original building line with front doors relating to the existing streets. A series of internal squares are created, echoing areas of a similar scale in the locality. Dwellings have small service yards and roof patios provide private recreational spaces.

Content: Phase 2 - 104 dwellings, 3 lettable shops.

Description: The second phase of the "Liberties" housing is directly to the south of the first phase which was completed in 1978. The perimeter dwellings are brickfaced and three storeys in height, while the dwellings in the centre of the scheme are one end two-storey houses and are finished in rendered blockwork. Each dwelling has a large rear garden and fuel store, and complies with the Department's new insulation standards with two fireplaces in each house. Three shop units are provided to the rear of the entrance portico of the old Coombe Hospital and these will form a public square which is intended as a visual termination of Meath Street.



## THE CORPORATION INVOLVEMENT

Dublin Corporation claim to have taken the initiative as far back as the 1957 planning scheme in designating the Coombe area for redevelopment. It was not until the 1967 Draft Development Plan that the area was considered as a case for special study for urban renewal purposes. Then the 1971 Development Plan listed the area as an obsolete area, with the objective to acquire and redevelop within the first five years of the Plan period. Between 1957 and 1971 compulsory purchase orders (C.P.O.) were issued. At the date of the C.P.O. Inquiry, the area included a mixture of occupied premises, derelict buildings and disused sites (including the site of the old Coombe Hospital). Within the area there were 34 dwellings of which 7 were declared unfit for human habitation. The majority of the dwellings were in the form of living accommodation over shop premises.

The plan for the renewal project was prepared by the firm of Delany, McVeigh and Pike, who had been engaged by the Municipal Authority to redevelop the housing area. As many as possible of the residents displaced by the operations of the Municipal Authority have been rehoused in the new houses, thus preserving the existing community in so far as possible.

According to the Corporation, the local Liberties Association welcomed and encouraged the Corporation proposals for the area. Regular information meetings were held with the Liberties Association and when the plans for the area were finally prepared, they were put on exhibition in two local halls. The project was the subject of much public interest and was publicised in local and national newspapers.

The Corporation's aim was to strengthen the residential character of the area and, through the better housing and new I.D.A. industrial estate, to inject new life into the area.



## THE LIBERTIES ASSOCIATION

The Liberties Association was founded in the late 60's mainly as a result of the frustration the local residents felt against the Corporation who, according to them, were letting the area die. For example, the following quotations are taken from the "Liberties Community News Bulletin", May/June 1979:

"More offices than housing intended for waste sites."

"Corporation plan must be fought."

"Out of approximately 37½ acres of waste land in the Liberties at present, less than a third of this area is to be given over for the building of dwellings.... The greater part of the remaining waste land is intended for 'commercial development and street widening'."

From the Liberties Magazine, September 1976,

".....if the authorities don't change their tune, it can only be assumed that there is a conspiracy to drive the Dubliner out and to leave the city centre to the office developer, the speculator and the motor car."

The Liberties Association attracted wide interest in the area. They challenged the Corporation over its housing policy. The Corporation intended building four-storey flats on the site acquired for housing development. The Liberties Association refused to allow the Corporation to build these flats for fear that what happened in the Bridgefoot St. flat development scheme would happen in the Coombe (see page 14). They got little hearing from the Corporation but they fought

on. They decided to employ the firm of Delany, McVeigh and Pike to draw up a plan for the area. With the help of this firm they studied the area carefully in an effort to try to reproduce the residential character. Their main source for this was the artisan dwellings in the area.

The Artisan Dwellings:

The Dublin Artisan Dwellings Co. Ltd., set up in the Shelbourne Hotel in 1876, had as its aim "to provide decent housing accommodation for the artisans of the city." The scheme built in the Liberties was completed and occupied by the end of 1882. The area covered 4½ acres laid out in two main thoroughfares intersected by open squares. Rents were from four shillings to seven shillings a week. In the centre was a handsome drinking fountain (now no longer a fountain but containing the statue of the Sacred Heart, erected by the residents in the year of the Congress 1932). The main reason why the "Artisan dwellings" scheme was so successful was that it wanted to give good living conditions within the existing density of population.

These houses are thought to be built entirely of brick but in fact the main structure is of timber which has brick infill internally and brick facing externally. The external brick skin also has a structural function in supporting the timber wall plates.

This scheme with its cosy squares has helped build up a very tight-knit community in the area. In many ways the Liberties community spirit is unique in this city. Sons and daughters who have moved away from the area



in search of housing, still return to shop, to visit the "local" and to attend Sunday Mass. The Liberties Association was determined that the new housing scheme would help keep the community spirit alive in the area.

Attitudes began to change in the Corporation. The writer discovered a number of reasons for this. Among them are the following:

1. The utter failure of the Ballymun scheme. The Corporation did not want anymore "Ballymun" type of housing on their conscience.
2. Changing politics (politics played quite a part in the "ins and outs" of this new housing scheme. The writer preferred not to deal with them as they proved to be both complicated and character damaging). The large ring road originally planned to go right through the Liberties and subsequently shelved, is one example of this.
3. The general international trend to "low-rise, high-density" housing.

As a result of these changes in attitudes, the Corporation shelved its plans for the four-storey flats and decided to employ the firm of Delany, McVeigh and Pike, who by that time had done a lot of the groundwork in preparing a housing plan for the area.

At every stage in the plan, the Corporation consulted the Liberties Association. The Association claims that it was the first body in this country to challenge the Corporation and to work out a plan for local housing in conjunction with the Municipal Authority.

They feel that not enough credit for this was given to them and that the Corporation has appropriated all the praise for taking the initiative in consulting them when it should be the other way round. Co-operation between the local authority and the residents is quite an accepted thing now, but it was not so in the early days of the tussle between the Liberties Association and the Corporation.

### The Architects

The firm of Delany, McVeigh and Pike, who were responsible for drawing up the plans for the area, had three architects involved. They were Ciaran O'Malley, Brendan Horgan and Jim Barrett. It was Mr. Jim Barrett who was subsequently employed by the N.B.A.

The main aims of the plan were,

1. To preserve the existing street lines, which they have done very successfully. This caused some friction initially with the Corporation who have certain laws about front gardens. Had front gardens been allowed, the street lines would have been broken.
2. To model the scheme on the artisan dwellings, which included facing the new houses with red brick and incorporating squares into the scheme.

Mr. Barrett, on being asked about his involvement in the scheme was very helpful and the following is a summary of his replies.

Asked about the original plans which the Corporation



had for the area, Mr. Barrett said,

"The original study was for flats and our initial effort maintained a scale of four-storey maisonettes along the Coombe frontage - reducing internally. This would have produced a three-storey dwelling over deck level and a single-storey old person's dwelling at street level. The Corporation insisted that we reduce our densities and the height of the maisonettes to two-storey, giving an overall height of three stories to the Coombe."

Regarding the international trend to "low-rise, high density" housing, Mr. Barrett said,

"The Corporation were aware of this movement and accepted our proposals without hesitation - their attitude changed slightly afterward and they increasingly associated and sought suburban standards for what are urban dwellings. This trend culminated in their absurd proposal to build two-storey houses with gardens behind O'Connell Street."

When asked why the houses on the Coombe Hospital site are different to those on the far side of the road, he said,

"The design of the dwellings to the south of the Coombe is as per the New Street/Clanbrassil St. site. The Corporation were attracted to this house type (narrow frontage - three-storey) in that it provided houses at relatively high densities, they consider it more economical and it met their suburban standards."

The writer asked Mr. Barrett if he were satisfied with the housing schemes, considering they have won an "An Taisce" award. He replied,

"No, we are not satisfied. That they are considered better than other examples of urban housing does not make them good. I would attack density levels, the segregation of old person dwellings and the model being used."

He confirmed that the layouts were based on the artisan dwelling scheme when he added the following:

"The layout used in the small squares of Meath St. i.e. Reginald Square, Brabazon Square, formed the basis of all of our layouts."



## CHAPTER FOUR

### EXAMINING THE NEW HOUSING SCHEME

The new housing scheme will now be examined under the following headings:

1. A critical look at the buildings,
2. Landscaping,
3. Playground facilities and other amenities,
4. Vandalism,
5. The future.

The houses on the Meath St. side, while being terraced have balconies and recessed doorways and have access from the street to squares at the back. They are of a dark brown colour, but when examined closely there are variations in the colour of the bricks. The eye is continually caught by interesting details such as variations in the bricks over some of the windows, the wrought iron railings near the front doors and the box-like shapes of some of the rooms near the upstairs balconies. The squares at the back are very lively in design, having steps at various levels and areas for trees. The whole scheme is exciting and already has an atmosphere all its own. It fits snugly into the area and obviously was well thought out and built to be lived in.

On the far side of the road, the houses on the old Coombe Hospital site are not as interesting to look at. They are of a uniform design, tall and narrow, with very little to catch the eye. The bricks are of a lighter red than those across the road and in fact are "boring" to look at.

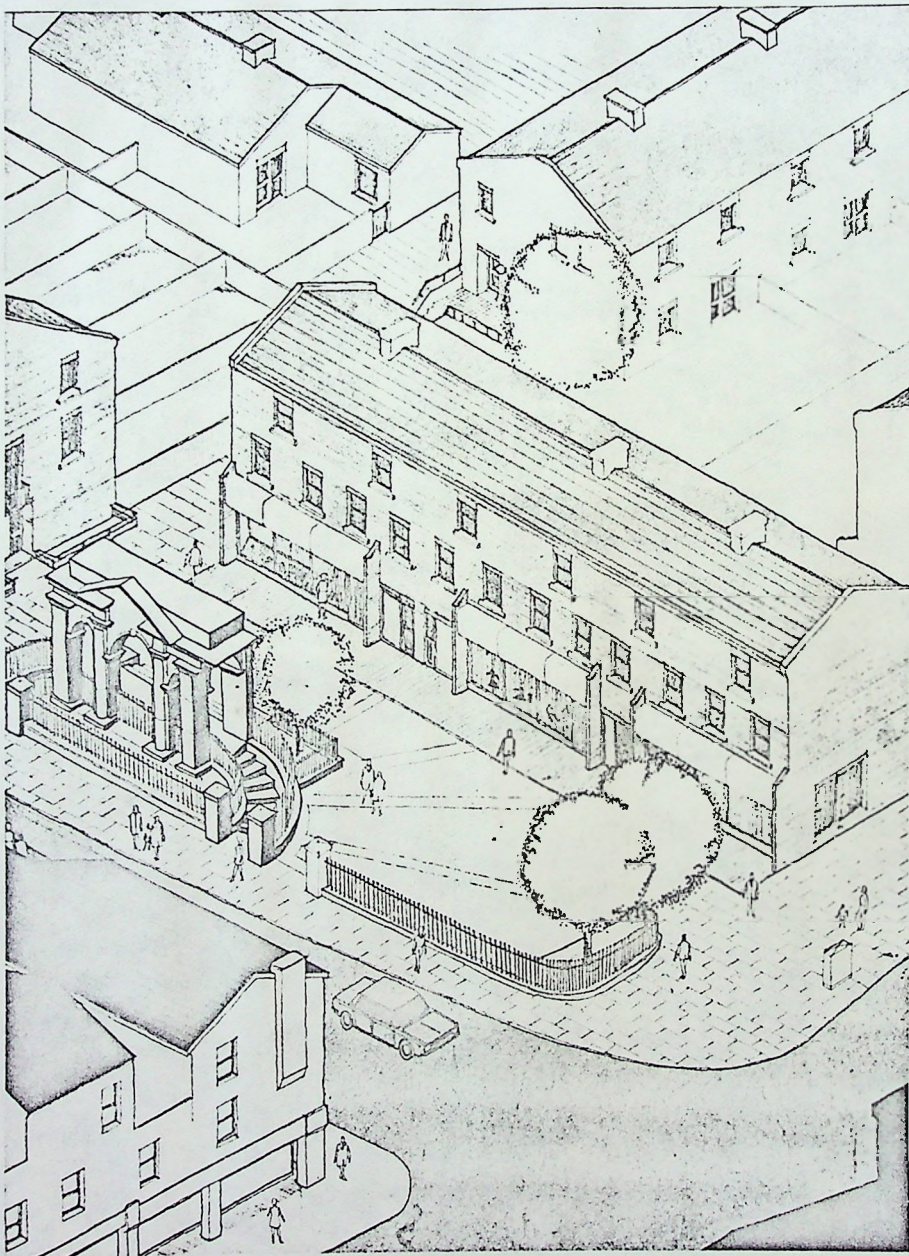
While the front of the houses are faced with red brick,





7. & 8. The new N.B.A. houses on the Coombe





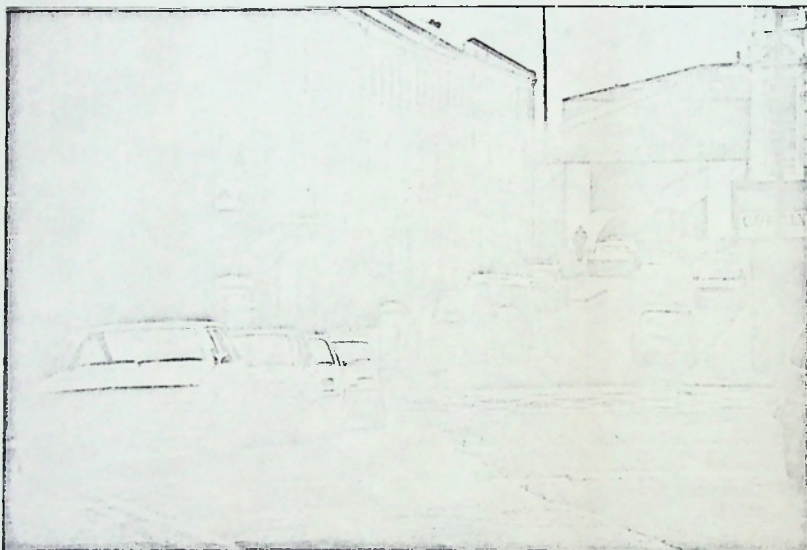
9. Architect's drawing of the N.B.A. houses on the old Coombe Hospital site





10. The N.B.A. houses on the Old Coombe Hospital site





11. The N.B.A. houses viewed from Meath St.

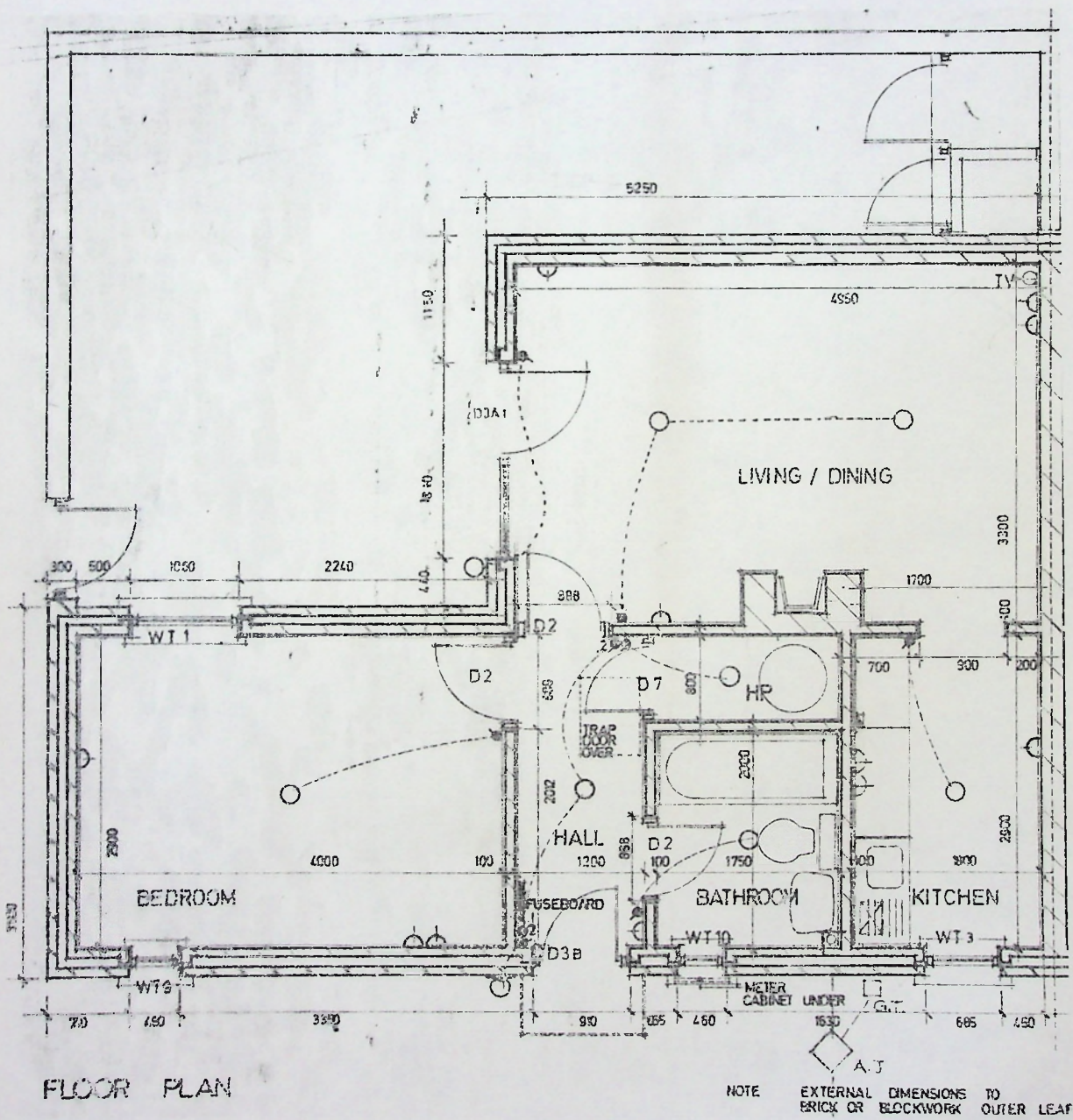
the back is pebble dashed and is extremely well finished and in fact is made a feature of, which is quite rare. There is already some effervescence in the bricks on some of the walls, due to either poor detailing or poor drainage, or both. The street line, running up beside the "Weaver's Pub", seems too "fast", with nothing to break the eye, in sharp contrast to the houses across the road which have many interesting features. The lintel bricks look contrived and artificial and are not at all attractive in comparison with some of the older buildings in the area which make a feature of some of these bricks. It was wondered if the windows in the single-storey dwellings at the back were pokey and if they gave adequate lighting? Mr. Barrett, the architect, assured the writer that there is indeed adequate lighting.

The old Coombe Hospital Portico has been retained and renovated by the Corporation with the names of Liberty "characters" carved into the steps at the back. It is a reminder of the past and fits in well with the new surroundings.

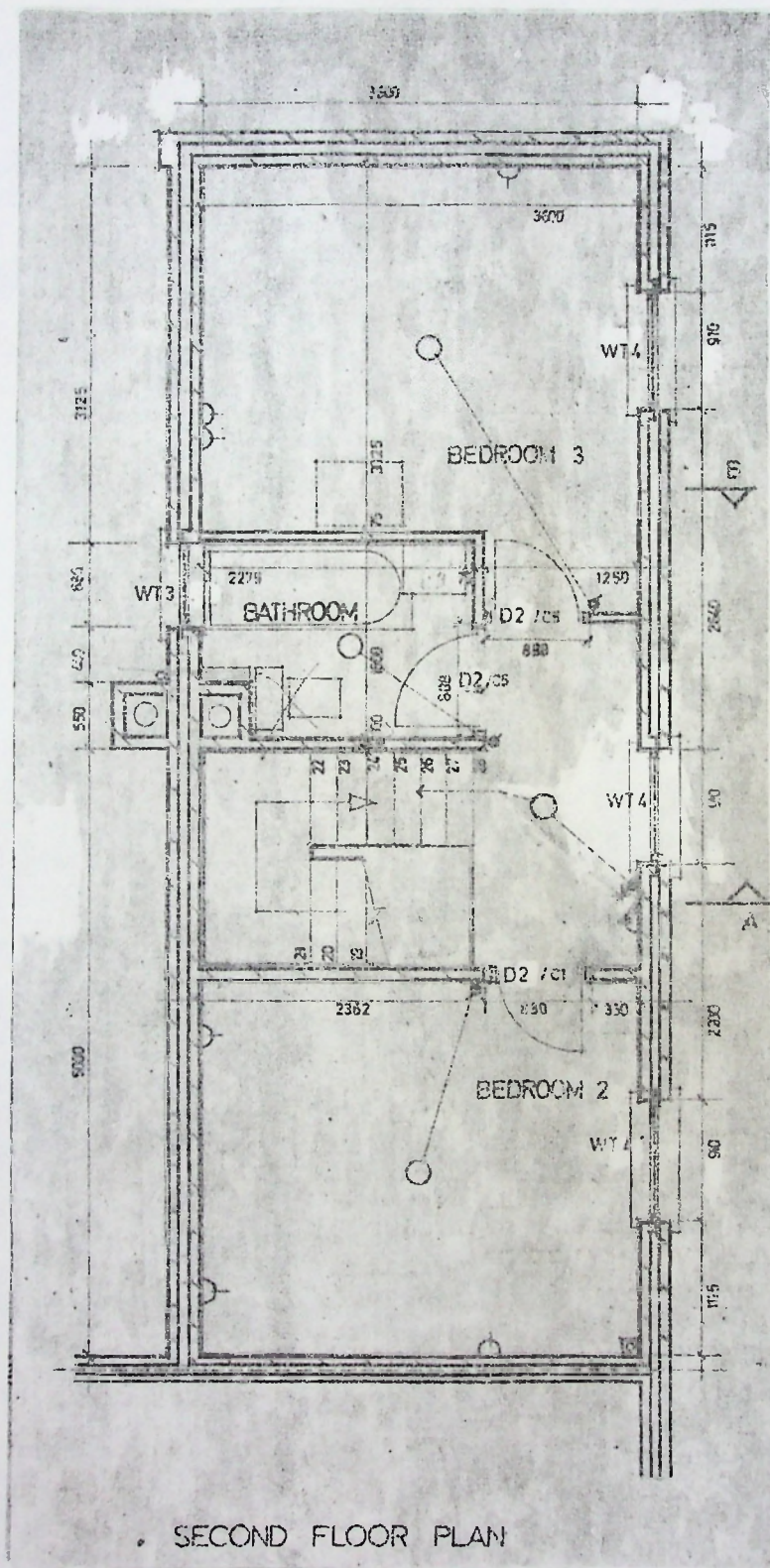
A brief description of the plans of a four-bedroomed house on the old Coombe Hospital site is as follows:

On the ground floor, the entrance leads into a small hallway. Off the hallway to the right is the kitchen/dining area, which has a fireplace with a back boiler. To the left off the hallway is a w.c. and at right angles to the w.c. entrance is a bedroom. The first floor contains the living room and a bedroom. On the second floor are two bedrooms, a bathroom and a w.c.





12. Plans of a single-storey dwelling





The plans of a single-storey house are as follows:

The entrance leads into a long narrow hallway. To the right of the front door is a bathroom and w.c. combined. Further down the hallway, also to the right is a large hot press. To the left, immediately facing the hot press is the bedroom. Opposite the hall door, at the end of the hallway is the living/dining area. The kitchen is off the living/dining area, as is the back yard which is L-shaped and which contains a coal bunker.

A number of questions arose as a result of examining the plans. These questions are listed below and have been answered by Mr. Barrett, the architect.

It was wondered if the w.c. in the single-storey dwelling should be built against an outer wall, or at least a cavity wall and not next to the kitchen area, as in the plans? Mr. Barrett assured the writer that there is no requirement to place a w.c. against an outside or structured wall. The building regulations allow for bathrooms to be located in the centre of buildings with air changes located mechanically.

It was wondered if it would not have been better to have placed the kitchen near the front door. Mr. Barrett replied that while proximity of the kitchen to the front door is attractive, it is felt to be more important that this area relates to rear patios - supervision of children, clothes drying etc.



14. View of an internal courtyard



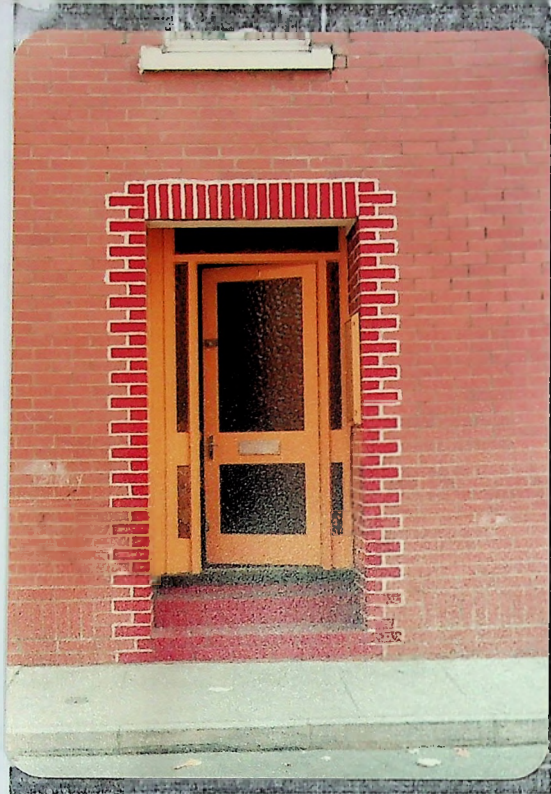
On the outside of the front door of the single-storey dwellings it was noticed that the canopy is very well designed and finished off, provision being made for proper drainage.

It was thought that one of the small squares looked contrived and it was wondered if it would have been better to have had lower railings around the green patch in the square rather than the high railings which are there and which give a fortress-like appearance to the square?

There is a red-brick wall built between the houses and the proposed new road. It was wondered if trees should have been planted alongside the wall which would act as a "sound barrier" eventually, between the traffic and the houses.

The chimneys are well-spaced and well-designed on the houses on both sides of the road. However, in some cases, the houses, viewed from the side, were far too narrow and looked rather peculiar in shape.

It was noticed that a number of householders had painted the red-brick around the door, (in some cases - red!) and that quite a few had added wrought-iron work around the doors and small front gardens. The question arises as to whether this type of individualism should be permitted in a housing scheme so carefully designed as this. Should there not be some legislation against this sort of thing as on the Continent? The writer has spoken to a number of people on this topic, including an architect (not connected with the scheme), and a prominent member of the Liberties Association, and all agreed that while interior individualistic



15. & 15. (a) Samples of "decoration" by local residents





16. & 16. (a) Samples of wrought iron decoration by local residents





17. A yellow lampstandard



design and decor should be encouraged, painting the exterior red-brick wall should not be permitted.

#### Landscaping

The Corporation, in conjunction with the firm of Delany, McVeigh and Pike, went to a lot of trouble to landscape the area. Unfortunately most of the trees have been torn up from the Meath St. side. The houses on the old Coombe Hospital site are newer and the trees were planted at the end of November. So far they are all standing. The Corporation have plans to replant any trees that have been pulled up. The Liberties Association is hoping to run a garden competition to foster pride in gardens in the area.

The landscape architect for the area made plenty of provision for garden seats and even tables, but unfortunately these have all been torn up.

However, the inclusion of the old lampstandards, painted yellow and red, do much to make the area very attractive indeed.

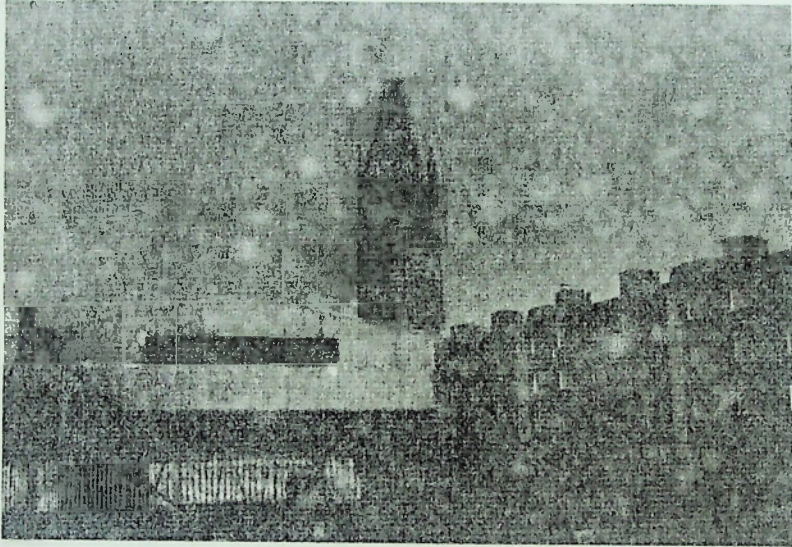
#### Playgrounds and other amenities

The landscape architect in conjunction with the Municipal Authorities, designed two playgrounds, one in the North Coombe housing development and the other across the road in the South Coombe development. The equipment designed for both playgrounds was considered by the designer to be "vandal-proof" and was specially imported from Scotland for the two playgrounds. Unfortunately the residents objected to the playgrounds, saying that they only encouraged vandalism and so the



18. Area originally designated as a playground  
(notice the trees planted recently by the  
Corporation)





19. A view of the Vicar St. playground

equipment had to be removed from both playground sites. The site in the South Coombe development (on the site of the old Coombe Hospital) is being looked into by the Liberties Association at present, in the hopes that at least two dwellings for old people will be built there.

There is one playground in the area, off Vicar St., which serves the Vicar St. flats, in which children can be seen playing. There is a certain amount of play equipment, including swings, a slide and a roundabout. At the far end of the playground is an area for football. There does not seem to be sufficient space for both.

There are two formal parks in the area, one beside St. Patrick's Cathedral and one off New St., called by the locals the "cabbage patch". The latter has only recently been made into a park for the public. Why it was not made into a playground, being the only other space available for one, is hard to understand. Questioned about it, Mr. Barrett, the architect for this area, rightly referred to it as "a caged-in floral garden for geriatrics".

The fact that the residents objected to the two playgrounds is understandable in one sense because of the threat of vandalism, but what the area needs are good sports facilities to reduce the threat of vandalism in the area. The writer has spoken to several people about this problem and all agree that it is vital that some kind of sports facilities should be made available as soon as possible. In fact, as one person interviewed said, "The lack of sports facilities is bordering on the incomprehensible." The cost of centre-city land is





20. Proposed site for the new road

an important factor and the solution is only forthcoming from governmental departments and only then when the finance becomes available. What is needed is a comprehensive sports complex with an all weather hard play area.

In the meantime, the Liberties Association is examining the site set aside for the new road which will eventually link Kevin St. with Cork St. The Association feels, as does the landscape architect, that to build a road there is folly. The Association would like instead if this site could be turned into a sports area. At present there is a wall separating it from the residents. The residents have all been questioned and all have agreed to the area being turned into a play area, on the condition that the wall is raised. All that is needed is for the Corporation to agree to this proposal, not an easy task.

#### Other amenities

There is a Community Centre in the North Coombe development. People on being interviewed about it, feel that it is under-utilized and that it is badly designed, in that there is no hall as such, only two fair sized rooms. At present it is used as a pre-school. One of the difficulties concerning its under utilization is the fact that the heating system installed is very expensive to run. The Liberties Association, on being questioned about this, said that in the near future they hope to rent an office in it to the Corporation, the rent going to help finance heating in other parts of the building. When this happens it is hoped that other groups will use it as well as the



pre-school group.

There is an area set aside in the South Coombe site for the Eastern Health Board. It is hoped that it will eventually house a Day-care Centre. At the moment finance is not forthcoming and the area is rubble-strewn and acts as a makeshift play area for some of the local children.

Beside this site is a large colourful mural with stones from the old hospital forming "stepping stones" at the base. These two walls, the writer discovered, were deliberately brightly painted to act as a "focal point" for the area from as far south as Meath St. Some of the local children, on being asked, said that they love the bright colours and what they like best is the red door painted on the side. They said that some of the younger children imagine that someone lives on the far side of the dorr! Unfortunately, there is graffiti scribbled on the wall, tending to destroy its appearance.

#### Vandalism

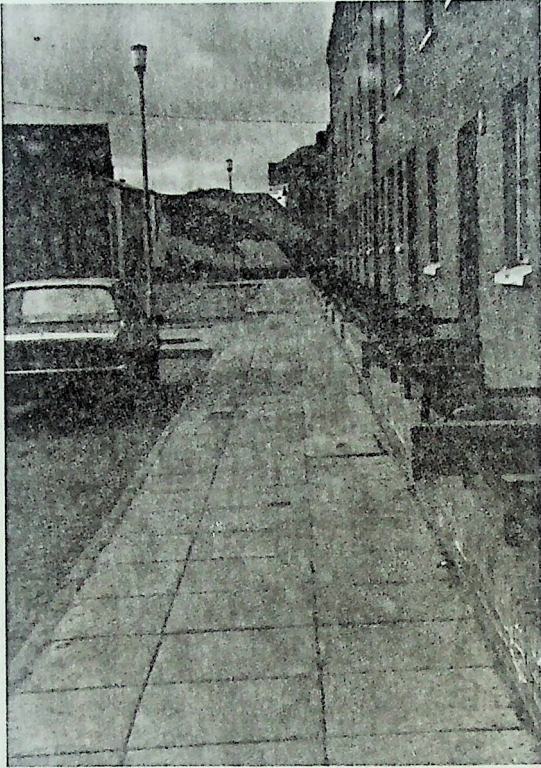
The writer spoke to many of the residents about how it feels to live in the new area. All agreed that they love it, some had a few misgivings and these concerned the vandalism in the area. People in the North Coombe admitted that they had had little trouble from vandals in comparison with other areas. One householder told how she, along with other residents concerned, persuaded the Corporation to install a large gate, thus walling off the courtyard or square from outsiders.

Only the residents situated around this square use it and each have their own key. The householder in question said that it has become an ideal private square and that they are determined to keep it free from outsiders and vandals. It was suggested that the North Coombe development site was freer from vandalism than the South Coombe site, because the majority of the residents in the former were rehoused "Liberty" people. The people spoken to on the North Coombe site were, on the whole, very pleased with the housing and are doing their best to build up a good community spirit in the area.

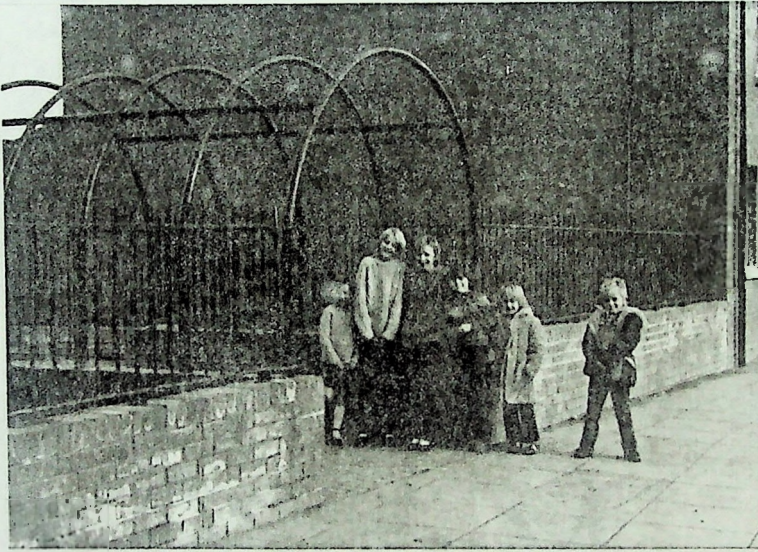
On the other side of the road, however, the picture was quite different. The people spoken to complained about the terrible vandalism. The Corporation, on being questioned about this, said that in their experience it takes about 18 months to two years for a new area to settle down. Vandalism is always a problem in any new Corporation area and if the residents are patient, things will ease off. In the meantime, the Corporation will replant, again and again, any shrubs or trees torn up and property will be repaired.

There is a metal archway in the South Coombe area which is a feature. Children can often be seen swinging on it, enjoying themselves. A resident living nearby explained that this archway was played on by hooligans at all hours of the night and morning, disturbing everyone. She pointed to the nearby house, showing the writer hard-caked mud fired by the youngsters sticking to the wall. She admitted that she and her husband and family were very pleased with their new





21. A view of the mural showing the red door at the side



22. A view of the metal archway and some of the younger residents of the area  
(notice the mud spattered on the wall of the house)



house but the vandalism, particularly at night, was causing concern. This story is typical of many living in the area.

The Liberties Association, on being asked questions concerning the vandalism in the area, pointed out that the policy of the Corporation to give top priority to people with "medical problems" being rehoused in the South Coombe area was wrong. The area is often referred to as "Lourdes" or "the miracle strip" on account of the people with medical problems who were given the houses and then became "better" when they moved in! The Association feels that people with "nerves" problems are finding it a strain coping with the vandalism. They felt that there were too many "problem cases" in the area. Other people said that there were not enough "Liberty" people rehoused in the South Coombe area and that too many people from other "problem" areas were given top priority (contrary to the promise made by the Corporation to consider people from the Liberties first).

These people from problem areas have brought their problems with them. Some months ago, it was feared that the South Coombe area might become a "no-go" area, with the local residents policing the streets against vandals. However, the writer, in the company of a prominent member of the Liberties Association, watched two gardai on foot, patrolling the area. The Liberties Association encouraged the Gardai to do this to foster good relations between the local residents and the gardai.

Elsewhere in the Liberties, it is generally felt that the level of vandalism has increased considerably, even

in the last two years. Drug-taking is on the increase and it is no longer safe for people to go out alone - even in the daytime. Many reasons were given for this, unemployment being the main one.

## CONCLUSION

### The future

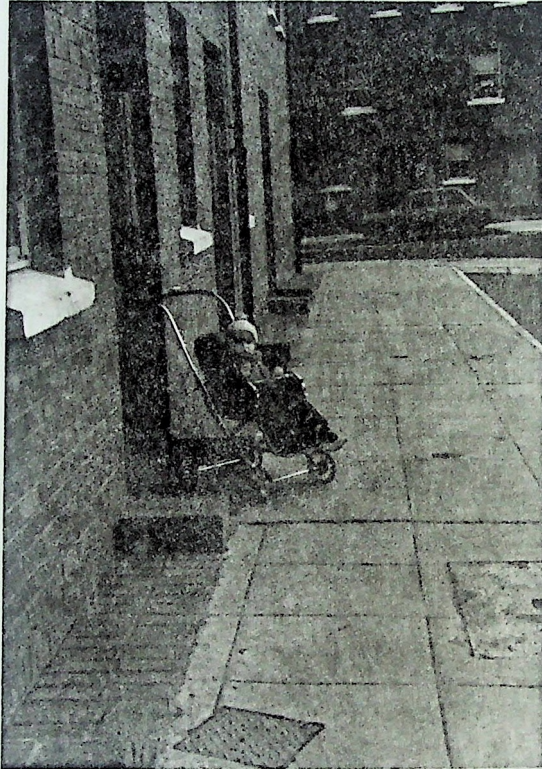
While the writer was mainly concerned in this thesis with the development of the new Coombe Housing Scheme, in thinking about the future this scheme must be seen as just a part of the future of the whole Liberties area. Several things concerning the future have already been mentioned and they include:

1. The building of sports facilities in the area.
2. Top priority given to people of the area for jobs in the new I.D.A. complex.
3. The 7½ acres of land in the area left lying idle at present to be developed for housing. Concerning this, the Liberties Association would like to see private investors buying the land and building houses for people who could live in them with the aid of grant or "loan" schemes from the government. In this way there would be a broader mix of people in the area which, according to the Liberties Association, is far healthier than having Corporation schemes which house, in the main, working class people with a high rate of unemployment.



4. Preservation of the existing houses. As has been pointed out earlier, a high percentage of the houses in the area are in need of repair. There should be money made available through the local residents association to help people repair their houses.
5. The intensification of employment schemes for youth and the development of employment-creating schemes generally.
6. Office development in the inner city. A limited office-type development in the Liberties area would provide employment not only for office workers but also for porters, cleaners, canteen staff etc. Appropriate development can assist in securing economic revival and environmental improvement and also in promoting a better social mix.
7. A programme for "improving neighbourhoods" should be implemented. This would include
  - (a) clearance of derelict sites,
  - (b) tidying up of hoarding and advertisements,
  - (c) painting gable walls to liven up the area,
  - (d) provision of amenity features i.e. trees, flowerbeds, seats,
  - (e) repair of roads and footpaths.

Regarding roads, in some cases it may be appropriate to close off through traffic from residential streets or even pedestrianisation. It has been suggested that Meath St. should be made a pedestrian way and the writer agrees with this.



23. His future depends on the co-operation of the  
local residents now



There are many other improvements the writer would like to see in the area concerning education and the environment, which will be dealt with in a second thesis concerning the environment as an educational source.

The writer, as a result of this study, feels strongly that the development of the inner city areas is of vital importance to the future life of this city. A lot will depend on the residents themselves. The Liberties Association has shown in the past that they can fight to save the life of their community against all odds. If they are still interested in their area the fight must go on for the sake of the future of the area. Some people in the area however have become disillusioned, declaring that the "fighting spirit" had gone out of the area. How true this is can only be seen in the future. Meanwhile, if the residents care enough, the fight will go on and the inner city will be revitalized and will be a living organism capable of change rather than a fossilised artefact.

FOOTNOTES

1. Dublin - Somerville Large pg. 36
2. Dublin 1660-1860 - Maurice Craig pg. 85
3. " " " " pg. 85
4. " " " " pg. 88
5. Dublin - Somerville Large pg. 199
6. " " " pg. 136
7. " " " pg. 148
8. " " " pg. 197
9. " " " pg. 198
10. Dublin 1660-1860 - Maurice Craig pg. 99
11. Dublin - Somerville Large pg. 210
12. " " " pg. 225
13. The Liberties - edited by G. Gillespie pg. 76
14. " " " " pg. 76
15. Dublin - Somerville Large pg. 228
16. " " " pg. 244
17. Condensed from the Combat Poverty Report 1980
18. The Liberties - edited by G. Gillespie
19. Back to the Streets - G. Cahill
20. Condensed from the European Habitat Report
21. From the firm of Delaney, McVeigh and Pike



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16. The European Habitat Report