

Time is the critical component in house building



Karl Deeter Talking Finance

To turn the sod on a new build, developers have a thicket of red tape to clear away first. Often that takes as long as the build itself

You can throw €4.5 billion at a problem and think that should solve it, but sometimes, when you consider the facts, the victory is a pyrrhic one. There are many problems that money alone can fix, but Irish housing is not one of them.

That is part of the reason why almost any policy is set to fail. The fact is that only time and immense effort can fix the issues we have, not immense effort or money alone. It will take several years for the property market to become functional.

The reason is the structural lag inherent in property. You can build a satellite or a car fitted with space-age technology in weeks or months, but even a standard house has a time span of years for creation.

This was brought home to me by Dermot Lacey, a Labour councillor with extensive experience in local authority housing. His general view is that the Department of the Environment is not fit for purpose.

That isn't a comment that should come easy to a person whose own party colleague heads up that same department.

He explained that his "general view that the department acts as an inhib-

itor rather than an enabler for much activity and the Local Government (Reform) Act of 2014 was simply their charter put into Law by Phil Hogan".

It was with this in mind that I spoke to a few developers as well as some others in local authorities or who had past experience at council level to consider the timelines involved in bringing a scheme to fruition.

Upon examination it appears that a project-ready site, as of today, will not actually be ready by until about 2018 at the earliest. Local authorities were, and still are, relatively hog-tied when it comes to getting the job done.

This is why, during our "recovery" we will continue to hear people per-

plexed at the disconnect between announcements and results, and asking 'are we there yet?'.

The fact is simple, €4.5 billion might buy a lot of materials, but it can't buy time and time is the critical component. Here's a timeline example for a social housing scheme, it will demonstrate why the issue of time is larger than that of money.

Preparation of tender documents for procurement of architect-led design team (one month), followed by submission to e-tenders, which from start to finish, is another two months.

Fully brief design teams and work through to creation of planning suitable drawings (six weeks), followed by Department of the Environment approval (two weeks).

We are now at a point where you can lodge the planning application and it has taken us into the start of May 2016.

The planning process often takes three months. Assuming there is always at least one Nimby ("not in my back yard") objector who wants to appeal a successful plan, we can add on about five months to allow for the ruling of An Bord Pleanála.

Preparation of tender documents for construction takes one month. Put this through the e-tenders process, and we

have another two months to wait.

Dublin City Council will have an Ordinance Survey review and the Department of the Environment sign-off, which will take about another month.

Between the awarding of the contract and the commencement we'll add on another month and a half. It's now April 2017, and not a single brick has been laid.

The construction begins - we'll allow for about eight weeks of delay, which is common, and a year over-all for a build of any significant size (which can be ambitious depending on the project).



Only time and immense effort can fix the issues we have

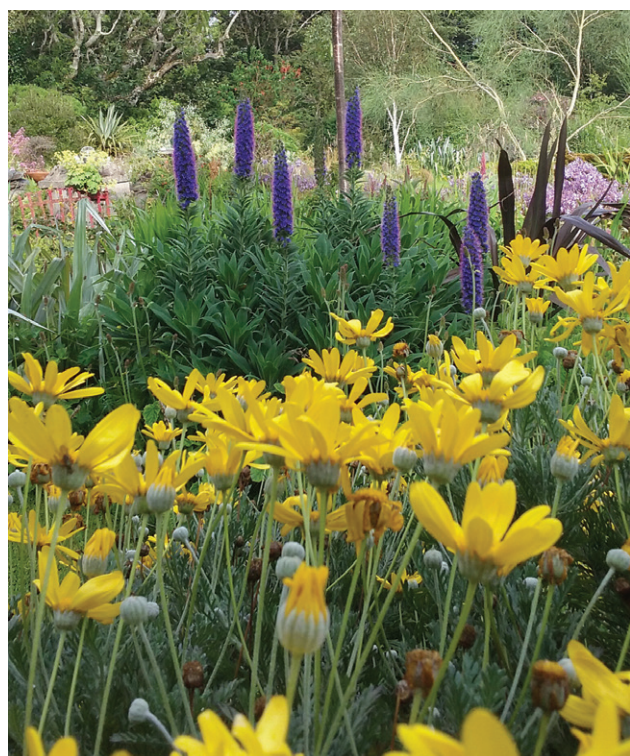
This brings us up to about April of 2018.

At the point of completion, homes are not immediately occupied and everything is in order, there are still other processes that have to occur. But we'll ignore all of them for now and focus on the fact that a ready-to-go site in 2015 has little odds of occupation (depending on the planning process and other things like weather, tendering and material and labour availability) prior to 2018.

That's the frustration of everybody in the industry. It's really difficult to speed this process up and the best of intentions won't change that. There is no flux capacitor we can call upon to warp time. This is also key to why over-building occurs. As prices rise for both rents and capital values (as they are sure to do), more projects will come on stream. Eventually we'll get to a point of hyper-supply like we did in 2006 and that is when it will all come crashing down again.

In a strange sense, we are looking at the same problem we used to have but with a new set of eyes. It's déjà vu all over again.

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The frost-free gardens at Cluain na dTor in Donegal



Donegal weather can be wet and wild



One of Conrad McCormick favourite plants, Hedychium 'Steven'



Conrad MacCormick's succulents



Ali Rochford Winter is upon us, and that means bananas in the bathroom and hedychiums in the hall, as tender plants come in from the cold



Watsonia and Agapanthus at Cluain na dTor



Purple Cannas look good backlit by the sun



Astilbe with blechnum novae-zelandiae in the foreground at Cluain na dTor



Mangave 'Macho Mocha' and lamium in Conrad McCormick's garden

Love me tenders

If someone asks you "have you fleeced your tender bits yet?" you might get a bit of a shock. But what they mean is have you prepared your exotic plants for the winter. Up and down the country, exotic plant aficionados are pulling their gardens asunder, anxiously anticipating the reaction of their other halves as their treasured specimens take up residence - and space - indoors. There is a procession of plants leaving the garden for the frost-free shed, the heated glasshouse or the house proper, if they are lucky.

Bananas are moving into bathrooms and cannas into kitchens. There are hedychiums in hallways, and begonia luxurians is luxuriating in the living room. Window sills are filling up with aeoniums and echeverias and it's not unusual to find a box of dahlias under the bed in homes where the tropical bug has taken hold.

During my formative gardening years, I lived in the cold and damp Midlands, so I developed an immunity to the bug. Now that I live by the coast, I fear I may have become susceptible. Seamus O'Donnell of Cluain na dTor nursery in the wilds of North Donegal was bitten by the bug 25 years ago. He had the foresight to create shelter by planting spruce, sycamore, ash, willow trees and that great seaside plant, olearia.

But this is Donegal and, while the seaside site is largely frost-free, it is wet and wind-ravaged, not ideal for tender plants. Still, cannas and bananas survive outside all year here, and tree ferns are thriving.

O'Donnell focuses largely on plants from New Zealand and South Africa. South African heathers such as Erica discolor and Erica mammosa are in flower now, and grass-like Restios are a firm favourite.

"Restios are not often seen in gar-

dens" he said. "But they are great architectural plants and the flowers are great for flower arranging." Not easy to grow from seed unless they have been exposed to smoke, they are, however, easily divided.

"Other plants that have put on a good show this year are the tropical geraniums - maderense and palmarum as well as Colocasias, Isoplexis, Puyas, Aloes and Arthropodium Matapouri bay. And Blechnum novae-zelandiae is a stunner and doing so well here."

For O'Donnell, over-wintering space is not an issue, as he has a polytunnel to house his tropical treasures. Inside, it currently looks like a botanical Noah's ark.

While the nursery offers all sorts of interesting plants, Donegal gardeners have yet to embrace the exotic trend, in spite of the suitability of the coastal climate. O'Donnell is hoping for an increase in visitors next summer as part the Donegal Garden Trail.

Conrad McCormick is another exotic plant enthusiast based near the northern coast of Antrim. He described himself as playing fast and loose with the rules of what plants should and shouldn't be grown together.

Asked about his favourite plants he lists three: "The luscious clump-forming icy blue culmed bamboo, Borinda papyrifera CS1046; Canna Orange Punch, which produces a prolific volume of drooping spires of orange blooms over verdant lance-shaped foliage all summer long; and the incredibly exotic, easy to grow and very hardy cousin of culinary ginger, Hedychium densiflorum Stephen, with scented spikes of creamy yellow flowers in late summer."

Tropical gardeners may be driven to coveting frost-free spaces. Some will go to great lengths, even renting extra space to house their expanding

collections or sweet talking extended family members and friends into granting temporary tenancy.

McCormick has a greenhouse, but it's not enough. "Most of my tender plants go into an unheated greenhouse and that gets them through the winter. Space must be found indoors for those that need to remain entirely frost free. I'm currently eyeing up my sister's new conservatory!"

The bathroom will get a botanical makeover, even though he tries to exercise restraint. "I try to keep the number of plants which need to come into the house under control, though the bathroom does take on a slight Amazonian theme from November through to April. I'm lucky to have a very understanding wife!"

Gardeners use all types of tricks to help plants make it through the winter, from using fleece as a blanket and cloches outdoors to keep the worst of the weather off, to setting them on electric blankets indoors. But there are also gardeners who refuse to molluscoddle plants, no matter how tender.

Bruno Nicolai, winner of the Irish episode of the Sky TV Show Me Your Garden series last summer, has a pragmatic approach to tropical gardening. He does, however, live in the benign climate of Cork city.

"Once I put a plant in the ground it stays there and takes its chances. Using exotics as bedding might have suited the Victorians, but it's not my style."

Whatever your style, it's your location and soil conditions that will dictate how you should overwinter your exotic plants and if in doubt, don't leave them out.

To read Conrad McCormick's blog, visit fiftyfivedegreesnorth.blogspot.co.uk. For information on Cluain na dTor nursery, Falcarragh, Co Donegal, visit seaside-plants.net



Francoa sonchifolia 'Rodgersons Form', Phormium and Crocosmia at Cluain na dTor



Lush planting including Rhododendron macabeum in Bruno Nicolai's garden



Gunnera, tree fern, grasses and Pseudopanax in Bruno Nicolai's garden

Bruno Nicolai



Arum lily Zantedeschia aethiopica at Cluain na dTor