

Open space: walking the boundaries of Tallaght

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On a frosty morning at the end of last November, I set out from my parents' house to walk around the edges of Tallaght: it was the day the government was due to announce cuts ahead of yet another emergency budget, but I wasn't much in the mood to pay attention to the news. The idea was to try to stitch together my memories of the places I knew with less familiar areas. I also wanted to see if this far-flung zone was still traversable by foot – seeing it by car would not suffice, and anyway I can't drive.

My journey took me along what I believed to be, more or less, the borders of Tallaght. These I hastily sketched on a sheet of A4 just before I left the house. They included trajectories along what were, broadly speaking, straight lines following the boundaries of Kiltipper Road to the south and Tymon Lane – the ancient roadway that runs parallel to the M50 between Greenhills Road and the

elaborate motorway interchange at Balrothery – to the east. But the other boundaries were less defined, more permeable and unstable, and, ultimately, my route reflected that. I wandered along the roads that crisscross the Jobstown area, wondering how you can define the edge of the city in an urban sprawl that seems so haphazard. The problem is that you often can't, and you have to rely on maps to tell where the boundaries once lay.



But in a way, the stony-faced homogeneity of suburban housing necessitates the creation of psychological boundaries – divisions that influence the way someone sees both their own area and the areas where other people live. The suburbs, often derided as fundamentally uninteresting, are frequently animated by divisions that remain invisible to the naked eye.

When I was growing up in Kilnamanagh, an estate to the north of Tallaght village, word got around that a group of Travellers, recently displaced by the construction of the Tallaght bypass, were about to set up camp elsewhere, and a gang of residents, fearing an invasion of caravans, took turns watching the entrances to our estate. They used oil barrels as makeshift stoves for heat, with a panel cut away so the hot coals could be stoked – people sat out at the entrances all night. It was 1984, most probably. Even then, the whole thing seemed faintly ridiculous. But it was also scary: when they refused to side with the other residents, my parents were threatened with violence: if they didn't change their opinion, their front windows would be *put in*.

The memory of the oil barrels burning through the night came back to me as I walked past a small strip of land used as a park adjoining the Greenhills Road. Now neat, verdant and well-trimmed, it was once waste ground surrounded by mounds of earth put there by locals to discourage Traveller encampments. I used to climb over those heaps of earth, taking a shortcut to the bus stop. I'm pretty sure

that at one stage I rode my BMX over them. They were tailor-made for doing stunts, and, although I wasn't good enough or big enough to do stunts effectively, a simple climb up one side of an earthen pile and down the other was enough to fire my imagination: I was a pro-BMX rider, and stunts were what I did.

Tallaght's place on the city's edge made it vulnerable. The fortified houses and castles that dotted its landscape testified to its place in the path of native Irish clans who plundered the area from their bases in the mountains and forests to the south. Many of these buildings, or the remains of them, were cleared to make way for the housing estates of the late twentieth century; others were half-knocked in the hope of clearing the ground for future construction, and stand surrounded by mock-Tudor redbrick semi-detached homes. Two fragments of Ballymount Castle bracket the Luas tram line just before the station at Red Cow, right next to the motorway.

Tallaght's landscape tells a story about the history of housing: about how buildings symbolize not just possession but also dispossession. Villages in the area had once been burned by forces of the crown for siding with the native Irish; now Traveller camps were burned by residents as a warning: in April 1983, a group of locals invaded a Traveller encampment in Clondalkin, a suburb adjacent to Tallaght, turning over and setting fire to cars. This was a response, residents said, to a string of crimes for which they held the Traveller population responsible. (Local Gardaí told newspapers that Travel-

lers were actually responsible for a comparatively small amount of crime in the area.) This event helped stir Tallaght residents to action, exacerbating tensions that had been simmering for some time. Residents' groups formed to defend their homes; anti-Traveller marches took place through the village (there were also pro-Traveller marches); a local priest was threatened by a group convinced he was channelling money from the collection plate directly to Travellers. Repeatedly, stand-offs occurred between Travellers and residents. In the popular imagination, Tallaght was painted in the broadest of strokes: a wasteland populated by ignorant homeowners prepared to take the law into their own hands. Tallaght: a frontier town, with lawless ways.

Tallaght was an attempt at an instant city: take a landscape, build some houses, add people, and stir. In this, it predated many of the larger schemes of the Celtic Tiger era. Tallaght no longer seems an isolated, freakish, and unplanned outgrowth of Dublin; rather it appears as the precursor of a way of building and living that subsequently became the norm in Ireland – an accelerated process in which a new population moves into massive housing developments that have seemingly been dropped at random into mostly untouched terrain. Tallaght was a grand, messy experiment, where the urban implications of modern Ireland were lived out but never fully resolved.

Tallaght feels separate from the rest of Dublin: seven miles from

the city centre, it is divided from Dublin's inner suburbs by the M50; the motorway is like an asphalted canyon, and its traffic roars below as you cross the bridge that carries the Greenhills Road away from the city. Everything seemed new, growing up there. You had a sense that we – all of us who had embarked on the collective task of living in this place called Tallaght – were on the very far edges of the city. We were hardly part of the city at all.

Tallaght was a state of mind, and once you'd moved on, you'd moved on. Since my family left Tallaght, I'd only been back a couple of times a year to see friends, even though our new house wasn't all that far away. We had relocated just a few weeks before I finished primary school, so – for those weeks – I commuted back to Tallaght from our new home in a largely middle-class suburb a few miles east. The dislocation that resulted from this commute made me feel like I was straddling two completely different worlds.

Tallaght: was I prejudiced against the place? Perhaps I was merely responding to the images of Tallaght that had accrued – in the media and on the streets of Dublin, and in Tallaght itself – throughout my time living there. Tallaght was working class; Tallaght was tough; Tallaght was violent; Tallaght had thousands of houses and very few buses; Tallaght had Travellers; Tallaght had residents who didn't want the Travellers living near them; Tallaght was a place you wouldn't ever go near unless you actually lived there; “the Wild West.” To many, Tallaght existed merely as a figure of fun, and no

doubt it still does.

Tallaght *was* like the Wild West, in that there were numerous prairielike open spaces – expanses of grassland left undeveloped, and barely landscaped, by the developers of the new housing estates, as part of a planning requirement for parkland intended for the purposes of leisure and amenity. They were even a selling point for certain builders who wished to promote the semi-rural status of these new suburbs. But these spaces were parks in name only, often abutting industrial estates and providing a route for large overhead power lines, which throbbed as you walked below them.

I was taught, at school and college, to think about landscape as something you see only in the countryside. Landscape was everything a city wasn't: airy, green, natural. In a city, forget about it: there was no landscape, just roads and buildings as far as the eye could see. When you're taught to think this way – sometimes by people who come from the country and resent the fact that they had to come to a city, most especially a drab, vaguely threatening new suburb, to get a job – you begin to ignore the environment around you. You start to look at everything through a lens supplied by others. Gardens are gardens, roads are roads, wasteland is wasteland, and none of it is the countryside. Landscape was, in fact, all around me, and, if I looked hard enough, an industrial estate could be more interesting than a tree.

So, this is your fate: smashed bus shelters and struggling home with your shopping. Long bus journeys. A nagging sense that this is all you'll ever amount to: sitting in a classroom learning about the River Shannon, reading Celtic myths as if they were fact, and struggling with the Irish language for an hour a day, every year between September and June. Geography, history, literature – everything was elsewhere, inaccessible.

What I didn't know then – not really, anyway – but what I know now, is that I was part of a larger experiment, which was this: what happens if you drop a suburb the size of a city from the sky? Tallaght is about the same size, geographically, as Dublin's city centre. Population-wise it's about half as big; it has roughly the same number of inhabitants as the north inner city. This is something you don't really hear enough – or, in fact, at all. One morning, sitting in the public library in Tallaght, I worked it out on a sheet of paper, using a variety of calculations involving Google maps and online population statistics. Tallaght was both Dublin and not-Dublin. It was too far away from the city centre to be considered part of it, but it was undeniably *there*, hiding in plain sight on the southwestern fringes: much of the attention paid to Tallaght over the years has been so negative that hiding in plain sight has come to seem the preferable option. The more I think about it, the more Tallaght matters to me, and the less central Dublin does.

Something about Tallaght spooked Ireland. Tallaght was sited at

a safe distance from the city, but seemed all the more threatening for it. Actually, Tallaght was a complex and diverse area that placed older residents – who had lived there since it was a rural village – alongside newcomers. However, viewed from afar, it became a “working-class suburb” or, almost as frequently, a “problem area”; soon the two were synonymous.

Developers in Tallaght claimed that the vast new housing estates would constitute a “garden town.” One of these private estates – in fact, the largest – was Kilnamanagh, where my parents moved from their rented flat above a shop in Crumlin village when the houses came on the market. When plans for the 1,500-unit development were excitedly announced in the *Irish Times* in September 1972, the builders, Tom Brennan and Joe McGowan, promised “a fully self-sufficient living environment, within easy reach of both the city and job opportunities in the surrounding country area.” The estate, which would house seven thousand people, was located, the article asserted, “in rolling countryside,” which would provide, according to the developers, “the ideal environment for modern living.” An artist’s impression of the new housing showed sizable semi-detached two-storey family homes amply shaded by mature trees while abstract figures clad in bellbottoms responsibly tended to their children in neatly trimmed front gardens. Kilnamanagh, and the idea of a countrified suburban bolthole, promised a bucolic escape from the decaying inner city. What it, and Tallaght, actually supplied was a

new kind of urban experience for which Ireland wasn’t ready.

The new estates were within easy reach of the city – if you had a car. The bus services took an age to adapt to demand – my parents tell me that they, and many other people, would reach the bus stop on the Greenhills Road on a weekday morning only to watch one packed bus after another speed by. Tallaght’s population expanded so rapidly that it was difficult to keep track: a conservative estimate has it that Tallaght’s population grew 717 percent between 1971 and 1984. By comparison, during the same period, Dublin’s overall population had risen by just under 20 percent. Almost instantly, Tallaght was nearly city-size.

As I made my way around Tallaght on foot, I wandered along Kiltipper Road, a narrow two-lane road that led me from east to west across the foothills at Tallaght’s southern boundary. I passed housing developments, none of which were more than fifteen years old: estates made up of semi-detached housing, built in the late ’90s, adjoined more recent, higher-density apartment buildings. There’s a point on the hill where the estates abruptly end, and the remainder of the road is pure country lane, used by vehicles taking shortcuts at high speed. I edged through some undergrowth into a clearing, where I sat down and admired the view, while muffled hip hop bled from cars rushing by just a few feet behind me.

Extending below you, as you sit there, between the trees lining the

Kiltipper Road and the vast swathe of housing that stretches from Killinarden northwards, is a ribbon of green that I've never seen before – a fairly substantial stretch of grassland that seems only to contain practice pitches often used by Shamrock Rovers F.C., the League of Ireland football club recently relocated to Tallaght after twenty years of peripatetic movement between rented grounds after the sale (for housing, inevitably) of their home ground in Milltown. The open fields contrast strongly with the high density of social housing beyond – the areas of Killinarden and Jobstown, built in West Tallaght in the late 1970s and early 1980s to accommodate thousands of people who had been on waiting lists for council housing.

At the end of Kiltipper Road, beyond the junction with the road to Killinarden, is Kiltalown Lane. Here, I find myself in the type of “edgelands” recently described by the poets Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts: patchy, semi-rural land pockmarked by scrap yards, derelict buildings and fly-tipped domestic and industrial refuse. An old farm with a recovery truck and a grey delivery van, stripped of its wheels, sitting next to a pile of tyres. A stream's slow-moving water merges with the ooze from refuse bags, brewing a dull thick sludge. Near the end of the lane, there's an explosion of rubbish: old duvets rolled up, bound tightly with string, cast into the hedgerow; the wheel of a car; a perfectly fine-looking television, resting awkwardly, upturned, on one of its corners; endless discarded carpets; whole beds, upside down, lie alongside matching mattress-

es. It's like a post-apocalyptic version of the Argos catalogue. Oddly, along a stretch of barbed-wire fence next to a red metal gate, two mud-caked household mats have been hung out, apparently to dry.

All along this stretch of the road, which is essentially a continuation of Kiltipper Road, orange signs have told me the following: first “Kiltalown Lane Closed,” then “Construction Traffic Only,” then “Road Closed,” followed by “Site Entrance 50m Ahead.” At the site entrance, I'm finally told, by another orange sign hanging on a gate, that this is a “No Through Road.” Another sign tells me that the area behind the gate is “the property of South Dublin County Council.” Still another sign warns me of security patrols. Above me, on the ridge of the hill, silhouetted by the weak winter sun, is what looks like a concrete wall.



I later found out that this construction was going to be a reservoir, part of a new water network to supply the ever-escalating demand in the south and west of Dublin. The contractor hired by the council for the job had gone into receivership a few weeks before I arrived there, and bits of equipment lay scattered inside the gate: a diesel generator set on a chassis of four car wheels for easier movement, unidentifiable bits of twisted metal, and wire fences bent out of shape. The building site was deathly silent: work had ceased indefinitely. In the shadow of the reservoir, there was evidence that someone had tried to set fire to the scattered piles of rubbish: the charred remnants mixed with mud, making it difficult to discern where the road ended and the countryside began.

Having made my way through Fettercairn, along the southern wall of the Roadstone quarry at Belgard – where two old buildings, Cheeverstown Castle and Cheeverstown House, have disappeared, sucked into the depths of the quarry at some indeterminate date subsequent to its opening in 1968 – I passed among the empty shells of mostly disused office and apartment buildings in Tallaght’s new town centre, which was found by a reporter, visiting in 2009, to be “like something out of a zombie movie.” I dutifully noted the gaps in the façade of one, left by builders who walked away when the site’s developers had folded. These buildings were not so much symbolic of Tallaght as of Ireland’s property bubble. The anxiety now embodied by them, and buildings like them, had been prefigured in the re-

actions to the gigantic estate developments in Tallaght in the 1970s. Continuing onwards, I turned towards the Belgard Road, and back in the direction of Kilnamanagh.

We moved house when I was around twelve. I wasn’t nostalgic for my life in Tallaght – its landscape didn’t seem to accommodate such feelings. There were fewer vast open spaces in the place we moved to, more trees. Housing estates were smaller. My feelings for Tallaght were sprawling and complex, and not easy to contain – a lot like the place itself.

When we moved, we were still from Tallaght, though. One day, when my cousin and I were playing on the road outside our new house, one of our neighbours confronted us and gave out to us, saying that people from Tallaght should stay away from his house. We lived only several houses away from him, so I didn’t know how we could stay away. This time, it seemed, we were the enemy.

Where we had moved to, people had come from all over – including Tallaght, no doubt – but they were unwilling to acknowledge their origins too readily. I soon learned that if you wanted to blend in with the Irish middle class, you had to pretend you were from nowhere. Following the example of your neighbours, your schoolmates, or your fellow workers, you had to take on a kind of middle-ground identity similar to the one they exhibited. You needed to embrace a certain kind of blandness, a mode of speech, and a way of thinking I

found peculiarly alien. If I didn't feel at home in Tallaght, I didn't feel at home here, either.

Tallaght had been a staging ground for identities: people were finding their place, literally and figuratively. In contrast, this new area was rule-bound: people were, or seemed, solidly middle class, and you had to act a certain way if you wanted to be seen as respectable. Middle-classness was a style that could conceal all definable characteristics from a person, especially his or her origin. Coming from Tallaght complicated that somewhat. It just wasn't the done thing – or, at least, it wasn't something you admitted to. These rules and attitudes were underpinned by a new kind of brutality I hadn't come across before, something I've never quite understood; it would subsequently become a lot more familiar to me.

Walking past the estate at Kilnamanagh, I turned in the direction of Tymon Lane. Tymon Lane is a narrow tarmac road that runs between hedgerows from the back of the Cuckoo's Nest pub on Greenhills Road, through a public park, past the side of the National Basketball Stadium, as far as the junction with the old Tallaght Road. Beyond this, a path leads you under the messy confluence of the motorway and the Tallaght bypass. The lane dates back to the Middle Ages, when it linked a number of castles along this defensive boundary of Dublin city. Now, you're accompanied by the leathery rumble of tyres: the M50 lies a hundred metres away from the once-quiet path.



I had started out on a frosty morning; now it was a cold winter afternoon, and the light was failing. I had walked around twenty kilometres, and still had a few more to do. My trip had taken me through familiar places I knew from the past, and through other areas I hardly knew at all. Tymon Lane had changed over the years – in appearance, in function. But I took some encouragement from its dogged persistence in a place where so much else had been erased.

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