

Opinion: 'We need to invest more in urban nature. It will improve mental health'

Studies show that there is a definite link between mental health and living proximity to parks, writes Brian Strahan.

BY [BRIAN STRAHAN](#) | SATURDAY 8 JUL 2017, 8:00 AM | [HTTP://JRNL.IE/3484390](http://jrnl.ie/3484390)



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WHAT HAS A crystalline, winding, stream, got to do, with gaining clarity of mind? And what have the sawtooth edges, and linear veins on the leaves of an Alder tree, got to do with someone's capacity to adhere to societal norms and mores?

The Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) in Mexico, is a centrist party. To bring it closer to home, they are a rough equivalent of the Liberal Democrats in the United

Kingdom. Don't tie this correlation to a tree for admonishment. But it sets the scene.

Lorena Martínez Rodríguez is a member of the PRI and a former Mayor of Aguascalientes, a central city in the South American country. A city with modern, literary heritage, in the shape of Pam Muñoz Ryan's acclaimed, historical novel: *Esperanza Rising*.

But with a history of deep rooted criminal behaviour too. Rodríguez decided in 2011 to avoid increased police presence in an effort to curtail the inherent problems and instead focused on a wholly different approach.

The Green Line initiative

La Línea Verde (The Green Line), was an initiative that saw forsaken wasteland, interspersed with parks and pathways, giving 300,000 people access to sprawling parkland. Federal and corporate investment fused with local city funding on a smaller scale, to ensure this project took shape.

In the first year the park was in operation, local government agencies claimed that theft and assault figures had fallen in excess of 50%. The sprawling park created a cerebral outlet too, in a concrete labyrinth. Which ties into US governmental research that there is a definite link between mental health and living proximity to parks.

So, what of Ireland? As of February of this year, the number of cranes in Dublin's skyline rose by 76% in a year. Land use in urban areas in the country's main cities is being utilised to its maximum. More homes are being constructed within suburbs. Whereby suburbia was sprawling to a point whereby it peaked

in 2006, as Ireland's construction industry built homes outwards, now the trend is to err on caution's side. Stay urban and build densely.

But at what cost?

How much vision is there on the long-term effects of living with more concrete and less space?

The Planning and Property Development Department of Dublin City Council has a development plan in place from 2016 until 2022. It covers spatial framework and quality of life.

As you would expect, it covers enterprise, the economy and environmental infrastructure. It talks about green infrastructure, open space and recreation. The plan acknowledges the need to "protect and enhance vulnerable natural areas".

And while conservation studies are important, whilst these studies are carried out, more centralised areas are being utilised for construction. Whereas we have learnt from previous errors of building fast, building out, and building cheap; now we are more centralised and pyrite mistakes are unlikely to be repeated. But are we missing something?

Are we giving enough thought to the fall-out?

The housing crisis is a socio-economic conundrum that we are struggling with. A generation may pass before its balance is correctly struck. City housing lists are moving at a dead pace. Simon Coveney thinks we should go high-rise in the right places.

All these aspects are significant. But do we give enough consideration to what the cost may be?

We are more aware of our mental health than at anytime in our past. More educated, more thoughtful, more sensitive. So why aren't we thinking more about what urban Ireland is morphing into? And importantly, what it's going to lack.

We simply need to invest more in urban nature. Invest more thought. The restorative power of nature aides us to replenish the energies we waste in our daily race to work and live. We stretch our days and stretch our minds. But what we need as a society, is the space to slow down. To replenish. Socially engage. Engage with nature. Supplement or even replace the manufactured products that help us escape.

When what we need is to cope with, and not distract ourselves from life.

Brian Strahan is a freelance writer.

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