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BELFAST INTERREGNUM: WALLS, VOIDS, AND FORWARD TO NEW GROUND AND POROUS BORDERS

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ABSTRACT

Good cities reward those who walk, looking outwards and upwards, and reflecting on the paths taken and on the sauntering asides that open an easy relationship with the city and its neighbourhoods. The Spanish paseo and the Italian passeggiata are, of course, as much about meeting friends and family as about using the connecting streets and passageways between one part of the city and another, and such act of walking is liberating, enjoyable and important in the making of place.

Belfast does not, in many neighbourhoods, have that easy, social connectivity. The once easy cross-city network of minor streets is, in large part, gone. Interface walls, motorways, and other barriers and separation devices are not overtly visible in the commercial city core but continue to define key emblematic neighbourhoods. And the growth of small-scale political tourism manifested in several bus, black-taxi trails and short neighbourhood walks to visit the interface areas and their walls, have potential result, unfortunately, that such walls, as artefacts of conflict, could tend towards permanence.

As one of many post-conflict cities, Belfast is still emerging from its historical and localised condition of manifested deep-seated sectarianism, where identities and allegiances are linked to a strongly held sense of ownership of territory. Hence, the reluctance to build in void spaces that could help resolve the housing crisis and be model for housing-led regeneration and model for development-partnering for change with the public, private and community sectors.

The once daily reality in the small nurture-field city-of-camouflage and the desire

for a more-connected city and neighbourhood does, however, have creative possibility, where conflict, friction, and collaborative opportunity –the collision and kiss of confluence– as creative act, can influence and impact one upon the other, that, as we know, sparks fly: alight.

The spirit of self-help and community resilience, the confluence of history, cultural continuity, and an urgent need to act remains an opportunity for transformative change: for the making of new ground in an emerging city-form.

Keywords: Belfast, Walls, Urban Voids, Porous Borders, Divided Cities.

RESUMEN

Las buenas ciudades recompensan a quienes caminan, mirando hacia fuera y hacia arriba, y reflexionando sobre los caminos recorridos y sobre los paseos que abren una relación fácil con la ciudad y sus barrios. El paseo español y la passeggiata italiana tienen que ver tanto con el encuentro con los amigos y la familia como con el uso de las calles y pasillos que conectan una parte de la ciudad con otra, y ese acto de caminar es liberador, agradable e importante en la creación del lugar.

En muchos barrios de Belfast no existe esa fácil conectividad social. La red de calles secundarias que antes cruzaba la ciudad ha desaparecido en gran parte. Los muros de interconexión, las autopistas y otras barreras y dispositivos de separación no son abiertamente visibles en el núcleo comercial de la ciudad, pero siguen definiendo barrios emblemáticos clave. Y el crecimiento del turismo político a pequeña escala, que se manifiesta en varias rutas de autobuses, taxis negros y pequeños paseos por los barrios para visitar las zonas de interfaz y sus muros, tiene como resultado potencial, por desgracia, que dichos muros, como artefactos del conflicto, podrían tender a la permanencia.

Como una de las muchas ciudades en situación de posconflicto, Belfast aún está saliendo de su condición histórica y localizada de sectarismo profundamente arraigado y manifiesto, en el que las identidades y las lealtades están vinculadas a un fuerte sentido de propiedad del territorio. De ahí la reticencia a construir en espacios vacíos que podrían ayudar a resolver la crisis de la vivienda y ser un modelo de regeneración dirigido por la vivienda y un modelo de asociación para el desarrollo con los sectores público, privado y comunitario.

Sin embargo, la realidad antaño cotidiana en la pequeña ciudad de camuflaje y el deseo de una ciudad y un barrio más conectados tiene una posibilidad creativa, en la que el conflicto, la fricción y la oportunidad de colaboración –la colisión y el beso de la confluencia– como acto creativo, pueden influir e impactar unos sobre otros, que, como sabemos, saltan chispas: encendidas.

El espíritu de autoayuda y la resistencia de la comunidad, la confluencia de la historia, la continuidad cultural y la necesidad urgente de actuar siguen siendo una oportunidad para el cambio transformador: para la creación de un nuevo terreno en una forma de ciudad emergente.

Palabras clave: Belfast, Muros, Vacíos Urbanos, Fronteras Porosas, Ciudades Divididas.

RESUMO

As boas cidades recompensam aqueles que nela caminham, olhando para fora e para cima, e refletindo sobre os caminhos percorridos e sobre os passeios que abrem uma relação fácil com a cidade e seus bairros. O paseo espanhol e o passeggiata italiana são, é claro, tanto para encontrar amigos e familiares quanto para o uso das ruas e passagens de interligação entre uma parte da cidade e outra, e esse ato de caminhar é libertador, agradável e importante na construção do lugar.

Belfast não tem, em muitos bairros, essa conectividade social fácil. A rede de ruas secundárias que cruzava a cidade, em grande parte, já não existe. Muros de interface, rodovias e outras barreiras e dispositivos de separação, não plenamente visíveis no centro comercial da cidade, continuam a definir bairros emblemáticos chave. E o crescimento do turismo político em pequena escala, manifesto em vários ônibus, trilhas de táxis pretos e passeios curtos pelos bairros para visitar as áreas de interface e seus muros, apresentam como resultado potencial, infelizmente, a tendência da permanência desses muros como artefatos de conflito.

Como uma das muitas cidades pós-conflito, Belfast ainda está emergindo de sua condição histórica e localizada de sectarismo profundamente enraizado, onde as identidades e lealdades estão ligadas a um forte senso de propriedade do território. Daí a relutância em construir espaços vazios que poderiam ajudar a resolver a crise habitacional e ser modelo para uma regeneração urbana que, liderada pela habitação, se constituísse em modelo de desenvolvimento de parcerias de a mudança das relações entre os setores público, privado e comunitário.

A realidade outrora cotidiana da pequena cidade-campo-de-camuflagem e o desejo de uma cidade e bairros mais conectados tem, no entanto, possibilidades criativas onde o conflito, o atrito e a oportunidade de colaboração –a colisão e o beijo da confluência– como ato criativo, podem influenciar e impactar um sobre o outro. Como sabemos, as faíscas voam: acendem-se.

O espírito de autoajuda e a resiliência da comunidade, a confluência da história, a continuidade cultural e uma necessidade urgente de agir continuam sendo uma oportunidade para uma mudança transformadora: para a construção de um novo território em uma forma emergente de cidade.

Palavras-chave: Belfast, Muros, Vazios Urbanos, Fronteiras Porosas, Cidades Divididas.

SUMMARY

This paper sets out to explore the specifics of ground in the post-conflict, contested city of Belfast, Northern Ireland. Indeed, an understanding of ground, territory, and perceived ownership of land lies at the heart of development paradigms that have focussed on the commercial city to the detriment of the inner-city neighbourhoods and have cemented patterns of segregation and lack of urban connectivity.

There has been a reluctance on behalf of many in authority –the city administration, various departments, and statutory agencies– to address the housing crisis and the urgent need for a regeneration agenda for the city neighbourhoods. The rationale offered for such inaction has been that the initial focus has been on

retail-led regeneration as means to 'kick-start' development in the city. And it is, of course, possible as citizen and as visitor to experience a version of the city that offers rich commercial and leisure pursuits and a range of cultural activity on either side of the river that bisects the city. A legacy of Victorian- and Edwardian-era built heritage has been lovingly restored, such buildings are being re-used, and there is a palpable feeling of change in what was a vacant, deserted centre during the period of the conflict.

The issues that led to the Civil Rights Movement in the late 1960s –Housing and Rights– remain the priorities as society seeks redress from the peace-process.

But those living in the city neighbourhoods, without major investment programmes, continued with their own quiet work throughout that period and laid foundations for community cooperation across the sectarian divide and, indeed, those on whom the 'case study' aspects of this paper are focussed, laid actual foundations for community-led capital building projects with their ambition to make a difference to improve lives and livelihood.

The paper is structured in five overlapping parts, to conceptually represent the material weft and warp that one might expect in a linen-making city, and also to reflect the incipient opportunity of the urban grain in a walkable, connected city.

Part one sets the context at the cusp of the period at the end of the nineteen sixties and early seventies, before the conflict fully impacted daily life and urban patterns. It also points to a critique that affirms that planning and urban design cannot be considered as separate from society. Part two takes a closer gaze at the realities of the interface walls and the void spaces in their wake that are terra nullius for many citizens who have no experience of living in direct proximity to walls, gates and high levels of deprivation that is the reality for many who have already carried the burden of death and loss for much of the period of the conflict. Part three suggests that others, including artists, poets, and architects, are necessary critical friends and act as our conscience in a society in need of transitioning from a labyrinthine and, at times, claustrophobic environment. Part four acts as a case study and details the work of the Gaeltacht Quarter, which is represented by a small group of friends –collaborators– who inspired by the eight families who established their own self-build community in the late 1960s have continued that early work and have developed a community-led regeneration programme that has delivered schools, offices, an arts centre and radio station and is now focussed on a housing-led programme to include further cultural and community spaces. The paper concludes with part five which summarises and affirms the potency of agency: the value of professional colleagues who have committed to a collective vision to make a difference in their area.

CONTEXT

Many will have been shocked and dismayed by recent news footage and media reports of renewed sectarian riots in Belfast and in several other towns. Children and young people attacked the police with stones and petrol bombs and then, encouraged by adults, launched an attack on their neighbours across the peace-wall. The violence is excused as a reaction to

the outworking of Britain's Brexit Protocol, and is but a siren expression of our latent, unresolved sectarianism. In more recent days the violence has been intensified by paramilitaries burning buses, keen to flex their muscle as Britain and the EU ramp up the rhetoric about 'triggering' Article 16 of the Protocol. And, of course, in the absence of local political leadership the vacuum is filled by violence, intended to sow fear and distrust.

In the 50-year period post- the 1968 Civil Rights movement; the pogroms and violence of 1969, and in the context of neo-liberal policy agendas, the population of Belfast, has continued to shrink reducing from 450,000 to 270,000 people, or to 330,000 with a recently increased suburban footprint. Disgracefully, issues of rights and housing remain unresolved and, in many cases, contentious and problematic. Policies of blight that have included the promotion of white-goods large sheds in lieu of much-needed social and affordable housing in inner-city areas, and policies that followed roads-engineering, rather than place-making for citizens, have shaped the place of the city and narrowed the capacity for what was once an easy weave of connected urban fabric.

As signal of the city's demise, in terms of its urban population, virtually all the largely Victorian-era inner-city housing stock was demolished (none of it as a direct result of the conflict) with, now, only a handful of traditional terrace streets left extant. That row-housing of the 1880s and 1890s was built in the shadow of 36 large linen mills, 30 of which have been demolished in the last 36 years. The replacement housing (using a suburban low-density model) was developed and delivered by the housing authority –the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE)– keen to build new, good build-quality homes but did so without sense of the collective memory of the city and with no apparent appreciation of the city's morphology, or of the pre-existing connective weft and warp of the inner-city neighbourhoods.

The current population, within the small, commercial city core, (indicated in figure 1) is approximately 9,000 and, incredibly, only marginally higher than the population of the town in 1750.

Tragically, more than half of all deaths in the northern conflict –the 1966 to 1996 'Troubles'– occurred in the first 10 years and forty per cent of all 3,500 dead were killed in north and west Belfast. The spatial concentration of political violence was manifested at the interfaces between residentially segregated communities. Space was central to the overall conflict and, as territory, remains central to how the outworking of the peace process might contribute to quality-of-life issues. Sectarianism, however, is not only a problem of the interfaces, in the principal towns and cities, but is also systemic in northern Irish society. In conversation in 2008, with community worker and peace activist, Roisin McGlone, Jon Calame noted, 'Sectarianism is not pockets of Prods and Taigs on interfaces. Right? It's all across our community, but it manifests along interfaces'. (Calame and Charlesworth 2009, 211).

This is an essay on a divided city in which two distinctly sounding communities share little recent collective memory. It is 'a short story' about a pocket-city: a city lipped by hills that you could almost hold in the palm of your hand. It is home-place: former ship-yard town; former mill town, and former arena of urban warfare.

Figure 1: figure ground map of the centre city, river, and edges of the inner-city neighbourhoods – a twenty map from City Hall

Belfast is a city in a region in which naming has a binary predilection and attraction – Northern Ireland /the North (of Ireland); Ulster /the Province (excluding the other Ulster counties Cavan, Monaghan, and Donegal). Its people are Catholic or Protestant, Unionist or Nationalist, Loyalist or Republican. The Other is an island and the weave and warp that was the material pattern of the linen industry is but a palimpsest in the streets of the inner-city.

Belfast is a post-industrial, post-conflict city that faces east and south: but it is, however, much more than expression of some Janus-like figure, facing both ways in two opposing directions with expressions of binary polarities. In our northern-Irish narrowness the 'God of beginnings' remains more representative of a neither here-nor-there middle ground, rather than having potential to be a challenging transformational doorway to change. It seems we always need to declare an 'either /or' agenda rather than incorporate 'both /and'. And, subsequently, our regeneration agenda has, to date, been centred on large-scale plans that are

promoted as sequential developments, rather than parallel citizen-focussed plans to improve quality of life and living that could connect the centre to citizens and to the neighbourhoods.

'For generations Belfast has been viewed in various intellectual and artistic circles as anathema to the creative spirit'. (Dawe 2003, 204). Celebrated poet Gerald Dawe, writing for the book The Cities of Belfast, noted that what was once a 'common civic culture' which underpinned much of the essence of Belfast, has been eroded by the political failure inscribed in the actual physical fabric of the place. 'Names map the past like ruins that haunt our present' (Dawe 2003, 210). Certain street names are indeed evocative and emblematic of the map of the city: names that register the image of the city for many people. For visitors to Belfast, and for many of us who live and work in the city, the names of the Shankill and the Falls Roads and their social, historical, and political associations and memories feed the imagination of what it means to experience Belfast. The identity of Belfast is that of a city of contrasting ideologies and experiences of quality of life. 'The centre-less city [...] has become totally sectionalised; hollowed out into political spheres of influence and control, with some contested and ragged remaining interfaces; literally, twilight zones' (Dawe 2003, 199). The notion of community within an expression of a common civic culture is, at times, squeezed ever more tightly to represent sectoral interests in particular neighbourhood locales as the concept of the local is compressed into intimate territorial frames of view.

Critical theory, however, sharpens a political economy critique that affirms that urban areas and planning cannot be treated as objects of study separated from society and warns us that '...urban form in most towns and cities reflects the dynamic of capitalism and its legacy can be seen in an urban form typified by the declining high-street and the mushrooming of retail sheds on bypasses and ring roads' (Allmendinger 2002, 76). Such a meta-narrative presents an understanding of, and a mechanism to challenge the exclusivist ethnoscapes of the interface areas and inert voids of the city and potentially act as an effective contribution to building 'civic literacy and capacity' (Gaffikin et al. 2008, v).

Interregnum feels as an appropriate summation of the potential of the 'in-between'. It embraces intra-kingdom; inter-jurisdiction; it encompasses the edge, the interval, and the transition: all issues of politics certainly but also of architecture and urbanism. The threshold between the old order and what could be the new order of things: the edge between the city and the void, between what city and void stand for, between the safe boundaries of the known and the dangerous edge of things.

Belfast interregnum may be creative expression: a question? And there is an architectural interest in such opportunity of 'ground', and to establish the unique power of language in relation to that ground: both an architectural language and the language of community and cultural expression.

Pre-1969 Belfast allowed a weft and warp of connectedness. It was possible to travel across the city. It was possible to know the whole city as a place of the kind that Gerald Dawe describes though, many, were not able to enjoy the opportunity of employment that the industrial city afforded. The city was unwelcoming to many of its citizens as some neighbourhoods were

Figures 2, 3: figure ground map of Duncairn Gardens in the north of the city, on which a business park makes the interface, cutting across once-connected neighbourhood streets. Maps are from 1965 and 2020

then as unchartered, insular and exclusivist as those mapped and studied following the violence of 1969 and since the aftermath of interface walls and the establishment of 'no-go' areas changed the map of the city. The city once had an open grain and permeable pattern of streets that straddled the neighbourhood divides. During the years of the 'Troubles' –the 1966-1996 conflict– there were, however, people who never left their own neighbourhood to venture the few miles to the city centre. Their needs were met within their own community and the entrance into the city core was fraught with the tension of entering through a security 'ring of steel' with the various body searches and checks that entailed. Paths of connectedness and separation were and still are very clear.

> *'Few things map out the human drama, distinctiveness and brutality of the Northern Ireland conflict more clearly than territoriality. The failure to agree the use of contested space finds expression in the language of identity, the physical environment and in routine activity patterns of daily life' (Murtagh 2002, 3).*

The coloured maps of the city charting the perceived and actual green and orange neighbourhoods, initially identified by security personnel, have been replicated to demonstrate the divisions in Belfast. Such a narrow, generalised, and sectarian reading of the place afforded the same security-personnel free access to scrutinise planning applications, thwarting, in at least one instance of personal experience, residential development along one of the major arterial roads. In Northern Ireland, the state apparatus '...from policing, incarceration, social welfare, and urban planning to public housing, conceived of governance in terms of counterinsurgency' (Feldman 1991, 86). Brendan Murtagh in the Politics of Territory: Policy and Segregation in Northern Ireland notes how The Belfast Development Office was established to implement urban policy and over time dominated strategic policymaking, key decision-taking and the delivery of major development programmes negotiated with selected interests and highly attractive financial incentives.

WALLS, VOIDS, AND A LANDSCAPE OF NEGLECT

The so-called 'peacelines' –the interface walls, first erected in 1969– remain a controversial means of security, creating an atmosphere of abnormality which seems normal to many, yet the walls remain shocking in their scale and in the extent of the lands in their wake. And, notwithstanding the extent of deprivation that is the daily reality for families and disaffected young people, they contribute to the palpable feeling of claustrophobia in many interface neighbourhoods.

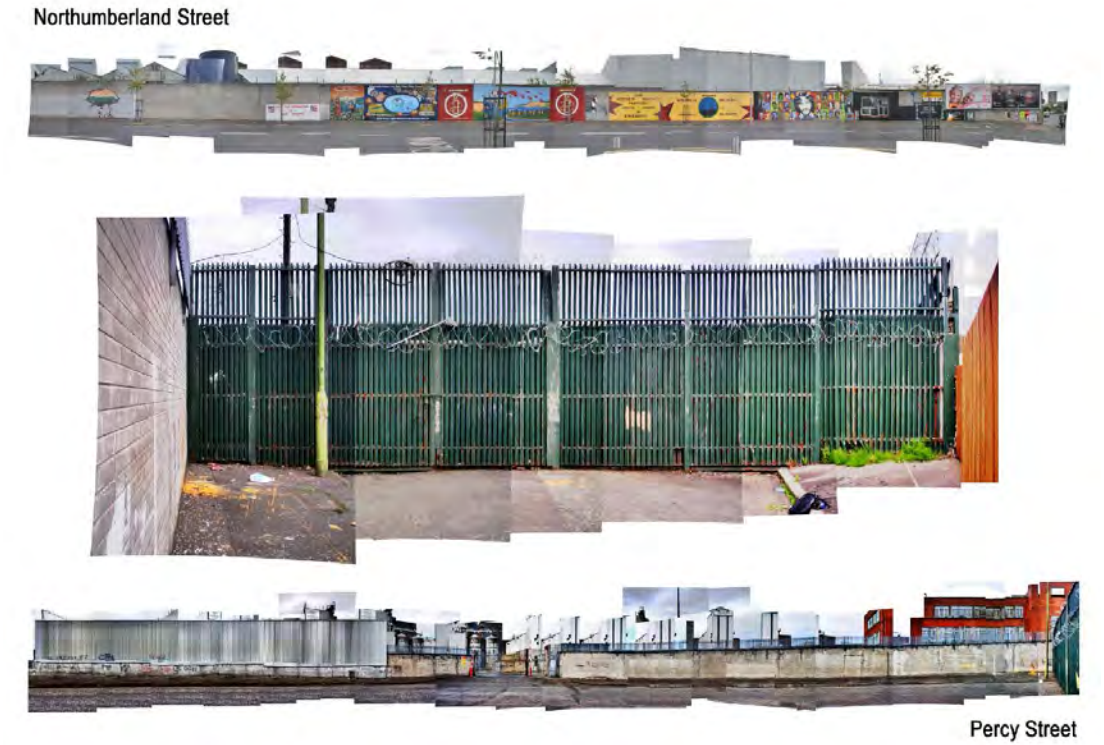


Figure 4, 5: extracts from a series of maps of the Belfast interface walls by ARdMackel Architects. This study maps the gates in the wall at Northumberland Street between Falls Road and Shankill Road

The interface walls, the motorways, the provision of 'enterprise' zones and urban infill planning strategies have all had drastic and negative impacts on connectivity in Belfast. The Shankill / Falls Wall is the longest standing 'peace-wall' in Europe, it is in places 10

metres high. In part it follows the line of the Farset River, from which Belfast gets its name and which was water source for the Linen Industry mills in the area. The wall is now longer in existence than the Berlin Wall was when it came down in 1989. The void space around the wall is one-fourteenth the size of the commercial city core and the Shankill / Falls Wall is one of more than thirty such interface walls in the city. The interface walls are taller than most of the road frontages on most of the streets of the city including those active retail streets and they create unbearable enclosure ratios and a dismal urban experience. They are the crudest urban signatures, and the identity they portray engenders alienation and reinforces division.

Figure 6: the cut of the Westlink motorway viewed from the Falls Road.

The gaping hole in the city made by the Westlink Motorway has reinforced the linear experience of the city map and severed and further separated whole neighbourhoods and communities of people from each other and from the commercial city core.[1] See Figures 6 and 15.

The cease-fires of 1994 were, undoubtedly, a catalyst for change and have afforded a new freedom of access in the city as they were followed by the removal of the ring of steel around the city centre which ironically almost exactly replicated the lines of the seventeenth century earthen ramparts around the then town of Belfast, though ironically the population living within the commercial city today, at 7,500, is exactly the same as the population of the town in 1750.

The remaining physical barriers of the interface walls and motorway continue to concretize the divisions between communities and

1 Belfast Urban Motorway was the name given to an ambitious scheme to build a continuous free-flow motorway around the city centre. The motorway was planned in the 1960s as part of the then European wide policy of major inner-city roads and motorways that cut swathes through cities from Glasgow to Barcelona. Announced in 1964 but never built, the scheme would have had free-flow links to four motorways (M1, M2, M3, and M4) which would themselves link to the rest of the planned motorway network. Eventually a much-reduced version of the plan was built as the A12 Westlink and opened 1981-83. The scheme did not begin as proposed in 1969 due to a high degree of public opposition and increasing worries about available finance. This all coincided with the most violent years of the conflict and due to intense 'disorder 'in the west of the city repeated attempts to begin phase 1 of the motorways works had to be abandoned. 1973 –the year of the world Oil Crisis funding was re-appropriated to finance security and policing. This new climate led, in 1975, to a full-scale review of the 1969 Transportation Strategy. It reported in 1976 and was itself the object of a public inquiry extending into 1978. Its recommendations were to abandon virtually the entire scheme except for phase 1, which was downgraded to a 2-lane dual-carriageway with two grade-separated junctions, two at-grade roundabouts and one at-grade traffic light-controlled junction. This became the A12 Westlink which opened in two stages in 1981 (M1 to Grosvenor Road) and 1983 (Grosvenor Road to M2). The M3, M4 and M7 plans were all abandoned in the mid 1970s. (author's synopsis) (Johnson 2014).

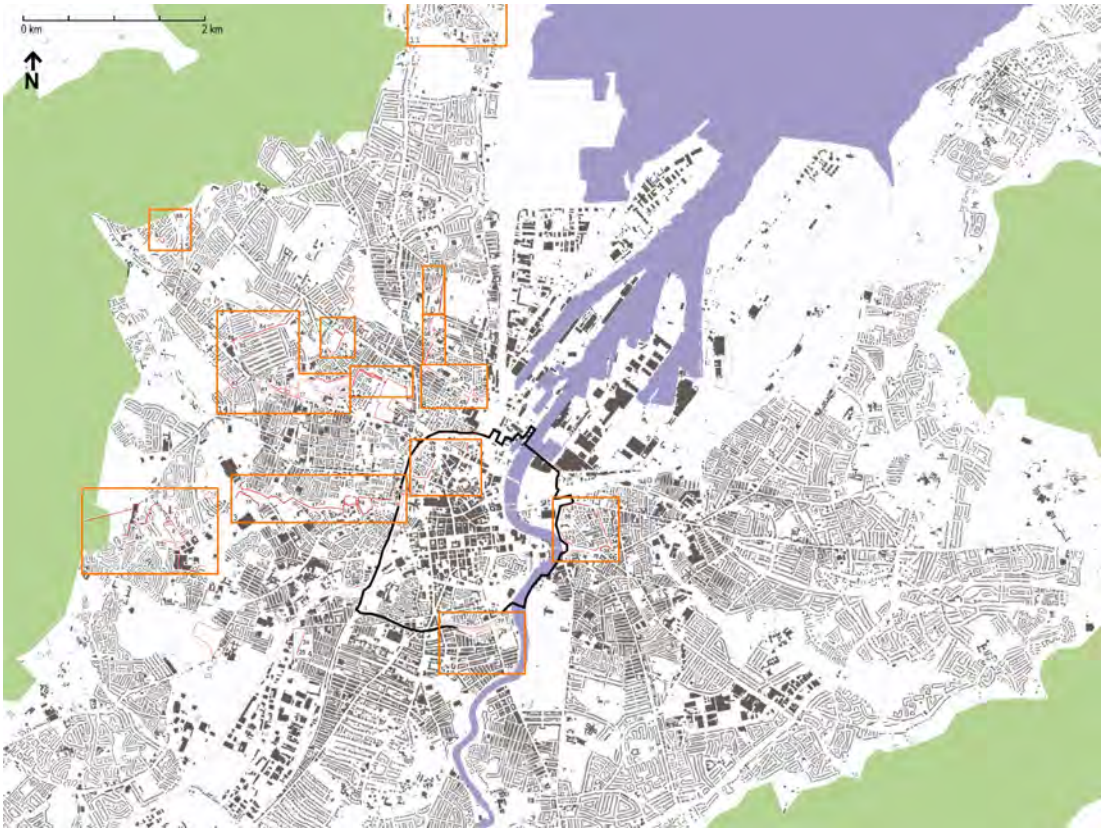
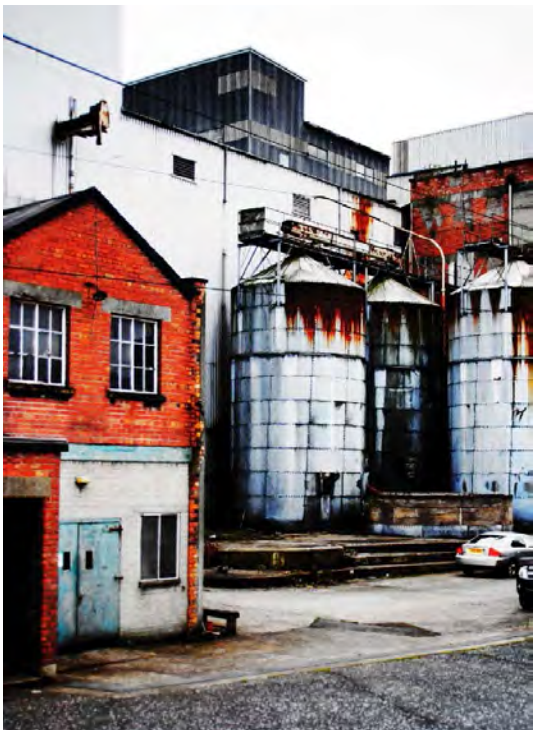


Figure: 7: Figure ground map of the urban area –the areas outlined in orange indicate the locations of the interface walls in the city

between the 'working-class' and the commercial city. Many 'working class' communities are sited at the city-end of the radial pattern of nine, or so, arterial routes (as they are now commonly called). The Shankill; Falls; Albertbridge; Lisburn, and the Antrim Road along which once lay compact neighbourhoods, or villages now stretch into the city centre in a spiritless mix of, mostly, anti-urban and anti-pedestrian motorways. Along each of these roads and in the labyrinthine spaces between them lie much of Belfast's 'Brownfield Sites' –the opportunity sites– and along them lie many of the city's parks and green spaces.

Whole neighbourhoods were, and still are, voids in our memory and in our personal and collective knowledge of the city. The interface walls and the scandal of the voids around them have been disinvested of capital and of attention for far too long and need to be a priority in the re-making or regeneration of the city.

The interface areas are sites of long-standing conflict (from the middle of the nineteenth century) and as segregated sites tend to have high scores on any multiple deprivation measure. They are an integral part of local neighbourhoods: they are, at times, defined and described within the 'perceptual maps' of bordering territories and as such require particularly sensitive care and consideration. They are the charged ground on which any ambition for an agreed city must be built and in that regard such areas define the



Figures 8, 9 (a and b): Andrew's Flour Mill, Falls Road, which forms an interface with the Shankill Road to the rear

register in the local urban lexicon that includes 'shared space' and 'shared city'. The understanding of shared space, though, is much broader and looser in the contemporary urban debate and that more open discussion might prove the catalyst for a free exchange of ideas on place-making in the city.

The shocking sectarian pogroms and riots of 1969 in Lower Falls and Ardoyne, led to 3,500 people being forced out of their homes, including the burning of Bombay Street, in Belfast, in August that year. Out of those ashes the conflict emerged as young people and political activists responded with violence to violence by state-supported agents.

But also, in an act of community and civic leadership, family, neighbours and friends determined to rebuild that burned-out street and staked a claim for the value and place of community action and collective endeavour. Eight families and their architect and solicitor who had built their own homes as an Irish language community in the west of the city, reacted to the refusal of government and the city authorities to re-build the burned houses, by forming a housing association. They borrowed money and building materials, and they rebuilt the street. They realised that ordinary people could affect change. 'Deán é, na h-abair é', (in Irish, don't just say it, do it) would become their mantra as that first generation of 're-builders' inspired a generation and the place of the Irish language moved from the home to the wider community.

For those inspirational individuals the old rural practice of helping neighbours by collectively working and co-operating and forming work parties to undertake key tasks at important times was complemented by a firm belief in the 1960s self-help ethos.

That building work in the charged atmosphere as the war broke out on the streets of Belfast claimed a small portion of 'new' physical ground by moving a section of the then newly erected 'peace-line' (a one-metre-high coil of barbed wire on timber x-shaped stakes) and it quietly, confidently challenged what have now become embedded notions of neighbourhood territory and neighbourhood ownership of land. The act of re-building also spoke clearly of the value of professional agency working with a civic agenda without fear and with confident leadership from within the community.

This author has long been interested in the idea and earth-churning and muck-shifting reality of the physical making of new ground. From the early fascination of visiting building sites with my architect father to crawling (as a boy) into one-metre diameter storm drains in the area we called 'the jungle', at the bottom of my street, as the M1 motorway in Belfast was being constructed adjacent to Abhainn Bharra[2] –the Owenvarragh River– becoming or being named the Blackstaff River further downstream. That barred river of my early years still resonates as metaphor for the changing face of my city as fences, walls and barriers became physical reality in the re-imaged spatial construct of the city and in the immediate and harsh experience, for many people, of ordinary day-to-day living.

As part of a small group of activists and Irish language enthusiasts many weekends were spent, for many years, in early acts of

2 Owenvarragh –Abhainn Bharra– barred river (the bars were stakes or staves). '...and the Owenvarragh, in its lower reaches, from Stockman's Lane to where it joins the Lagan, becomes the Blackstaff. Barra can also mean a sand-bar, or fearsad; so, these waters –Blackstaff, Owenvarragh, Farset– form an etymological confluence.' (Carson, 1997, 97).

voluntary contribution, travelling the east coast of Ireland from Belfast to Dublin to help raise money to 'buy a brick for Belfast' to re-build that street. Bombay Street (just off the Falls Road) was close to what were once the brick fields in the city and Belfast-poet Ciarán Carson's long prose-poem 'Brick' still says something about that material made from the sleech on which the city stands …and teeters.

> *'…the very city recycled itself and disassembled buildings –churches, air-raid shelters, haberdashers, pawnshops– were poured into the sleech of the lough shore to make new land …' (Carson 1989, 72).*

By 1972 those who re-built Bombay Street and had established the first, purpose-built, urban settlement of Irish language activists in Ireland, on Belfast's Shaws Road, went on to undertake projects of enormous significance and import. They established an umbrella company –Whiterock Enterprises– that would buy a farm and establish and build an industrial estate (building an 'advance factory' in the process); they formed a knitting factory; a construction company; a picture-framing business, and a filling-station and convenience store.

Their self-help mantra, fuelled by desire to meet the needs of their growing families led them to also establish and build their own nursery school, and later their own primary school and to establish a small bookstore to help raise funds to pay the 'salaries' of the first teachers who began what would become the current manifestation of Irish language education in the north of Ireland. (At that time teachers in Irish language schools were not paid by the state)

The reality and presence of the walls and the shadow-spaces that contain them are profoundly problematic – not least the proximity of the walls to family homes (the rear wall of the dwellings on Bombay Street remain within five metres of the Falls /Shankill interface– / peace-wall). But the core problems are social deprivation, segregation, and sectarianism. The 'peacelines create, reinforce and exacerbate dialectical identities …they contribute to the distrust' (Cosstick 2015, 38). The walls create a dysfunctional and distorted place to which most of us are so accustomed that we hardly notice the impact. And in addition, '…a fence in a certain neighbourhood in the city Belfast can set apart two local communities as well as two national communities and even … [in the context of Brexit] two supranational identities' (Mubi Brighenti and Kärrholm 2019, 8).

There are whole swathes of the small city of Belfast that remain unknown for many citizens –a terra nullius– even for long-term residents. The 2018 Booker Prize winning novel, 'Milkman', by, Belfast-born author, Anna Burns is set in an unnamed city but is clearly evocative of my home place and among its many resonant passages Burns writes of the 'ten-minute area on the outskirts of downtown', through which many of us, used walk, … or run.

> *'This would be hurrying, no dawdling, though no one in their right mind would think of dawdling here' (Burns 2018, 81).*

And that ten-minute 'run' was this author's daily experience for many years as I walked from work to city-centre in the 1970s and 1980s.

Peace activists have remarked that there are 'two Belfasts, two parallel worlds that are so close in places that you can slip from one to another …' (Cosstick 2015, 30). and that

is partially true, but the divisions of poverty and class also stamp other readings and such divisions have been almost ingrained into our psyche without much notice or resistance. We continue to interpret walls as means to shape urban space –our public realm. We layer barrier upon barrier. We build walls behind fences and in those walls place windows protected by solid steel shutters. Security and deep-seated fear remain a constant, silent influencer of form.

In the context of post-industrialisation, which has intensified urban crises in many European cities, political violence is located 'as a surface expression of deeper socio-economic and /or ideological contexts' (Feldman 1991, 86). The areas of boundary and interface between neighbouring communities, that contemporary history has now left socially non-connected, remain the fringe and marginal areas in the city and seem permanent areas of fear and enduring blight. These neighbourhoods seem doomed to paralysis and absence of new development that could transform such a landscape of neglect? No one, in officialdom, yet speaks on their behalf.

The walls in the city, and the void spaces in their wake, representative of all the layers of barriers in the city and the underlying deep-rooted sectarianism, are the lens through which all real change and real new ground should be measured. They are an affront to our society.

Figures 10, 11: ground, razor wire and padlock – the detritus at the interface

In his 1971 essay, 'Understanding Ourselves', subsequently entitled 'Common Ground' (1984) Professor E Estyn Evans (Geography, QUB) lamented that 'people living in such closed-in lowlands with restricted horizons tend to have a limited vision and imagination' in contrast with the 'hills which are naturally areas of vision and imagination, which are poetic and visionary' (Evans 1984, 7). All of us, with encouragement, can expand our common ground and build a place such that Evans hoped would broaden by people living together, mixing and 'quickening each other' (Evans 1984, 7).

The Interface Walls –the 'peace-walls'– are the immutable barriers that declare our irrevocable past. There are 30.5 kilometres of them in the city and subsequently, approximately 87 hectares of void spaces, shadow spaces in the city; that is, one quarter the area of the commercial city core. There are more than 30 walls over 11 metres high one of which is 1690 metres long. They are taller than many street frontages in the city and the Shankill /Falls

Figure 12: The longest peace wall in Belfast between the Clonard district in the Falls and the Shankill Road

wall is now longer in existence than any 'peace-wall' in Europe. It is now almost 50 years old, and the city has more walls now than at the time of the Belfast Agreement in 1998, now 23 years old this year.

The walls are crude and brutal urban signatures. They are the politics of separation and a diagram of the macro and micro political forces operating in the neighbourhood areas. The walls and the void spaces around them claim space and surface: they claim ground and they lay challenge to the regeneration agenda in the city. They, therefore, require an imaginative and impactful regeneration response. The interface walls do more, however, than separate two sections of a community. They cut across and destroy the urban fabric and urban grain: once connected streets have been severed and truncated and not now possible, in many instances, to re-connect. The walls stamp a pervasive and enduring character of non-connectedness on the city. The late Lebbeus Woods, writing the foreword for 'Divided Cities' was blunt in his assessment, 'The right thing …is to remove the barriers and replace them with new openings for dialogue and exchange' (Calame and Charlesworth 2009, viii).

Such politics of separation and the policy positions that have sustained segregation are but part of the suite of policies and urban protocols that have defined the regeneration agenda in the pursuit of sectional commercial interest, and of attracting large-scale investment to the commercial city at almost any cost and to the detriment of all the inner-city neighbourhoods.

The walls are seemingly immutable barriers to a shared city: to a shared common place and they are situated either on or directly

behind or adjacent the main arterial roads in the city. For most citizens they do not necessarily register as either urban artefact or negative city-space in the axis of daily living though they remain as areas which continue to feed the imagination and narratives of what it means to know Belfast.

Many of these edge spaces have all the characteristics that define civic or public spaces: they have high defining structures, and they impact (albeit negatively) on the lives of all the people who live in such incomprehensible leftover and ignored spaces which frame and structure the patterns and practices of collective life. The void spaces, the walls, have been both stage and witness and are charged by the dominance of binary meanings in a place resonating with a sense of opposites.

Architect Jean Nouvel made a proposal of a 'long meeting line' in Berlin which might transform the no-man's land. It was intended as '…a place where all the city's cultural events, sports, leisure activities, bars, restaurants and nightclubs would be concentrated, face-to-face: a fullness would succeed the void, but the history would remain embedded in the streets and stones' (Baudrillard and Nouvel 2002).

Architecture can't be as spontaneous as drawing or writing but the broad culture of architecture has precedents such as Nouvel's from which we can learn and imagine new neighbourhood narratives.

As noted above, security and deep-seated fear do indeed act as constant, silent influencers of form, but additionally, such concerns manifest as reasons, in many instances, not to address the housing crisis in the city. Business parks and roads infrastructure, designed and built to keep apart sections of the community, many of which are under-used, or vacant would seem opportunities to address a 'right-to-the-city' ambition for public housing, notwithstanding the potential delivery on 87 hectares of 'void space'? How are the voices heard and acknowledged? How might such projects contribute to a housing-led regeneration agenda for the inner-city areas of the city?

OTHER VOICES

Searching for metaphor or symbol as means to help our understanding could, perhaps, be represented by the Corleck Head unearthed in County Cavan in 1855, though not scrutinised by scientific attention until 1937. It is a similar artefact to others found in Ireland, Britain, and France –in a Celtic-Romano-British tradition that broadens the triplism of our mythologies and over-lapping histories. It is an object that has gained renewed iconography through exposure in recent publication that celebrated a curation of 100 objects to represent the history of Ireland (O'Toole 2013, 19-100). The Corleck Head, thought to date from the first century, has three faces –a possible dialectic opportunity that could suggest new propositions for our future? As metaphor it does offers imaginative and potentially creative possibility. It could challenge the 'either–or' binary conditions.

The potential for creative space is often conceived within concepts of safe-haven or refuge: the remove from dark places and dark times, and the Irish word for sanctuary and for such place of refuge is the word 'tearmann', with an etymological root in the Latin 'terminus' – the Roman God of Boundaries. Bilingualism, then, –English /Irish– may build creative

space and opportunity between mythological convention and fictive and architectural imagination. And, indeed, (as will be described in the section below on the Gaeltacht Quarter) it has been the Irish language community that has led the shift out of the inner-city labyrinths into the physical space of the city with ambition to make a difference and a desire to connect the neighbourhood to the centre-city.

Ground is generally not shared in Belfast. It is 'our territory' or that of 'the other'. The built figure of the city is equally charged. In such urban condition where 'common ground' is limited or disputed, or where shared-ground or shared space is fleeting, then how might the ordinary work of an architect help define or declare an agenda for connecting, accommodating, or stitching places? Could a conceived new ground be first step in making common ground?

For the 2012 Venice Architecture Biennale David Chipperfield wanted the theme of 'Common Ground' to ask us to 'think about the physical expression of our collective aspirations' and 'encouraged a more critical examination of what we share, with the awareness of what separates us' (Chipperfield 2012, 13). He sought an awareness of continuity and coherence – a tall order indeed. And in the design of the proposed (now cancelled) Peace Building and Conflict Resolution Centre for the former Maze Long Kesh prison site (also in 2012) architect, Daniel Libeskind, used the same theme of common ground suggesting the need for a shared narrative of the conflict in the North of Ireland as the beginnings of a shared future.

The words are intriguing. And the sentiments may even have few detractors. But, shared …and collective…what might be the opportunities for such expectations? How do we begin to tease out such meanings? The walls, the boundaries may, therefore, not be the edges or stopping points but could be porous: thresholds as the way through to the 'other' and opportunity between conventional interpretations.

Belfast-artist Brendan Ellis described the Westlink motorway that cuts through north and west Belfast as a 'kind of coronary bypass operation which will never improve the lot of the less-well-off', reminding us that those with jobs and money can drive through the inner-city without experiencing deprivation.[3]

And London-based journalist and author Vicky Cosstick in her book, Belfast: Towards a City without Walls, deftly critiqued the Westlink as the 'most dominant and effective interface …which slices the city like a crooked smile' (Cosstick 2015, 31). A road considered (if not conceived) as a cordon sanitaire which encouraged officials within government to suggest that 'other opportunities to create ''natural'' divisions between different areas should be explored' (Cosstick 2015, 31).

Vicky Cosstick is rapier clear in reaching to the heart of our socio-political reality noting that 'unfortunately, to a significant degree, the barriers have been deemed only of concern in the areas within which they are present, with little attention given to the social ramifications posed to the province as a whole' (Cosstick 2015, 39).

That political reality and the Northern Ireland Assembly's assessment that the overall cost of division is approximately £1.5bn per annum undoubtedly led to the 2013 ini-

3 Conversation with the author

tiative Together Building a United Community –TBUC– and the declaration by then joint First Ministers to bring down the walls by 2023 but which has, unfortunately, made little progress. It is perceived as a failure of leadership on several levels, not least that the communities were given responsibility for leading on transformation of the walls in a period of disconnect between communities and political leaders, and without help and advice to build their capacity for such momentous change. This was an abdication of political responsibility for the interface areas and of 'the need to recognise and address at the highest strategic level all of the critical issues affecting interface areas' including the legacy of trauma and the extent of disaffection of young people (Cosstick 2015, 35). Andrea Mubi Brighenti and Mattias Karrholm, writing in 'Urban Walls' summarised the problem as, 'there is a paradox or a political stalemate in putting the responsibility for destroying the walls on the most alienated and deprived communities living next to the interface areas' (Brighenti and Kärrholm 2019, 43).

Architect and urbanist (and much missed) Michael Sorkin in launching Cosstick's book in New York in June 2015 noted that the 'walls are currently armatures of negotiation and perhaps, reconciliation' and in accepting the process of transformation and building constructive change, urged that we move 'towards locales of interchange, discovery and neighbourliness'. (From the author's own notes at the event)

The disappearance of the walls; the questions of the past, of memory and of how memory retains its visibility, and the multiple layers of meaning and cultural assumptions are rich ground for challenging conversations.

Some readers may know Ciarán Carson's Belfast poems in his collections, 'Belfast Confetti' or 'The Irish for No', which mapped the disappearing and changing city. Many of the places mentioned exist now only in memory– winding arteries of Empire no longer on the map of the city.

In the poem 'Belfast Confetti', in 'The Irish for No' collection Carson declares:

> *I know this labyrinth so well – Balaclava, Raglan, Inkerman*
>
> *Odessa Street –*
>
> *Why can't I escape? Every move is punctuated. Crimea Street.*
>
> *Dead end again.*
>
> *A Saracen, Kremlin-2 mesh. Makrolon face-shields. Walkie-*
>
> *talkies. What is*
>
> *My name? Where am I coming from? Where am I going? A*
>
> *Fusillade of question-marks.*
>
> *(Carson 1987, 31)*

The Falls Road, close to the site of the first peace-line in the city is known in Irish as Bóthar na bhFál - the road of the hedges. It is a road, six miles long, from Twinbrook and Poleglass, through Stewartstown and Andersonstown down to the Falls and Divis Street and into the city centre, and it is the thread that has both politically and culturally linked the heartlands and hinterlands that feed the pulsing concept of 'West Belfast' as well as the actual physical place. The west to east road in part follows the line of the Farset River from which Belfast gets

its name, from the Irish, as the sand-bank close to the mouth of the river.

Author and university lecturer Eamon Hughes has discussed the etymology of the Falls Road: '…it is likely to go back to Irish Tuath na bhFál – petty kingdom of the enclosures or fields…but in place names it often refers to the area enclosed by a hedge or fence' (Irvine 2008, 41). Hedges do not wall. Hedges are porous; they offer opportunity for cross-movement and access, and imaginative opportunity, in a city dominated by walls. Martin Heidegger's understandings of space and boundary might assist our work? 'A boundary is not that at which something stops but, as the Greeks recognised, the boundary is that from which something begins its essential unfolding. That is why the concept is that of 'horismos', that is, the horizon, the boundary. …That for which room is made is always granted and hence is joined, that is, gathered, by virtue of a location, that is by such a thing as the bridge' (Farrell 2011, 250).

FORWARD: GAELTACHT QUARTER

The large area of west Belfast is an area of the city which was deemed 'beyond the pale', -'outside the palisade', –and indeed, during the 1970s and 1980s the west (like most of the city) was outside the ring of steel that partially enclosed the commercial city core– out with the jurisdiction in many ways. It was declared lawless and barbaric, but its people were resilient, creative, and progressive. The west Belfast community was demonised during the period of the conflict and yet is home to Féile an Phobail (one of Europe's premier community festivals) and home to an inspirational and transformative urban action – the Gaeltacht Quarter regeneration project. An initiative, which has its roots in that small group of eight families who decided in the late 1960s to raise their families through the Irish language. Their endeavour and inspiration have since inspired two generations to imagine, develop and build for the growing Irish language community, including schools, businesses, cultural centres, radio stations and sports complexes, growing to more than 30,000 pupils in the Irish medium education sector.

There is enormous potential for all our citizens in such self-help development /regeneration paradigm. Their maxim, 'deán é, na h-abair é', (in Irish, don't just say it, do it) is a confluence of history, cultural continuity and, currently, with the support of maturing and experienced local politicians who remain committed to their constituency bases (notwithstanding the current political stasis) offers a model to connect neighbourhood to the administrative and commercial centre.

Regeneration in Belfast, has, for more than thirty years, been a retail-led, city-core agenda. Such that any assumption about improving quality of life for citizens; about building in our post-industrial, post-conflict city have been predicated on reductive, old-model urbanism: as if shopping and mono-functional urban regeneration, as profligate non-place, will cement the peace and concretise a re-imaged, re-imagined city.

In some ways, architects, and builders, make new ground on every project – digging up old foundations and floor slabs and demolishing gable and party walls revealing the traces of family and intimate interior life. They 'grub-

up' (in the parlance of the industry) and prepare to make a new ground or new floor or new site condition that will act as tabula rasa –the utopian blank slate– on which activities, habitation and use will prevail. The scraped ground on which new buildings and structures arise is a simple, understandable concept but there is richer interest in the deeper, more profound, imaginative, more multi-stranded confluence of memory, history, soci0-political context, and cultural opportunity of such ground to which the condition of architecture might attain. And such understanding of memory and history might also leave opportunity for a new recipe for future fictive narratives to infuse and infect the existing urban morphology.

We can be inclusive; we can acknowledge the memories of a place and incrementally develop as a process of continuity in the city rather than accepting urban fracture, rupture, and rejection. The history of our conflict and of our culture –our artistic expression– has been inexorably linked to the spaces and buildings of the city. Those histories provide our context for growth; provide our base pattern for change. As ever, culture always has the capacity to be both porous and exploratory.

Architecture creates space for the individual and for society, and it is the definition of space that is the first step in the making of 'place' and the forming of a sense of homecoming for people. Place is not merely the space around objects –buildings. Neither the object nor the space can be detached from human activity –they exist in constant interaction. As theorist, Bernard Tschumi declared 'regeneration is a promiscuous collision of programmes and spaces –a complex network of relationships– of which architecture is as much about the events that take place in spaces as about the spaces themselves' (Tschumi 1996, 13).

Brownfield sites are about neighbours, about the surroundings, the pre-existing conditions, and a complex network of spatial, physical, and emotional relationships. All suggest degrees of responsibility and of civic considerations. And all set a snare by associations of 'context' and 'appropriateness' – that emotive loop of regeneration, the narrow interpretation of which leads to an argument about fashion or style.

Philosophers Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno refer to the term 'mimesis' as a kind of deep affinity between things and people: mimesis as a process of mediation; that it is responsible for the very possibility to recognise similarities and to transfer meanings. As method, mimesis, and an understanding of 'ambiente' (pre-existing conditions), may loosen the snare of 'context' and offer an opportunity for mature dialogue between designers, planners, clients, and citizens.

This author gains a stride from Seamus Heaney's notion that a reliable critical course can be plotted by following an artistic sixth sense. Robert Pinsky's essay on the 'Responsibilities of the Poets' proposes that the 'need to answer …is the ground where the centaur walks' (Seamus 1996, xiv). The centaurs –imagined by many writers as liminal beings– caught between two natures and embodied in contrasted myths seem appropriate metaphor for the artistic search for an ambiguous intermediate state – the political, cultural, and social interregnum in my homeplace? The liminal zone or littoral zone (neither one thing nor the other) might be the opportune space on which to make new ground?

Might that be opportunity for such a post-conflict city as Belfast?

The Falls Road throughout the period of the conflict ('66 – '96) was source of leisure, entertainment, business, commerce, and culture, almost a town within the town. Many lived in 'twenty-minute' neighbourhoods, before we understood the lexicon of the city or anticipated the current potential shift towards fifteen-minute and twenty-minute neighbourhoods. The Gaeltacht Quarter is, the core of a re-think, urban generator project that provides a singular urban opportunity because of the presence of St. Mary's University College; the proximity of the Royal Victoria Hospital (a high-quality teaching and research hospital); the activities and energy of Féile an Phobail and its sister spring and autumn festivals, and the energy and resilience of a vibrant and young Irish language community, centred on the 750-pupil Coláiste Feirste secondary school.

Our collective work is always a struggle for authenticity and distinctiveness and the capital development programme seeks to concretise the vision and ambition to make a difference for citizens. The Gaeltacht Quarter proposal, as a community-led project, has the opportunity of both setting an example of how neighbourhoods and the inner-city can connect to the centre and to other areas, and of also sta-

Figure 13: The core area of the Gaeltacht Quarter on the Falls Road

king new ground by using the Irish language as the centre of gravity to build cultural, tourism and business initiatives as a stable and organic economic system which sustains people and is sensitive to their needs and ambitions.

The Irish language community has been central to all the self-help projects in the city since the 1960s and they have forged the cultural renaissance from kitchens, back-rooms, and mobile classrooms. For the Irish language movement in Belfast the sense of community; the cultural and economic development of the community and the place of language as an inspiration are key cornerstones of identity and ethos.

The Irish language community in Belfast has experienced resurgence in recent years. It has moved from the labyrinth of the city neighbourhoods out to a physical presence on major roads and the language has moved from a cultural expression to an established place in the business, cultural and educational fabric of society. 'Show me the money' – the language of commerce has equal resonance in the Irish language sector. Or to celebrate, and paraphrase, Noam Chomsky, activists, working with passion and dedication can help deliver changes in consciousness and understanding in their local society.

Many areas seek a genuine mixed-use activity: one that would mix commerce, residential and business within one walkable place and the proposed core of the Gaeltacht Quarter does provide that mix of a distinct residential neighbourhood with unique cultural and educational resources on its doorstep.

The core team leading the Gaeltacht Quarter project is currently working with government, Belfast City Council, and the statutory authorities to adopt the concept and detail of the capital projects plan to help deliver for the local neighbourhood. Several strategic priorities have been identified and agreed: to deliver a capital development programme; to provide support for language and cultural development; to deliver investment and business development, and to deliver public realm / streetscape improvements and public art. There is no more optimistic art than architecture which lays the foundations for a better future for all, and physical regeneration and new building projects is the core activity.

Figures 14, 15: Raidió Fáilte – Irish language radio station, recording studio and training facility

Figure 16: Offices for several Irish language educational bodies – on the Falls Road at the centre of the core area of the Gaeltacht Quarter

The objective of the renewal and development of the Gaeltacht Quarter is to build upon what has been taking place in the area spontaneously and to create a living, bustling quarter which people will visit in significant numbers and in which many more will work and live. The activities and uses in the Gaeltacht Quarter will include restaurants, shops, craft workshops and outlets, galleries, and quality boutique hotels, and new residential accommodation, of various typologies, that could be used during the summer season for tourists and visitors to Féile an Phobail.

In the context of an evolving direction for the development of the city, the series of building projects has provided opportunities to engage with the challenges of designing hybrid, intergenerational buildings and spaces that interrogate notions of 'ground' and public space and connect within the specific neighbourhood locale.

CODA: AGENCY

Architects, urbanists, social policy makers and citizens seek a shared place –a connected city or neighbourhood– with opportunities for all and a shared or communal public space for events and community expression that can be retained in the collective memory of place. In cities and neighbourhoods of conflict, or sites of conscience, and in places of limited experience of shared

places or common ground how then might the architect using her /his understanding of the mechanisms and protocols of regeneration and 'place-making' work towards meaningful, evocative architecture?

How might architects and creative practitioners explore and aerate notions and understandings of 'new ground and porous borders', particularly relevant in a city such as Belfast where there is a fraught relationship between the specifics of figure and ground, as true for Belfast, however, as it is for many post-industrial, post-conflict cities.

How do we build upon or affect sites of conscience? How do we deal with former prison sites such as Maze Long Kesh or Crumlin Road Gaol? How do we deal with sites of former police stations or sites of atrocities or difficult memories? Can an architect bring something to a programme that might make new ground on which to build or develop a shared space?

Architectural project work can extend the reach of the debate to explore the relationship of one city –Belfast– with its citizens by extending the ground of architecture fully into the realm of urban design and to consider the surface, skin, and section of the void-city –the in-between space– that could connect the centre-city to the neighbourhoods and to the suburbs and the hills. City section as transformed landscape might then initiate an open-public engagement on the complex issue of people(s)' cultural identity and space: our fundamental crisis.

There is now worrying taxonomy between our walls and hidden barriers and what seems increasing interest in privately owned and gated communities which are the imperative and disturbing thrust of William Rees Mogg's 1997 book, 'The Sovereign Individual' in which he declares that the elite class will establish their own enclosures and the lower classes will be excluded: walled out, in effect.

This author doubts many, other than those interested in the period, will have heard of pacifist, feminist and author, Francis Sheehy Skeffington (executed in Dublin in 1916). He used to agree with his detractors and declare that, indeed, he was a crank but recognised that such could be a good thing, as a crank is but 'a small instrument that makes revolutions' (White and Quinn 2015, 307).

Such portrait of agency is a good thing: it has potency. Let more of us be cranks and difficult and continue to speak for those without a voice.

The voids in my city –the cavities in the built form– and the built architecture are crucial components of the emerging and changing urban experience of the city. Space as an ingredient of urban design is the creative construct that shapes our experience of architecture and permits participative communication and exchange.

Architects, and others, in an increasingly engaged discussion on the city are keen to develop praxis in planning and in architecture rather than respond to policies of planning that have, in some instances, been advanced to expand the influence interests of capital in the shaping of the city. It is increasingly clear that the traditional working class / inner city communities are not sharing the dividend of a rejuvenating city and the planned, built and now empty buffer zones on the edges of the many interface areas are now ripe for development. The concept of the city as a living entity rather than an accepted historic pattern of ownership,

association and use might free the agenda for debate and discussion.

Our communities are failing because of lack of housing provision and the problem of sectarianism. We need to strengthen our neighbourhoods and prioritise public interests. Social innovation and individual agency undoubtedly have value but need supportive frameworks. Fiscal policies once considered impossible are, since the crisis of the Covid-19 pandemic, now possible, credible and, indeed, necessary. We need such inclusive approaches to the provision of public housing. There is current opportunity to re-power democracy, to build a net-zero roadmap for our towns and cities, and well-integrated multi tenure housing has the potential to address our empty city- and town-centre sites.

There is urgent need for housing in our cities and towns, and 'public housing' is certainly, part of the matrix of development options for our complex society. In the current urban context, values, lives, and habits may change as 'physical /social distancing' challenges the nature of internal and external communal space. Home-office or home-schooling and provision of dwellings and neighbourhoods with flexible contingency spaces may well become spatial requirements in new developments. Multi tenure housing is opportunity to embrace such needs and spatial configurations as patterns of living continue to evolve and as working from home becomes an accepted modality of living.

The concepts of re-connection, in a city such as Belfast, could be paralleled and aligned with a policy of social inclusion which could establish the core principles for the future physical development of Belfast that confirms that the inner-city is as important as the commercial city core. The neighbourhood areas blighted by the grotesque 'peace walls' may offer the only common areas for social integration (other than the commercial core) where communities with differing religious and cultural backgrounds, but with shared social values and circumstances may add to and celebrate the tapestry of a re-born city. Belfast Interregnum could be a plan of connected projects, as much as conceptual frame?

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He is Associate Senior Lecturer in Architecture at the Ulster University, Belfast and has been visiting critic to ENSA School of Architecture, Nantes, France and Plymouth School of Architecture, England.

Ciaran was a founder member of PLACE, developed in co-operation with Belfast City Council to provide a city centre venue as an Architecture and Built Environment Centre. He was also founder member of Forum for Alternative Belfast. Ciaran currently serves on the Boards of organisations including, The Gaeltacht Quarter, the Maze Long Kesh Development Corporation and is architect advisor to the Ministerial Advisory Group in the Department for Communities.

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