

## Peace by Piece: (Re) imagining Division in Belfast's Contested Spaces through Memory

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*This paper investigates processes and actions of diversifying memories of division in Northern Ireland's political conflict known as the Troubles. Societal division is manifested in its built fabric and territories that have been adopted by predominant discourses of a fragmented society in Belfast; the unionist east and the nationalist west. The aim of the paper is to explore current approaches in planning contested spaces that have changed over time, leading to success in many cases. The argument is that divided cities, like Belfast, feature spatial images and memories of division that range from physical, clear-cut segregation to manifested actions of violence and have become influential representations in the community's associative memory. While promoting notions of 're-imagining' by current councils demonstrates a total erasure of the Troubles through cleansing its local collective memory, there yet remains an attempt to communicate a different tale of the city's socio-economic past, to elaborate its supremacy for shaping future lived memories. Yet, planning Belfast's contested areas is still suffering from a poor understanding of the context and its complexity against overambitious visions.*

### Introduction

*My first memory was when my aunt got shot... It frightened me, so it did. She was only home from visiting my granny in England, and she was walking around the corner to my aunt's house. She got shot dead... I.R.A. crossfire... Well, you're afraid to go out, in case you get shot dead, so you are.<sup>1</sup>*

Children and young people of the Youth Group, Survivors of Trauma and North Belfast Youth Group reported the testimony extracted above. Many children were conscious of the influence of unforgettable incidents they have witnessed and the impact on shaping their future lives. The presence of such historical imprints is, however, inherently loaded with more than the mere picturesque value of the incident scene. For years that followed, the streets of Belfast represented traces of conflicting societies that has not vanished until

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1. Joy Dyer, Do you see what I see? *Young people's experience of the Troubles in their own words and photographs. The Cost of the Troubles Study* (Belfast, Northern Ireland: International Conflict Research Institute (INCORE) 1998). <http://bit.ly/1rbuwZF>.

today, but became part of everyday networks and relationships, and subsequently infused by the presence of the past articulated in the city's architecture and public sphere. Architecture, in this context, has profound effects on the sensory engagement and historical memory of society. It brings meaning to the present by reciting events of the past, even in the absence of first-hand events. Throughout history, architecture has been a representation of vital memories by providing stories and images of the past, whereas buildings and places, like the aunt's house mentioned above, for example, serve as windows to the past and inform us of the magnitude of authority asserted upon the populace and which may extend to the present. This 'living memory' is defined as the recollections of events that people were involved in or witnessed first-hand. In preliterate societies throughout history, eyewitnesses were often relied on heavily to recount the events they had personally witnessed, transferring these 'living memories' to younger generations by word of mouth.<sup>2</sup>

The city of Belfast in Northern Ireland is symbolised by the ethno-religious divide between Protestants and Catholics. Since the city's foundation in the early seventeenth century, it has been termed a 'frontier city' or, sometimes, a 'polarised city'.<sup>3</sup> Belfast grew progressively as a settler town from the early seventeenth century, largely populated by Protestant people of Scottish and English origin. Segregation during the colonial city period existed on a macro scale, with Catholics forming a majority outside the town's walls in "rural" Ulster.<sup>4</sup> Sharp jolts in the segregation between Protestants and Catholics were associated with the Home Rule campaign, and, for the first time, segregation was evidenced in the form of rioting on the streets of Belfast. However, the city was not only segregated by its religious identity, as there was much more to the historical separation beyond the surface. Abnormal physical indicators of segregation appeared during the period of the rampant ethno-national city after the ongoing ethnic, religious and ideological struggles had escalated, this time alongside the rise of paramilitary groups. Manifestations of the struggle existed in the form of bombings, shootings and intimidation; the result was that the city remained more divided than ever. It was in these warrens of streets between enclaves, that the government instigated the erection of the Peace Walls (Figure 1).

In the years that have followed the Troubles, the walls have had two main purposes – as canvases and barriers; they acted as communicators of identity between locals in the areas and prevented opposing identities from interacting and maintain social hierarchy in the contested parts of Belfast, and whilst they are seen as 'visible authority', it is perhaps ironic that they are not recorded on

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2. Alison Landsberg, *America; The Holocaust and the mass culture of memory: toward the radical politics of empathy* (New German Critique: Duke University Press, 1997).

3. Joël Kotek, *Desegregating the City: Ghettos, Enclaves and Inequality* (New York: New York State University, 1999); Meron Benvenisti, *Jerusalem: Study of a Polarized Community* (Jerusalem: West Bank Data Base Project, 1983).

4. Ibid.

any map of the city.<sup>5</sup> The 25<sup>th</sup> of February 2016 marked an imperative event after the first eight-foot wall long standing in an interface area in North Belfast was removed. The wall was erected on the Crumlin Road in the mid-1980s when the new Ardoyne social family homes were built to give protection to residents living at the interface during the Troubles. The removal act, surprisingly, took place at night with no media coverage until the following day. Justice Minister David Ford acclaimed the substantial work made by community representatives in Ardoyne, in partnership with the Housing Executive and statutory bodies such as the PSNI and Department of Justice ‘in building community confidence to the point where they no longer wish to live behind such a barrier’.<sup>6</sup> This achievement, despite the first to be transformed out of 21 recognised Peace Wall locations, has conceded a crucial step to support regeneration projects and ‘to change the physical environment and the lives of those people who live behind it’.<sup>7</sup> However, as they stand, the walls are a disturbing physical legacy and continue to emphasise the deep division and religious differences that remain embedded across the community.

This paper provides critical synthesis of the Peace Walls in Belfast known locally as the Peaceline. It investigates why the walls have developed from relatively small coils of barbed wire into colossal barbaric enclosures and how communities on both sides of the interfaces perceive and culturally memorise causes of their existence. The goal is to exemplify the changes that have taken place in architecture and spatial planning thinking and practice in Northern Ireland since the Good Friday agreement in 1989 using Belfast as a case study. We tend to look both at the planning ideology revealed in planning documents and manuals, and in the conducting of planning processes by local architects and planners and methods in dealing with the divides. We argue that divided cities, like Belfast, feature spatial memories of division that range from physical, clear-cut segregation to manifested actions of violence, and have become influential representations in the community’s associative memory. Evidence is derived from interviews, maps and illustrations, to develop narratives that respond to the following questions. Do Belfast’ Peace Walls serve a purpose in contemporary society? How has the associative architectural memory of the Peace Walls impacted their importance in acting as a means of control in these spaces? Finally, what have been the strategies of architects and planners in the past, and how have they developed overtime?

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5. Laura McAtackney, “Peace maintenance and political messages: the significance of walls during and after the ‘troubles’ in Northern Ireland,” *Journal of Social Archaeology* 11, no. 1 (2011): 77-98.

6. BBC, *North Belfast: Work begins on removing interface wall*, 2016. <http://bbc.in/1qKNg1I>.

7. Ibid.



**Figure 1.** *Memories of Conflict in Belfast, 1971*

Source: <http://bit.ly/1QwsYxU>.

### Individual and Collective Memories of Division

Various scholars have interrogated the integrity of architectural memory. Lewis Mumford, in *The Culture of Cities*, questions the legitimacy of architectural memory at a city scale, with the view that the city is a ‘palimpsest of meaning’ that could be revealed or concealed according to the changing views of an evolving culture.<sup>8</sup> Mumford makes claim to another category of architectural memory, ‘unchanging memory’ – history that preserves the identity of the city throughout time.<sup>9</sup> The danger is of singling out particular memories, which in turn would result in losing the deeper sense of meaning and memory that the urban environment may possess for its people. Moreover, there was a danger of cities becoming ‘packaged and imaged’ for interpretation. The collective image of the city therefore could be that of ships coming into the docks or a grid view of a cityscape immersed in light and shadow.

Aspects of collective memory have been particularly prominent since the collapse of communism in 1989 and the iconic moment of the Berlin Wall being demolished. An ‘episodic memory’ has emerged, quite often allowing certain groups in positions of authority, who wish to taint this culture in their favour, to do so.<sup>10</sup> In a way, ‘the fault line between the mythic past and the real past is not always easy to draw’.<sup>11</sup> The relationship between memory and forgetting is constantly being transformed under cultural pressures; as a result, what we end up with is a set of ‘imagined memories’, characterised as ‘prosthetic memories’ – memories that have circulated publicly, and that are not organically based yet are still experienced by the individual.<sup>12</sup> By contrast, prosthetic memories often pose a threat to living memory, as they are quite often mass mediated and subject to revision and alteration, to promote one overall ‘collective memory’.<sup>13</sup>

According to Nietzsche, collective cultural memory manifests itself in the Darwinian principle of the survival of the fittest, in that human beings adopt traits and transfer them to future generations, to ensure their survival.<sup>14</sup> It, therefore, marks a distinction between those ‘who belong’ and those ‘who do not’.<sup>15</sup> For buildings to have memory, an established link to time and history is crucial. The visible link can be made through ageing or decay, or simply by being built in a particular style. As architecture witnesses events over time, it

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8. Eleni Bastea and Christine Gorby, *Memory and Architecture* (USA: University of New Mexico Press, 2004), 26.

9. Ibid.

10. Endel Tulving, *Elements of Episodic Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 59.

11. Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (California: Stanford University Press, 2003), 47.

12. Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 19.

13. Mohamed Gamal Abdelmonem and Gehan Selim, “Architecture, memory and historical continuity in old Cairo,” *The Journal of Architecture* 17, no. 2 (2012): 167-192, p. 164.

14. John Richardson, *Nietzsche on New Darwinism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

15. Ibid.

constructs a narrative of its age. Collective memories of events important to that sect of society are embedded into the individual; yet, when the individual is repositioned to a new environment, the idea of collective memory is often discarded and replaced with a new one.<sup>16</sup> In contrast to the idea of architecture instilling memory in people – what is viewed as a monument – there exist a reflection of our present sensibilities and a direct reflection to the original state, thus making it monumental; the memory we seek is what makes the monument.<sup>17</sup> John Ruskin, however, supports the view that architecture is society's primary harbour of memory, instilled in the people through built objects.<sup>18</sup> Still, the danger is the influence that social and political control exerts over memory when one perceives such monuments. Whilst history significantly consolidates perceptions of architectural memory, this could lead one to question the integrity of the memory bestowed on the built environment in many cases.

These spatial assignments are indications of the control of urban space occupied by older orders, in the way that the power and space relationship reinforces the existence of the new order. David Harvey argues that 'reorganization of spaces is always considered a reorganization of the framework, through which political and social powers are expressed'.<sup>19</sup> Individuals usually desire either to glorify their past conflict by comparing themselves with entirely different societies characterised as flawed or unhealthy; or when they desire to criticise their own society, they tend to glorify a society that appears to be different. Both approaches represent merely a projection of the other in one's mind, regardless of the other's actual state. However, even this view could be debated. What remains evident is that the urban structure of colonised cities has changed as a response to visualising this power.

Indeed, places connected to traumatic incidents are registered as situated memory that is used to reinforce shared history and value systems. Places where of various recorded murders in Northern Ireland during the Troubles are still remembered for once losing a member of family or a relative. Commemorating these instances by displaying murals or recalling those stories is a unique way to bring the past into the everyday practice of the present and a sharp declaration of the changing meaning of the place. When tragedies like this occur, places seem to gain mysterious connotations as sites of unprecedented events. Places of the past become merely spatial and physical containers that situate oral memories that are meaningful for the community and somewhat shape its identity. In these events perceptions of the past is

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16. Clare Mulholland, Mohamed Gamal Abdelmonem and Gehan Selim, "Narratives of spatial division: the role of social memory in shaping urban space in Belfast," *Journal of Civil Engineering & Architecture* 8, no. 6 (2014): 746-760.

17. Alois Reigl, *The Modern Cult of Monuments* (Vienna: Braumuller, 1903).

18. John Ruskin, *The Lamp of Memory* (UK: Penguin Publishers, 2004).

19. David Harvey, "Flexible Accumulation through Urbanization Reflections on "Post-Modernism" in the American City," *Perspecta, Theater, Theatricality, and Architecture* 26, (1990): 251-272, p. 255.

preserved, although accidentally, through local strategies of active memory that create distinctive testimonials.

Belfast's embedded memory of division is evident in the complexities of its history when studied from the perspective of its representational elucidation: in its buildings, monuments and artefacts. Though these clarifications all exist within the public domain, they are part of the history of multiple and overlapping claims to modernity. The artwork of the renowned Belfast-born wartime painter Colin Middleton, for example, shows how the perception of the city to the individual has changed over time. Whilst the paintings reflect Middleton's own image of Belfast, it had a profound influence on collective memory, given that many people have viewed them over time. Middleton's paintings were primarily of Belfast during wartime, with each provoking a different memory to the observer. These certainly connote a sense of affiliation and affection towards a Belfast clearly depicted as the industrial city it remains in part today, with its rows of Victorian housing and factory chimneys bellowing smoke.

Religious segregation in Belfast is a topic of geography that is constantly evolving as a city with 'an invisible map' sometimes manifested in the non-physical.<sup>20</sup> The social stigma and memory attached to the Peace Walls enforce the local value in these segregated societies and this notion is perhaps more significant than the walls fulfilling their function as 'divides'.<sup>21</sup> Their colossal nature and impact upon communities living in Belfast increase clashes over religion, which is apparently the main cause of violence. In fact, the walls serve as a device to create a 'tenuous peace'.<sup>22</sup> It is not religion in the sacred, spiritual sense that is the cause of the divide; but it is the existence of religion in the cultural sense, as Christine Gorby claims.<sup>23</sup> The majority of sectarian violence over the previous forty years occurred in working class areas of the city – classed as 'high intensity areas'.<sup>24</sup> The result of this violence was that planners implemented a number of segregated enclaves as a means of separation, in the form of 'cul-de sacs'.<sup>25</sup> The need for dividing walls was questioned on the grounds that they serve no purpose because they are not 'enclosing'.<sup>26</sup> In fact, they exist as a symbol of segregation and do very little in terms of their purpose – keeping the two communities apart.

The gates are closed at night, creating a secure perimeter, but in principle it's simply a deterrent to the flow of people, rather than enclosure. There are no checkpoints. The boundaries are fluid and yet strictly obeyed, implicitly impermeable. To my foreign eyes, the seeming pointlessness of a massive wall

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20. Christine Gorby, "Diffused spaces: a sacred study of West Belfast, North Ireland," in *Memory and Architecture*, ed. Eleni Bastéa (New Mexico: UNM Press, 2004), 57.

21. Rory Hyde, *Future Practice: Conversations from the Edge of Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2012).

22. Ibid.

23. Gorby, "Diffused spaces: a sacred study of West Belfast, North Ireland," 2004.

24. Marie Fay, Mike Morrissey and Marie Smyth, *Northern Ireland's Troubles: The Human Costs* (London: Pluto Press, 1999).

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid.

that you can simply walk around highlights the utter arbitrariness of what these walls are separating.<sup>27</sup>

Consequently, contemporary Belfast has shed its skin of concrete brutality in favour of lightweight, glass-clad steel structures reminiscent of other major UK cities, which in turn has contributed to a changing perception of the city, both from local and global perspectives. By turning its back on the past, Belfast has emerged as a city worthy of development. Nonetheless, within the contested areas of North and West Belfast, there are different attitudes amongst the communities. Writers generally claim that the individual and collective memory in Northern Ireland has evolved to a stage of “crisis”, embedded in the displacement and erasure of conflict.<sup>28</sup> It is not, in fact, the Troubles that are the key cause of the problem in Belfast, but the attempted “unifying” of these areas to the city centre, without taking into consideration issues of people’s embedded memory of the clashes and its subsequent implications.<sup>29</sup> It is the severity of segregation outside central Belfast, for example, that has corroded the local council’s ambitions of mending the city’s wounds through its re-imagining. Regardless of how the past has been perceived, the events of the Troubles led to severe losses on both sides of the conflict, and the council’s attempts at erasing the memory associated with this dark past more often than not resulting in further violence and social disorder. Indeed, the Peace Walls certainly do not evoke memories of peace.<sup>30</sup>

It could be argued that recent planning interventions in Belfast’s urban spaces followed immensely politicised ambitions. Here, the idea of politicised urbanism reflects the process of engineering visions to assure commitment in dismantling division and its associated memories, while bringing communities together. Nevertheless, such approaches are not only shaped by the planners’ aesthetics but are also based on cultural and social concerns that act in shaping different objectives and outcomes. This urbanism determines an approach that structures new procedures and trends in planning, and their course of implementation. It also forms the theoretical and physical trends, which accordingly are translated into projects that echo the city’s urban fabric. Drawing further on this type of innovative landscapes in Belfast, the paper will continue to investigate the actual course of actions and planners’ perceptions more deeply, in their attempts, to draw new maps of future development in conjunction with its active communities. In the following discussion, we argue that the Troubles in Belfast since the late 1960s mirrored various implications of the city’s landscape. Belfast’s urban fabric became fundamentally scarred with imposed and incompatible structures that corrupted its urban development for several decades. We will also look at the association of the Peace Walls with conflict in the people’s embedded memories, a reality that is yet affecting

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27. *Ibid.*, 56.

28. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Ill-logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991).

29. *Ibid.*

30. Gehan Selim, “The Landscape of Differences: Contact and Segregation in the Everyday Encounters,” *Cities* 46 (2015): 16-25.



the taking of positive steps towards their gradual elimination, while at the same time implementing good design approaches that could temporally heal the situation.

### Scars on the Landscape of Belfast

*As so often before in the history of mankind, architecture was the guilty instrument of despair.*<sup>31</sup>

The societal division in Belfast is directly reproduced through its built fabric and territories that have been adopted by either side. Indeed, differences in political views demonstrate the divide in Belfast, but this is also visible through other barriers which range from flags, murals and motifs to steel fences. They all have the dual aim of segregating the masses and instilling political ideals into the mindsets of residents, as a means of intimidating those who do not share the same political beliefs. The symbolic influence and memory that these artefacts provoke are deeply important in maintaining the collective identity of these areas of society. The most obvious of these divides are the Peace Walls erected in various areas of conflict throughout Belfast (also known as interface areas). The first physical barriers in the city appeared in August 1969 when British troops erected temporary knife rests strung with concertina wire as a means of deterring boiling unrest between republicans and loyalists. The barriers were later made permanent, with the knife rests becoming spans of corrugated steel topped with coils of barbed wire, altering the physical landscape of the neighbourhoods by reinforcing boundaries of physical segregation.

While Belfast's contested spaces remain fascinating, they are not unique. Throughout history there have been many instances where regimes have erected walls, such as the Berlin Wall in 1961, as means of dividing – to protect conflicting groups of societies. The wall, unlike the peace lines of Belfast, was largely impermeable. The circumstances surrounding its erection were not to divide opposing communities, but to create a divide between a single community purely on geographical terms, with governments on either side imposing opposing ideologies on each populace. When the wall was removed, the people were united. Whether walls have been wanted or not by societies, they create lasting legacies on the people's daily lives that they have carved through. Today, there remains a cult of memory attached to the Berlin Wall. Many see its removal in 1989 as a relief from the oppression that was endured during the divide and few have positive memory of it. In instances, the memory associated with the walls was regarded as negative and restricting (Figure 2).

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31. Rem Koolhaas, Elia Zenghelis, Madelon Vriesendorp, Zoe Zenghelis, *Exodus, or the voluntary prisoners of architecture, the avowal project*, 1972. <http://bit.ly/1rbv55P>.



**Figure 2.** Berlin Wall Memorial with Marker Showing where the Wall Stood

Source: <http://bit.ly/230hz0v>.

There are a total of 99 different security barriers and forms of defensive architecture across the city which remain in existence in predominantly urban, working class loyalist and republican communities. They are predominantly at the North and West of the city, dissecting residential areas and in some cases, green areas. The responsibility for the construction and maintenance of these structures previously resided with the British Government, until the devolution of policing and justice powers in 2010. After this point, the Northern Ireland Executive, through the Department of Justice, became responsible for all policy-making decisions around Peace Walls. It is the case that none has ever been removed and that they continue to overshadow the landscapes of the working class communities. Since the first paramilitary ceasefires in 1994, the Northern Ireland peace and political processes have addressed a series of sensitive and contentious issues relating to the conflict, including matters concerning policing, prisoner releases, decommissioning of weapons and power sharing. While the peace process has also, in part, begun to address challenging issues of segregation and the deep cultural division, it has not yet sufficiently progressed to address the most obvious and highly physical evidence of this deep-rooted division – the Peace Walls.<sup>32</sup>

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32. OFMDFM, *Attitudes to Peace Walls* (Belfast: Office of First Minister and Deputy First Minister, 2012). <http://bit.ly/1T8ksag>.



**Figure 3.** *The Cupar Way 'Peace Wall' between Belfast's Catholic Falls Road and Protestant Shankill Road*

The attitudes and indifference of those living on either side of the walls are largely no different to those of a previous generation, when the walls first

appeared within the landscape. Their presence also attracts negative international attention and dilutes, to some degree, the devolved administration's response towards periods of annual communal tension and public disorder. They also have a financial impact upon the delivery of public services and the opportunity to attract inward investment. The lifestyle and social potential for those communities living in the shadow of the walls have, for many years, been severely affected by the violence and disorder which the walls can attract. In the context of health and social wellbeing, each of the neighbourhoods within the walls is in the upper quartile of some of the most socially and economically deprived electoral wards in Northern Ireland. The devolved administration and local government have recently recognised this significance and have incorporated addressing physical division into some of their broader strategies and action plans that are designed to deal with segregation, community safety and urban regeneration (Figure 3).

There are many other visual symbols throughout Belfast that assert identity and influence on its residents, most notably flags. They are displayed in excess throughout different areas of Belfast depending on their unionist or nationalist views (unionists fly the Union Jack whilst nationalists fly the Irish Tricolour). Kerbstones are emblazoned in the colours of these flags and also prevalent in these areas are murals quite often of military iconography. Murals and monuments to fallen freedom fighters are highly prevalent in these areas and serve as a constant reminder to its communities of the struggles they endured throughout the Troubles. Graham Dawson argues for a 'dichotomy between the misconceptions of mythology and the scientific truths of history' and that the conception of the 'past' is not the same on both sides.<sup>33</sup> The physical presence of murals and motifs only increases community pride in their respective causes, resulting in increased segregation and further polarisation. There are differing perceptions of the physical divides shared by 'outsiders' and 'insiders'. Insiders seem to perceive the walls as "protectors" of their respective cultures and their formidable physical guardians. In a more poetic sense, the walls 'create simultaneous conditions of porousness and impermeability in the city and that even though the Peace Walls disconnect what was once a continuous urban fabric, the memory of the former gridded street patterns of West Belfast remains suspended in the minds of inhabitants – possibly to be later reclaimed'.<sup>34</sup> The Murals can be viewed as a means of control and security, signifying to the outsider that within the area there is a closed community of people with strong political beliefs, so much so that they are willing to wage war in order to stand by their political views. Quite often the murals express grievances held by the Other side; 'they evoke the sense of a wartime blockade and an attitude of defiance towards the invader' such as the infamous hunger strikers or murals depicting internment.<sup>35</sup> Many murals were painted on the

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33. Graham Dawson, *Making Peace with the Past?: Memories, Trauma and the Irish Troubles* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 35.

34. Gorby, "Diffused spaces: a sacred study of West Belfast, North Ireland," 2004: 240.

35. Selim, "The Landscape of Differences: Contact and Segregation in the Everyday Encounters," 2015.

walls as *metaphors* to commemorate and celebrate martyrs who fought for their political cause, and to reinforce remembrance in the populace that said martyrs died for the cause. It is also a purpose for educating and inspiring future generations of both community groups to hold similar extremist beliefs as it ultimately surrounds them everywhere.<sup>36</sup>

### **(Re)imaging Belfast and Memorising Contestation**

The Orwellian-like term ‘re-imaging’ is a phrase often used by the Northern Ireland government when working in contested areas. It is important to note that there are no memorial sites in Belfast city centre, despite the vast amount of fatalities that occurred around this place due to the Troubles. Indeed, a clear shift in architectural design trends in the centre of Belfast over the past three decades is evident. Up until relatively recently, Belfast was characterised by its forbidding concrete structures and its infamous ring of steel (the city centre itself was cordoned off and its gates were closed at night during the height of the Troubles). With the lack of memorials at the sites of bombs or shootings, the councils ‘re-imaging’ of Belfast demonstrated a total erasure of the Troubles and an attempt to wipe the local collective memory, but instead we find that individual memory remains intact.

In fact, planning public spaces in Belfast is never a smooth mission, as a result of the divide and struggle with issues of memory. The zoning of new districts, such as the Titanic Quarter and Cathedral Quarter, are essentially an attempt to communicate a different tale of the city’s socio-economic past. Even in choice of name, this is contested, however, bearing in mind that Titanic Quarter was originally called Queen’s Island. This aligns to the government’s process of ‘erasing memory’ or its’ re-imaging, given that the shipping industry, based in Queen’s Island, was heavily discriminatory towards nationalists. It is an endeavour in itself even to design for areas in the city that are considered largely neutral; and it is even a hot topic as to what colours can be used in graphical displays of projects – careful consideration needs to be given when using reds, blues, greens and oranges, due to political connotations. Quite often, designers for projects in the city will stick to neutral palettes of greys and black to avoid offence. One could even consider this a metaphor for the design in these politically contested areas in themselves – neutral and non-appealing. As such, there needs to be ‘reconciliation authenticity’ about places and the memories associated with them, which can open a whole new set of narratives on previously marginalised stories and histories.<sup>37</sup>

A succession of devolved governments for planning policy in Northern Ireland has been largely ambivalent in strategies for interface areas. Throughout the 1990s, the government recognised and identified areas of contestation and acknowledged its impact on greater Belfast. This was evident

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36. Ibid.

37. Zayd Minty, “Post-apartheid public art in Cape Town: symbolic reparations and public space,” *Urban Studies* 43, no. 2 (2006): 421-440.

in the resulting policy, which aimed to tie the emerging peace process to the correspondence between deprivation and the divide.<sup>38</sup> The policy aimed to address matters of division, in particular issues such as allocation of housing and land in interface areas and the Peace Walls, as well as accessibility to employment for both sides in these areas. The result was manifested in a policy entitled ‘Shaping Our Future’ in 1995, which involved cooperation with over 500 local community representatives. The policy document posed the risk of further segregating the already polarised communities in Belfast, through its attempts to address numerous ‘controversial and sensitive’ points. Nonetheless, the policy went ahead but was later abandoned by the devolved government established in 1998.<sup>39</sup>

Whilst the notion of alternative means of divide is not entirely accurate when used in the context of Northern Ireland, considering that it is in a post-conflict state, the legacy of this conflict has continued through the memory associated with the built form of the city.<sup>40</sup> Although the Peace Walls manifest the conflict in a physical form, there are many more, perhaps less obvious, measures of divide in physical forms throughout the city, mainly affecting its urban fabric patterns and future development.

If you examine Belfast in terms of the figure ground relationship, pre 1960 you have this sort of grid layout developing in the form of interconnected streets. Then the peace lines are installed and what develops is a total deviation from the grid, with a number of redevelopment areas appearing in the form of ‘cul-de-sacs’ (P2.14).<sup>41</sup>

Although the walls provided a physical dimension to the already divided society, what developed from its existence was a further divide in these sub-societies. In the housing estates off the Shankill Road, for example, planners followed a system whereby sets of houses were grouped around a housing square or a shared space, following the ideals of renowned architect Oscar Newman and his notion of ‘defensible space’.<sup>42</sup> This planning development allowed houses to form ‘sub-communities’ of 20-25 houses that took over the ownership of their own shared space, yet it led to a weakening of the urban fabric by further separating this new unit from its neighbouring streets. It was pointed out, however, ‘that this was not entirely a bad thing, as with ownership

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38. See Making Belfast Work Initiative (MBW). The initiative was launched in 1988 to address problems facing people living in the most disadvantaged areas of Belfast. <http://bit.ly/1Stmu5b>.

39. Malachy McEldowney, Ken Sterrett and Frank Gaffakin, “Architectural Ambivalence: The Built Environment and Cultural Identity in Belfast,” in *Urban Planning and Cultural Inclusion*, ed. by William Neill and Hanns-Uve Schwedler (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 100-109, p.43.

40. Brendan Murtagh, *The Politics of Territory, Policy and Segregation in Northern Ireland* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002).

41. Interviewees are coded based on the standard code used in this paper (Px.yy), where (Px) refers the participants code in list of interviews; and (yy) is the year when the interview took place.

42. Oscar Newman, *Defensible Space* (London: Architectural Press, 1972), 106.

came responsibility, and in the areas where the shared space lay vacant and didn't hold claim by either side, violence and social disorder became more evident' (P1.14). The result, simply, was a wall that divided a planning system that further divided yet worked within itself, with the remaining space being occupied by social disorder. Essentially, this was about control and ownership. This system worked to a certain degree, but there was a danger in this approach being absorbed into the overall city plan, which is exactly what happened in the late 1960s (Figure 4).

Unavoidably, planning in areas surrounding the Peace Walls is extremely difficult, taking into consideration that the walls are there for a reason. 'Even if it is now only memory that is attached to the walls, memory itself is very powerful in instilling community pride and ties the current generation that have not necessarily experienced conflict first hand' (P1.14). By creating projects that straddle the peaceline, architects must be very wary in implementing this approach. Strong links to clients and local people are extremely important. The recent DSD-led project, the NIVCA building in the Duncairn area, straddles an interface zone and, as a result, acts almost as a buffer.<sup>43</sup> This in itself demonstrates the impact that the Peace Walls have on the emerging new architecture in Belfast's divided places. Even if the walls were removed, the very fact that this building has an entrance on either side will replace the memory of the wall and highlight the fact that the divide is still present.



**Figure 4.** *Cupar Way housing units, Belfast*

From its inception in 2009, the Forum for Alternative Belfast (FAB) was dedicated to work directly with communities that had suffered from high levels of deprivation and were disadvantaged as a result of the environment they were living in.<sup>44</sup> They have worked with the Belfast Conflict Resolution Consortium (BCRC) in producing a publication surrounding the needs and issues of locals in contested areas. The consortium is made up of ex-prisoners and political campaigners from both sides of the community, and one of the major points

43. DSD. Department for Social Development, *People and Place: A Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal in Northern Ireland* (Belfast: DSD, 2003). <http://bit.ly/1YPzaaf>.

44. Forum for Alternative Belfast – a non-profit organisation that campaigns for a better built environment for Belfast, one that focuses on the Peace Walls.

that was highlighted in the publication is that ‘the one thing that unites the communities in the interface areas is their class and the one thing that divides them is their politics’ (P4.14). They claim that communities in these areas of conflict all suffer from some form of degradation due to their social class. Through a process of consulting and working with the local communities, FAB created a publication about shared space that looked at a whole range of issues. Instead of directing attention on the very obvious issues of Peace Walls, FAB focused on the environment that the working class communities were living and working in which was of poor quality, badly designed and not good for walking in. They also found that the issue of the infrastructure of roads secluding the areas prevented the communities living there from having a good connection to goods and the services in the city outside their area.

We realised that from the beginning of the conflict, most single identity communities looked in on themselves, becoming very insular and as a result, they tended to look for facilities within their community territory and boundaries that reinforced insularity – people wouldn’t leave New Lodge/ The Shankill/ Tiger’s Bay – they lived within it (P2.14).

Part of FAB’s mission was to take on the Jane Jacob idea that neighbourhoods could be romanticised and that, in actual fact, this would mean that the whole city could become a single neighbourhood. The challenge was to open these communities and connect them to the city, thus undoing the cul-de-sac model that had been adopted by planners in the 1960s and 1970s. ‘In a way, that was something that you could get agreement on, you couldn’t get agreement on the peace walls because there would be great difficulty with that’ (P2.14). Whilst it is evident that removing the Peace Walls would be no easy task, their presence in Belfast is largely viewed in a negative light. The very fact that these areas are economically deprived is only made worse by the fact that the walls have a considerable impact on the delivery of goods and services. Investors see that there are signs of violence and disorder in the area, and all of a sudden the potential for these communities to attract inward investment is reduced significantly. From a security perspective, the walls focus negative attention on the devolved government’s response to communal violence and disorder.

Industrial buildings in Belfast are viewed as being highly effective in acting as largely neutral spaces in terms of ownership and in giving back both sides of the community jobs that had disappeared because of the Troubles. They increasingly appear as buffer zones along the interface areas in Belfast and seem to be relatively successful in terms of reducing social disorder. In fact, more guilty conscience exists over the ways in which the government approached interface zones in the past. In addition, ownership is definitely a controversial issue, should permanent alterations or removal of the walls come to fruition. In North Belfast, there is a very high demand for housing on the Catholic side and little demand on the Protestant side – where there are vast areas of vacant space. These sites would normally be used to relieve this



housing demand; yet for political reasons this is difficult in Belfast, due to major concerns over territory and ownership, regardless of the use.

During the development process in the Ardoyne and New Lodge areas, as part of the Belfast Action Team in 1990, the task of the government's advisory team was to adopt new environmental approaches for addressing the interfaces. The results were a number of business parks situated in and around the interface zones. At the time, violence in the neighbouring protestant area of Tiger's Bay, an area shielded from Duncairn by a huge wall, was high due to the political events surrounding the Anglo-Irish Agreement, and large numbers of houses were becoming derelict, with many people leaving their homes as a result. Around 200 houses were demolished, one-tenth only having been built 15 years prior. Part of the deal with the Tiger's Bay community at the time was to consolidate the area and build some new houses towards the adjacent Limestone Road, as well as to insert a buffer zone including a business park and buildings with other uses that would be neutral. It was evident that the government was directly responding to the residents' needs.

In terms of a divide being manifested through a physical wall, it is instead being created by the insertion of commercial property, quite often used as start-up incentives for local businesses. For example, an industrial centre in Duncairn, in particular, provoked debate between architects, planners and engineers, due to its site being an interface zone (ibid). When the design brief was issued, the planners insisted on there being a single entrance, located just off North Queen Street (P2.14). The engineers did not agree to the positioning of this entrance, due to the issue of a main road being too close and that it would affect the sightlines. They proposed that a second entrance could be positioned at the rear of the building, i.e. on the other side of the interface. Planners argued that in doing so, 'you would essentially end up with two entrances: a Protestant and a Catholic entrance to the building' (P6.14). After almost a year of debate, the engineers eventually agreed to have the single entrance positioned where it was initially proposed. 'It was a battle, but it was even difficult to make them even aware of the consequences of putting an entrance on either side of the interface. The project was another attempt to bring down levels of violence, and it was successful, as it put the communities too far apart' (ibid).

It is interesting to note the meticulous nature of the design of buildings in such contested spaces. In this instance, the planners (unlike the architects on NICVA) attempted to address the danger of the building becoming a buffer, by careful consideration of its entrance. The nature of the interfaces themselves determines the design and placing of buildings as buffers: at points such as Cupar Way, where the interface is at its most extreme, the task of designers is much more difficult.

If you look at the interfaces, there is a distinct difference in the areas depending on where you go. The most iconic of the peace walls is the one on Cupar Way, the biggest, longest, most permanent example of the wall. In North Belfast on the Glendore Gardens, you have the softest interface,

which is equally fascinating. It divides a Protestant working class area and a Catholic middle class area. There is space between the two communities, there is no wall and the space was formerly used as a bonfire site. The space is now used for a number of positive events, which is equally fascinating because here we have two communities that have worked together to find a solution. There is a shop, an old shipping container that is relatively famous in the area. It is positioned right in the centre of the contested space and it has allowed interaction between the two communities; it's ugly, but most importantly, it works (P2.14).

### **Transforming Division: Is It Feasible?**

Nonetheless we made no effort at all to talk to people, but that was the government's approach at the time. It was a big political breakthrough because it was about relieving community housing stresses and it was a heavily contested issue for the government, but no one actually asked the locals what they wanted (P3.14).

From an architectural perspective, the Peace Walls-associated memory serves as a catalyst and motivation for the design process in areas of division. Their physical existence gives considerable attention to Belfast and is a strong indicator of the city's turbulent history as an actual manifestation of the cultural and religious differences that exist across the area. Studies have shown that more extremist views tend to be held in areas of social deprivation across the world.<sup>45</sup> Besides, the walls have generated considerable interest on international grounds over the years. In 2009, there was potential for economic investment on the part of OFMDFM, to coincide with the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the collapse of the Berlin Wall.<sup>46</sup> A strategy was not devised on time, due to conflicted views from the areas, as the international investment was linked to a proposal to remove the walls. In 2008, Mayor Bloomberg of New York City also spoke of the economic potential in removing the walls, in the form of investment. Nonetheless, the walls themselves have served as an artefact of the city's recent past.

A considerable change is manifested in terms of methods that planners and architects employ over time. When Building Design Partnership, for example, was developing the cul-de-sac estates off the Falls and Shankill in the 60s and 70s, there was no community involvement, as the project was mostly to accommodate people relocated from elsewhere. Today, planning in contested

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45. Sarah McDowell and Peter Shirlow, "Geographies of conflict and post-conflict Northern Ireland," *Geography Compass* 5, no. 9 (2011): 700-709; Ken Sterrett, Mark Hackett and Declan Hill, "The Social Consequences of Broken Urban Structures: a Case Study of Belfast," *Journal of Transport Geography* 21, (2012): 49-61.

46. Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM). For further information, see OFMDFM, *Making Belfast Work* (Belfast: 1995); OFMDFM, *Shaping our future* (Belfast: 1995). Available from: <http://www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk>.

areas is approached much differently compared to the way it was in the 1960s. A member from FAB noted:

Our approach was very different in that we didn't say we were going to negotiate with communities and take down the peace walls; we said that the first thing we were going to do was a proper and thorough analysis of the area surrounding the peace walls. Because if you look at somewhere like Cupar Way, an interface between the Shankill Road and Springfield Road, and you took the wall away now, you would still be left with two roads. The urban fabric has actually been designed within the context of the walls (P1.14).

The overall goal of removing the walls completely is quite far-fetched, and the government's initiatives, as well as international pressure to eradicate them through financial incentives, are largely ignorant of the communities in the contested space. Many communities see the walls as forms of security and protection, and proposals to remove them without thorough analysis and public cooperation are doomed to failure. Removal of the walls in a short period of time would likely raise territorial concerns and social disorder. A survey by OFMDFM in 2012 revealed that 69% of residents believe that political violence is still occurring today and that the walls help with protection on either side.

We have two irreconcilable ideologies here, but there is scope for conflict transformation and that means to transform what was formerly an arms' struggle to a democratic debate and discussion. Older people suffered too much in the conflict to really believe in the peace. Reconciliation may only come now with new generations. The peace will grow up with the kids but in the meantime, it's the separation walls that grow (P3.14).

In a way, the 'living memory' associated with the walls is still raw amongst communities, and it is largely up to the government to pave the way for improving cross-community relationships in areas of conflict. Perhaps the most significant factor to address in the wider context of the situation is integrated schooling. As a member from the BCRC stated, segregated schooling on religious grounds is one of the core problems of the divide in these areas (P2.14).

There is a huge amount of segregation in daily lives, and this is most evident amongst working class communities. The kids go to school in either protestant schools or catholic schools – there is nowhere in their daily lives where the two groups meet. This is not a consequence of the walls; the segregations and divisions were there long before the walls existed. Instead the walls have fed into this and created further segregation. So now, we are in a situation whereby there is more segregation after 13 years of the peace process than there was during the actual conflict (ibid).

In the meantime, planning practice in Belfast is confronted with divisions and yet stranded by slow actions. Literature written by professionals on division and post-conflict solutions, which offers authoritative evidence of their sympathetic and nuanced understanding of conflicted territories, is valuable. However, it lacks practical frameworks and structures for application. With professional practice drifting deeply into the city's political landscape, there is an urgent need to improve progressive policies and approaches for moving into contexts of realisation. The following are a number of strategies towards dealing with contested space surrounding the peace lines in post-conflict Belfast.

Planning practices being faced with re-imagining controversial contexts such as in Belfast are not unique; however, a trend has developed whereby planners are paralysing themselves through their inability to act by trying to gain an understanding of the city's politics. The socio-political complexity of geography is often viewed as an overwhelming restriction on designers, but many within the field of design hold the view that it is their choice to be ambitious in proposals for contested areas. An "unsolicited architecture"<sup>47</sup> strategy has certainly been successful at a small scale, with the Sina's café being a prime example; but whether this success could be mirrored on a larger scale is debatable. In a way, the Sina's café project owes much of its success to its temporary nature. The fact that it is a shipping container and not a permanent structure makes it impose much less on the communities on either side. Sina's owner pointed out that the local council opposes the container being there, arguing that it is 'unacceptable in its location, and that it detracts from the character of the area' (P5, 14). One could question the existence of "character" in the area; nonetheless, to many the café is definitely a positive contribution to the area through its attempted neutralising of the contested space (Figure 5).



**Figure 5.** *Sina's Café is a Possible Success that Could be Mirrored, Belfast*

47. See Hyde Rory, *Future Practice: Conversations from the Edge of Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2012).

Diluting communities by bringing people from different faiths and religion to live and communicate in one place is one of the possible ways out. An architect from the Northern Ireland Housing Executive spoke of a new strategy for social housing whereby houses are delegated to people from different backgrounds, thus ‘forcing them to live alongside one another’ (P6.14). Whilst this is still in its early stages, it was appearing to be moderately successful. The problem that has manifested itself over the recent decades is the approach of the cul-de sac arrangement, which led to the further dividing of already insular communities. What now exists in the contested areas, and particularly in the Falls and Shankill areas, are communities of sub communities, each with its own sub-culture and religion. By injecting vigour into housing schemes that will bring people of different views into a shared space, the divide will become less poignant (P1.14). The MAC tower, by Hackett Hall McKnight, and the Lyric Theatre, by O’Donnell Tuomey, for example, are testament to the future of architecture in Belfast and have greatly improved the city centre and its southern reaches, partly through aesthetics but also by bringing more people into these places. Admittedly, such contexts are not contested spaces in any real way but they are examples of how design can and should be executed. A landmark contextual project in the contested spaces could be the answer to unifying these communities. Whilst designers have tried to unify these areas through industrial ‘business park’ schemes, they have largely failed, due in part to the economic recession and their lack of openness to the general public. Yes, they address the needs of the workers by providing jobs, but overall they serve little purpose other than accentuating the physical divide in an alternative manner (Figure 6).



**Figure 6.** *The MAC Tower by Hackett Hall McKnight, Belfast*

Recent artistic interventions along the walls (particularly at Cupar Way) have proven to be welcomed by communities on either side; and in 2010, 98% of residents surrounding Alexandra Park in North Belfast welcomed the addition of a gate in the Peace Wall within the park. Grounds for designing interventions to the wall as an attempt to readdress its identity – not as a barrier of division, but as something that both communities can take pride in and that will bring people into the area for its architectural integrity, not for its brutal nature as dividing a battlefield. A group of graffiti artists working on the Cupar Way peace line spoke of how graffiti artists from all over the world come to paint on the wall and that it is widely recognised worldwide for its showcase of street art. In fact, of the group I interviewed on the day, three were renowned street artists from New York and Australia who had come over to paint with the group. The walls continue to be built; yet only one has been demolished. The wall is an immune response, a symptom of past generations; therefore, removing it without treating the underlying condition could be making the same narrow-minded mistake as building it in the first place was.

### Conclusions

Throughout much of its history of civil unrest, Belfast has been a city torn apart and subsequently rebuilt. Northern Ireland has been portrayed as having politically ‘moved on’ from the Troubles era and this is evident in the devolution of power to a local administration from 1998-2005. Nonetheless, there are many physical artefacts that remain throughout the city, which recaptures the ideals held by opposing sides during the conflict which are still maintained and actively pursued to the present day. While few people under 25 have a living memory of the Troubles, many strategies have been adopted by both sides to ensure the fighting spirit and memory of the atrocities that are instilled into the present-day youth, primarily through manipulation of collective memory. That said, this paper has examined the construction of collective memory being dependent on the predominant discourses of a society, as some claim; but when these are displaced and fragmented, the collective memory runs the risk of becoming split and almost schizophrenic. In a way, individual memories of division in Belfast will continue to be passed from generation to generation, each time becoming more fragmented and reliant upon the environment of the city they experience. It would be inaccurate to say that the people’s collective memory of this division could not exist without considering its individual memory. In fact, re-imaging destruction in significant sites through rebuilding is simply not enough to clear the areas of individual and collective memory.

The role of the practical profession in post-conflict cities such as Belfast is both complex and difficult, and the various strategies, which have been explored through the recent decades, have had moderate success and failure in different areas. Replanning and designing such places in fact adds a third dimension to the socio-political divide on the outskirts of the city centre. The

modest planning in Belfast's contested areas has evidently been the result of many detrimental factors, most significantly the poor understanding of the context and its complexity on the part of the designer or planner, and their having an overambitious vision. The areas explored in this study are highly political and sensitive, and the removal of something as significant as the walls is simply an overreaching goal. Architects cannot apply broad design principles to these areas, as would be the case for other master plan schemes. There are many design strategies for the contested spaces that could be adopted. However, there are also a number of factors that must be addressed. History has proven that in order for any strategy to work, designers must incorporate the wider context of the walls themselves and include community groups in their decision-making, taking into consideration the influence such groups have. In fact, for any proposals to go forward, these interests must be on board.

On the other hand, the incorporation of industrial or commercial buildings at interface areas is crucial, particularly when executed incorrectly, as the so-called "neutral" buildings are simply the manifestation of the divide in an alternative way. Yet, a number of industrial sites lie vacant and in a poor state. This alludes to a lack of ownership that leads to violence and social disorder. In time, these areas become territorial markings of groups on both sides of the divide. Special care must be taken in order to prevent buildings being used as such as a buffer: in particular, the positioning of the entrance is crucial. On the topic of ownership, planners and architects must also take steps to ensure that communities on either side of the divide do not form further sub-communities within themselves (as was the case in the 1970s). This can be prevented by the location of goods and services and planning accessible housing schemes (avoiding cul-de-sacs and closed avenues). They must integrate housing schemes into the wider community whilst avoiding large, vacant spaces that are not claimed by residents. In terms of addressing the housing situation on either side, this is perhaps one of the most difficult problems that planners and architects face. This becomes an issue of territory, and the government and designers are aware that they cannot simply gift vacant land on one side to alleviate a shortage of land on the other. In these cases, liaison with cohesive community groups is vital, but also integrating mixed groups and religions into housing schemes through organisations such as the Housing Executive could address this issue, or perhaps even dilute it. Nonetheless, weakening the divide between on either side by creating sub-culture/ religious societies is not something that can occur overnight.

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