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Urban Artifacts and Social Practices in a Contested City

Ralf Brand

BELFAST is notorious for conflict. However, a series of cease fires called in 1994 that were institutionalized by the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 created a new normality in Belfast that is only rarely disturbed by outbreaks of violence. And indeed, the thousands of tourists who are now again populating the streets of Belfast see hardly any sign of conflict. I was in some kind of a tourist mode myself when I began my new job at Queen's University, Belfast in April 2005. I was thrilled by some of the Victorian and Edwardian architecture, impressed by the regeneration efforts around the former Gasworks site, astonished by the thriving shopping scene and student culture, awed by the largest ongoing commercial construction project in Europe, the Victoria Square development in the heart of the city, and blown away by the scale and ambition of the redevelopment in the Titanic Quarter. In other words, Belfast had become simply a normal European city with aspirations to compete in the global market.

And yet, I noticed that I was in the capital of the “troubles” (a term that denotes the phase of massive violent conflict beginning in 1969) when I tried to store my luggage for a few hours at the central bus station: “No luggage-lockers, sir; not in Belfast.” The old fear of bombs might have vanished, but the artifactual manifestation of conflict lags behind the new reality; the reality at the surface, to be precise, because closer inspection reveals

how alive the roots of the conflict still are. The “constitutional question”—whether Northern Ireland should belong to the Republic of Ireland or should remain a territory loyal to the British crown—is still unresolved but lies at the heart of the issue. Some might declare this struggle between Catholic Nationalism and Protestant Unionism a grotesque anachronism in a postmodern world where constructs such as nation and identity seem atavistic. Others, however, adhere to Castell’s observation that the importance of identity has proportionally—and predictably—grown at the same speed as the traditional sources of meaning crumbled under the force of a globalized commercial, competitive, and consumerist frenzy.

Traditional notions of identity seem to appeal to those whose manual labor is not much valued in the new “knowledge economy.” Those who cling to a sectarian “single identity” can indeed be found in the traditional working class strongholds in the Shankill, Lower Falls Road, and many parts of North, West, and East Belfast. Other areas, especially in the south of Belfast, are populated by the winners in the new economy, who usually tend to more bourgeois ideals, often incarnated in a posh German car. But despite this partial and locally bounded bleeding between the main identities, people there still maintain social links primarily within their own religious, that is, ethnic community; they are “spatially mixed but socially separated.” In most parts of Belfast, however, the residential geography is still characterized by a stark degree of sectarian segregation. Mistrust, verbal abuse, harassment, and intimidation, even flying stones are daily features of life in these areas and even petrol bomb attacks are far from extinct.

Murtagh

It is, therefore, not surprising that this social reality is manifest in many objects, maybe most tangibly in architectural artifacts and urban design features, created to make space defensible as Oscar Newman prominently suggested. Many of these artifacts have been removed since the cease-fires, but others remain as “troubling remnants” of a more openly violent past, while many others are still needed or even extended to prevent at least opportunistic attacks, often from those who indulge in what local parlance dubs “recreational rioting.” In other words, the bitter division is reflected in bricks, mortar, and cement. The so-called “peace walls,” which separate the warring factions, are certainly the most striking exemplars. But many other and less spectacular artifacts—murals, surveillance cameras, look-out posts, and other security installations—are scattered all over Northern

Jarman

Jarman Ireland. They all are “physical scars on the landscape,” many of which have been discovered by the operators of sightseeing tours as interesting enough objects for their patrons’ cameras; but many of them are perceivable only to the trained senses; mostly eyes but also ears. This paper is about them.

The rationale that guided me in highlighting some and skipping other urban artifacts was the intention to provide a roughly representative, but certainly not exhaustive, mix of such phenomena. I wanted to write about large-scale and very small objects, about spectacular and mundane ones, about cliché artifacts and about those that are very little known outside of Belfast, sometimes even outside of a particular neighborhood because they require a very close look, an intimate knowledge of a certain local context, and a de-coding of their socially constructed meaning. This focus on material “stuff” does not at all imply the conclusion that immaterial and mental constructions are less important. Mental representations of spaces and places, for example, are hugely important for people’s every-day lives. Interestingly, however, even mental maps are largely constructed around key material landmarks such as buildings, walls, fences, CCTV towers. I dare to speculate that conflict-architecture tends to influence people’s spatial perception even more strongly than “ordinary” landmarks. But this, of course, should be subjected to systematic empirical tests.

Issues about materiality in divided or contested cities are receiving increasing scholarly attention after they have been ignored for way too long. Among the causes for this lack of attention might be that we become so used to the material environment through which we ritually navigate day-in and day-out that we grow oblivious to it; we lose the critical distance that reflection requires. What thus appears normal, ordinary or even banal to locals might appear in clear contrast on the radar screen of visitors. One of the reasons why a critical understanding of the artifactual manifestation of conflict is so important for the shaping of the future of Belfast—and in fact, any of the numerous other contested cities around the world—is the fact that objects can gain a degree of agency and self-momentum. The built environment, the shape of buildings, certain street patterns, territorial markers, etc. tend to exert an intended or unintended pull or push upon people’s perception and behavior. Science and Technology Studies scholars (STS) talk about this common phenomenon by referring to “scripts” or “programs” or “agendas” that are embedded in all kinds of artifacts. A speed bump, for example, makes people slow down. In the context of a contested city, certain material

objects have the potential to influence people's choice of shopping locales, commuting patterns, or leisure habits. In a not at all cynical sense, a divided city like Belfast is, therefore, a rich learning environment about the fact that all kinds of artifacts *reflect and shape* social reality. Churchill put the very same dialectical phenomenon in more general and simpler terms: "We shape our dwellings and afterwards our dwellings shape us." The same holds true, of course, for urban spaces in general. In other words, the relationship between the built environment and the social reality in a contested city is a prime exemplar of what Pfaffenberger calls a "technological drama," where the boundary and the causal direction between the material and the social realm becomes very hard, if not impossible, to identify.

Churchill Center

State Force

Bearing in mind Michael Foucault's assertion that "architectural and urban planning, . . . designs and ordinary buildings, offer privileged instances for understanding how power operates," it comes as no surprise that certain urban artifacts represent the power of the British state in Northern Ireland—and its rejection. For many Nationalists, the police forces, for example, were seen as the extended arm of the British authority and thus as an evil manifestation of a colonial and oppressive regime. Unionists, however, expected the police to secure their legitimate existence on Northern Irish turf without having to fear attacks from the terror campaign of Nationalist militants. Sometimes, however, even Unionists condemn the police forces when they feel their security concerns are being neglected. The result of this social dynamic is visible in almost every neighborhood: "All police stations are highly fortified and highly distinctive. They have lookout posts, which are protected by metal grills placed to deflect missile attacks; they are defended by blast walls and bounded by bollards designed to prevent car bombs from being driven too close. They are overlooked by a range of CCTV cameras, and they are physically dominated by masts which contain a plethora of aeriels and panoptical devices." Unlike many army bases, which are slowly disappearing, as a sign of trust in the peace process, most police stations need to be maintained, which sometimes is taken as an opportunity to attenuate their grim appearance through plants, color, brick masonry, and ornamental features.

Wright and Rabinow

Jarman

Court houses are another typical demonstration of state power and play an accordingly symbolic and problematic role in Belfast's socio-spatial fabric. The one on Crumlin Road is best known to tourists for its Neo-Palladian architecture. For locals, it is the site of many verdicts against those they call "defenders of their community." The court house was closed in 1998, and justice is now being dispensed in a state-of-the art facility in the swankily regenerated area along the Lagan River. When one of my colleagues commended the design of the new court house, he was told that some Nationalists would find it ugly even if it was designed by Michelangelo himself because it is a blunt display of the power of an illegitimate and oppressive state.

Similar sensitivities resonate around prisons, especially around the Crumlin Road gaol, which was linked to the adjacent court house through a tunnel. It held prisoners since Victorian times and acquired some questionable fame during the "Troubles" because it housed many paramilitary prisoners. It was the site of many breakouts, bomb attacks, and rooftop protests. The prison has been closed since 1996 and is now awaiting future uses. The combination of its history with its unique architecture has triggered ideas to convert it into an eerie tourist attraction: The Alcatraz of Belfast. Its highly delicate and symbolic nature, however, demands extremely careful planning efforts. Nationalists suggest using at least parts of its area to alleviate their severe housing shortage—an idea that is anathema to the adjacent Unionist population.

At least equally contentious is the question of what to do with HM Prison Maze, also known as the H Blocks (after their characteristic shape), Long Kesh or simply, The Maze. It was purpose-built in the 1970s to house paramilitary prisoners, after the British government had revoked their status as prisoners of war and relabeled them as ordinary criminals. This triggered massive protest from IRA prisoners, which culminated in the spectacular hunger strike of 1981, resulting in the deaths of ten prisoners. Several other dramatic events kept HM Prison Maze in the news until the signatories of the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 decided on an accelerated release of all paramilitary prisoners, which made the complex obsolete in 2000. A plethora of proposals has since been circulating for the 360-acre site, and it remains to be seen whether the chosen plan will successfully integrate the symbolic, commercial, commemorative, touristic, residential, educational, industrial, artistic, and recreational purposes that the area is meant to serve.

Segregation

Wards where more than 90 percent of the population are from either of the two religious/ethnic communities can be considered severely segregated. The portion of the total Belfast population living in such areas increased from 49.3 percent to 55.4 percent in the ten years after 1991. The portion of severely segregated estates of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive in Belfast even reaches 98 percent. Not even workplaces are spared from sectarian features. The location of access points to factories, for example, can be a contentious issue to satisfy the security concerns of all workers. In some instances, it was decided to build two entrances: One for Nationalist, the other for Unionist employees.

Morrissey and Gaffikin
International Journal...

Northern Ireland
Housing Executive

Hospitals, schools, churches, leisure centers, libraries, and playgrounds in highly segregated areas are usually used by members of one community only. This kind of benign and largely self-imposed apartheid bears strange fruits in people's everyday lives. Hardly anyone would feel safe in a pub on the "other" side and more than half of the population in severely segregated areas would never venture to "the other side" to do their shopping. When people fear to avail themselves of public services in the "wrong" territory, many amenities have to be duplicated in both areas: community health centers, job centers, bus stops, or post offices. Where this is not the case, people sometimes suffer huge inconveniences like Nationalists from the Short Strand area who travel across the river Lagan into the city center just to purchase stamps when community tensions seem too dangerous to use the close-by post office in the adjacent Unionist neighborhood.

Fuhrer

Sometimes, the daily mobility patterns of people become visible in the urban fabric. There are the "black taxis," for example, that are fully integrated into the public transport hub behind the Castle Court shopping mall in the city center but which serve only Nationalist or Unionist areas. The fixed routes these taxis travel are almost like ethnic tentacles reaching out from the heartland of either community, and the places where they wait for passengers usually "belong" either to Nationalists or Unionists. Some other territorial claims are even less visibly coded and only subtly imbued as mental markers. Despite the fact that the main shopping mile in the city center is meant to be a shared or at least neutral space, some argue that Nationalists are slowly gaining the upper hand in the Castle Court shopping center. Of course, the physical structure of the mall cannot be altered by any group, but its patronage can consist of a majority

of people who display certain ethnically charged emblems on their t-shirts, key rings, hats, etc.

Dividing Artifacts

The boundaries where both communities collide are called interfaces. Many are the result of the “Troubles,” which forced up to 60,000 people to move within the greater Belfast area into more homogeneous territories. This movement increased segregation levels and, by implication, created additional interfaces. The intensity of violence at certain interfaces necessitated the erection of so-called “peace walls,”¹ intended to prevent localized skirmishes. These walls are as high as ten meters and sometimes several kilometers long. They are barricades of concrete, corrugated iron, and fences designed to avert ballistic attacks with stones and other dangerous objects. These walls are among the starkest examples of “how to do words with things” as Latour famously calls the attempt to embed or to outsource desired behavior into artifacts. Seen in this light, peace walls are wordless imperatives yelling “Do not throw anything to the other side!” in an easy-to-decipher language as can be seen in Figure 1.

Peace walls also provide classic examples of the unintended side effects of materially embedded behavioral agendas. Gerard McGuigan, for example, a former Sinn Féin Councilor, reported, “Once the [Alliance Avenue] peace line . . . started going up, people started testing it for weak spots and that led to it being extended further.” It is quite typical that peace walls attract further disorder, which explains the fact that the vast majority of trouble-related deaths occurred in close proximity to them. Not surprisingly, peace walls are frequently patrolled by security forces and generously equipped with surveillance cameras. This can have the ironic effect that trouble-seekers gather at alternative locations that can turn into new interfaces. Maybe the most loathsome wall divides Alexandra Park, a lovely green space that could otherwise be a tranquil urban retreat. In 2001, the nearby Waterworks Park was the venue of repeated disturbances, which almost led to its division through new fences, had not the prudent majority of local residents stepped in with an initiative to reduce tensions, to take greater care of the park, and to attract more law-abiding visitors, including unhurried anglers, by stocking a pond with fish.

Most peace walls are fitted with steel gates that can be closed at specific times of the day or whenever the security situation

¹A map and images of interfaces is available at <www.belfastinterfaceproject.org/interfacemap.asp>.

Latour 2000

Heatley

FIGURE 1

The Peace Wall Along Cupar Way, Separating the Nationalist Falls Road from the Unionist Shankill Area

demands it. Some are operated year-round by the police while others are controlled by the adjacent communities. In some cases, sophisticated local arrangements facilitate the continuation of daily life along fortified interfaces. For example, it is the nearby chemist who holds a key to the pedestrian gate at Duncairn Gardens to ensure the accessibility to medical drugs to anyone at any time. Another attempt to add a human touch to the inhuman peace walls is to disguise or embellish them. The one on Crumlin Road, for example, features carved ornaments and plants. The suggestion to hide a peace wall behind a row of trees may sound like a good idea, but the very arboreal decoration can be misused by perpetrators who climb the trees and then throw stones or worse from their elevated position.

I once asked whether it would make sense to lessen at least the visual impenetrability of concrete walls by incorporating glass blocks into their physical structure. The answer was pessimistic: "It only takes one idiot to figure out how to write 'Fuck the Pope' mirror-inverted on the glass." Another of my naïve ideas was equally quickly obliterated: "If Christo wrapped the peace walls, someone would arson the fabric in the first night." But if we acknowledged them, a local artist suggested, as facts

that are unlikely to disappear any time soon, we should maybe give up the moralizing argument that their beautification would somehow implicitly legitimize their existence. Therefore, the best thing we could do here and now is to make use of them, say, as screen for open air cinemas or as venue for “peace wall festivals.” While this idea has not yet materialized, other allegedly creative uses of derelict land near interfaces have emerged in the form of “old people’s homes as buffers in [such] areas.”

Morrow

Houses, Neighborhoods, and Streets

The manifestation of conflict is not only visible in monumental walls but also in the design of the houses, neighborhoods, and streets behind them. The foot paths in the Poleglass development, for example, were allegedly constructed to full road specification to facilitate access for heavy army vehicles. Similar observations (or rumors?) have been circulating in the planning community for many years but the danger of taking a wrong turn is enormous when trying to un-design given artifacts in the sense of reverse engineering in order to read the designer’s original intention. What can be taken as fact is that the Northern Ireland Housing Executive consults with the police where security issues arise on interface areas.

Murtagh

Cowan
Hillyard
Dawson

Murtagh

The liberal use of cul-de-sacs also provides material for lively debates among planners and architects in Belfast. Some claim that this design solution is a classical case of social engineering, promoted by the police to prevent shoot-and-run attacks. Dawson also argued that the cul-de-sac design in the Short Strand deliberately “minimized the exit points in the area, thus permitting it to be secured quickly and with minimum resources.” A planning practitioner who was involved in the design of several cul-de-sac mazes, however, remembers that the security forces were actually opposed to this kind of street layout because their vehicles could get trapped and attacked in them. His version simply portrays cul-de-sacs as “the kind of thing you were expected to do in the 1980s,” partly because it was simply fashionable and partly because transport planning wisdom demanded a limited number of intersections on thoroughfares. Whatever interpretation is closer to the truth does not limit the strangeness of the fact that this discussion is still subject to debates and conspiracy theories at all. That is probably just the way things are “in a society where anecdote can quickly become accepted as fact.” And in any case, cul-de-sac neighborhoods do affect the social life of

Murtagh

Murtagh

their residents—but not always in an intended way. Many elderly people, for example, complain about the sterility of their community after their residential area has been “modernized.” The previous streets and their rows of terraced houses were much more permeable and provided many more things to watch during a long and otherwise boring day. What is even worse is Morrissey and Gaffikin’s observation that cul-de-sacs “have produced their own segregations *within* ethnic enclaves, further eroding urban values of permeability, accessibility, and connectivity.”

Morrissey and Gaffikin
“Planning for Peace...”
unpublished manuscript

Many other design solutions are also candidates for any textbook about Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED). Low-level barriers resembling extremely broad kerb stones, for example, qualify as examples of access control. What CPTED practitioners would call “natural surveillance” was the remarkable result of a community engagement process for the design of an open space near an interface: The residents requested that all gable ends must have windows and that trees are planted instead of bushes because potential perpetrators could hide behind the latter but not the former. In other cases, trees were planted to interrupt the line of sight of stone throwers, verbal attackers, and visual harassers. In the Donegall Pass neighborhood, this approach was outsmarted by local children, who simply sidestepped into an elevated flower bed from where they could reinstate their line of invidious engagement with the other children across the railway tracks.

The frequent deviation from the typical British street-house-backyard sequence to a street-frontyard-house pattern is also meant to increase surveillability because it creates extra space where trespassers quickly become conspicuous. A speculative mind might ask whether this design facilitates more frequent encounters between neighbors in their front yards that could actually increase tribal community cohesion—against the “others.”

Qalido

It must not go unmentioned in a description of residential design in Belfast that many design features of individual houses are attempts of desperate target hardening by means of grills, bars, and wire-mesh. The climax of this vast range of variations are de-facto-aviaries (See Figure 2), that people needed to build over their tiny gardens that abutted on a peace wall that was not high enough to block projectiles from the strongest missile throwers.

Even seemingly neutral apartment blocks are not spared the necessity of employing related security considerations—although some might say that a significant degree of paranoia takes its toll in such cases. A telling example is Whitehall Square, a recently opened apartment complex immediately adjacent to

FIGURE 2
Double- and Triple-Protected Back Yards Facing a Peace Wall in Bombay Street

Sandy Row, a well-known inner-city stronghold of Unionism. Although the advertisement for these freehold flats does not mention this delicate fact in any way, the designers chose preemptively to locate the entrance as far as possible away from Sandy Row and to install electronically controlled security gates as a default feature. Whitehall Square is, in a sense, a new type of interface: one between the winners and the losers of the new economy, complicated with a sectarian undertone.

Murals

The arsenal of CPTED practitioners also contains the strategy of territorial reinforcement, which is the use of physical attributes that express ownership such as fencing, signage, and landscaping.

Murals are probably the most visible incarnation of such demonstrative territorial ownership in Belfast. They typically depict the readiness of a community to defend itself, usually through one of the many paramilitary groups whose logos and members—often with assault rifle and face mask—are frequently featured. Many Unionist murals demonstrate the eternal loyalty to the Queen while many paintings in Nationalist areas display solidarity with other oppressed ethnic groups around the world, including Palestinians, Catalonians, or Basques. Another typical mural theme is the grief that earlier traumatic attacks have inflicted on one's community; crying children and burning houses are common motifs in those paintings. Some murals pay tribute to the hero-defenders of one's community. Others, on the Unionist side, for example, commemorate the 36th Ulster Division that fought for the British mother country in the Battle of the Somme in 1916 while the Irish were preparing their armed struggle for independence at home. A number of murals reach even further back in history. On the Catholic side, there are murals that commemorate the Great Famine (1845–1849) (See Figure 3)

FIGURE 3
Nationalist Mural Commemorating the Great Famine

whose death toll of somewhere between 500,000 and one million is attributed by the Nationalists to the greed of the land-owning English elite. On the Protestant side there are murals of the Battle of the Boyne, in which the Protestant King William defeated the Catholic King James, an event that has trickled into the collective Northern Irish memory as the beginning of British dominance on the island of Ireland. A mural in East Belfast tries to corroborate the legitimacy of British presence on the island by highlighting a 4,000-year-old history of the Ulster-Scots culture that is meant to prove the historic linkages between Scotland and what is now Northern Ireland.

Jarman Most murals reflect the political situation at the time of their creation, which is why certain motifs can go out of fashion after a while. Jarman observed in this regard that “the content of the murals has shifted from strident expression of a defiant resolve to carry on the war regardless of the cost, to more sorrowful expressions of the very human price that has been paid.” More recent murals also depict less militant and more cultural themes, usually supporting one’s community’s pride but sometimes even celebrating the whole city. An example of the latter is the larger-than-life image of George Best, the recently deceased football star who is an icon for almost all (male) Belfastians.

Jarman Youth projects have also produced a number of remarkable non-sectarian murals. Some of them feature a utopian good life free of bombs, guns, and drugs. An almost touching motif can be found on both sides of a gate that severs Madrid Street in East Belfast. It features the handprints of many young artists and depicts, in perspective continuation, the houses on the respective “other” side. Unfortunately, the painting on the Unionist side has recently been torched, thus highlighting the fact that the life span of murals varies as much as their themes. Those with cheap paint disappear after several thunderstorms, those of limited artistic quality or outdated concern tend to get painted over. Some are vandalized by bored youngsters, others are officially removed after thorough community consultation. The products of the most lucky painters, however, “remain in place for years and a small number of these are . . . regularly repainted to keep them fresh and bright.”

Further down the line of artistic excellence are the miles of kerb stones that are transformed into territorial markers through red-white-blue or green-white-orange paint in many Unionist or Nationalist areas, respectively. Short, political, polemical, and often paramilitary slogans are also sprayed on many surfaces in

the most contested areas of the city. Some of them proof at least of a certain degree of creativity in spoofing the meaning of many acronyms that were initially coined in an attempt to find politically correct but clumsy expressions for otherwise quite ordinary terms. The least creative use of paint is in so-called paint bombs that can easily be produced and easily thrown at any disliked object, preferably cars, homes, or churches of the “others” that include not only Nationalists and Unionists but also recent immigrants and DINKS and YUPPIES who live in the now generously paint-bombed Whitehall Square apartments.

Flags

Flags are another common sight in Belfast because they are cheap, easy to display, and very effective in strengthening denominational group identity and in declaring one’s turf off-limits to outsiders. The Union Jack, for example, is a perfectly unproblematic symbol when flown in London, but in Northern Ireland it is equated with Britishness and, thus, seen as an affront by Nationalists. Similarly, the Irish Tricolor is simply the flag of the Republic of Ireland when seen in Dublin. In the North of the island, however, it gains special meaning as the banner under which Nationalists fight their armed struggle for a reunification with the South. Many other similarly value-laden symbols are of equal emotional and political importance. Examples are the St. George’s Cross, St. Andrew’s Cross, St. Patrick’s Cross, the Orange Order Flag, or the Leinster Flag (harp on a green background). The latter two also explain why the color green is often equated with the Nationalist, Republican, Catholic agenda while orange is often used as a proxy for Unionism, Loyalism, and Protestantism.

Many flags are almost lovingly cared for, as an anecdote of a colleague underlines: He once went into a Nationalist street a few days before a Unionist parade was scheduled there. He noticed the absence of a large Irish tricolor and praised the sensitivity of the Nationalist residents and their attempt to lower community tensions by removing the flag shortly before the parade. He was told that the tricolor was simply being washed and ironed just in time to be flying again during the parade. Efforts are often expended to ensure that flags can be seen beyond the area in which they are erected by affixing them as high as possible, sometimes even on top of high-rise apartment blocks. The more aggressive types of flags feature a confusing variety of acronyms and

logos of paramilitary organizations. Although these organizations are illegal, their flags poison the urban atmosphere from many lampposts where they are attached with adhesive tape. Legal, but in many cases not much less provocative, are election posters of political leaders which “remain on lampposts weeks, months, and even years after they should have been removed and effectively serve the purpose of marking out territory” as Gillespie observes.

Results from the 2003 Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey indicate that nearly one-fourth of all people in Northern Ireland felt threatened or intimidated by sectarian murals, kerb paintings, or flags at least once in the preceding year. These artifacts are not only effective “chill factors” intimidating outsiders. They also “can lead to economic damage and can discourage investors, business, and employment.” It is, therefore, not surprising that government agencies and community organizations invest much energy in “tackling the visible manifestations of sectarianism and racism” as the recent policy framework *A Shared Future* calls this challenge. The problem is particularly tricky because most people are afraid to complain about flags and emblems even if they—like 66 percent of respondents to a recent survey—think they should be removed by the police. In addition, half of those surveyed believe that their removal is unenforceable anyway. A representative of the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister challenged this pessimism by reporting—not without some pride—that 1,000 flags of an aggressively sectarian nature or flags that remained beyond agreed protocol periods have been taken down since 2005.

Such pragmatic questions are not the only ones that need to be answered. Northern Ireland also needs to find an, ideally consensual, answer to the question where the legitimate expression of one’s culture and identity ends and where triumphalism and intimidation begin. Nobody has an objective answer. Truth needs to be negotiated. This is why the Shared Future Agenda emphasizes that tougher legislation is just one element of a more comprehensive strategy. It stresses the importance of a collaborative approach between the police, elected representatives, and local communities for the removal of inappropriate and aggressive murals, graffiti, flags, and painted kerb stones from arterial routes, town centers, and areas near interfaces, schools, churches, and hospitals. It is frequently argued, however, that we should not just tinker with the symptoms of conflict but that we need to tackle the underlying issues that spark the use of intimidating symbols in the first place.

Office of the First Minister and
Deputy First Minister

Office of the First Minister and
Deputy First Minister

Office of the First Minister and
Deputy First Minister

Gillespie

Gillespie

Bonfires and Parades

Many of the physical phenomena I described above are not uncommon in many other so-called contested cities like Beirut, Nicosia, Mostar, Jerusalem, etc. Another type of the conflict's visible manifestation, however, might be almost unique to Northern Irish shores because they only appear at certain times of the year, particularly in July when Unionists hold parades and bonfires to celebrate the victory of William III over the Catholic King James II. Bonfires used to be an inter-generational event, not much bigger than ordinary camp-fires. Nowadays, however, many bonfires have mutated into huge infernos and have become pretexts for teenage drinking orgies that discredit the original intention. Weeks before the lighting of the fires, Unionist youth compile seemingly everything flammable, primarily pallets, discarded furniture, and tires (although illegal), to a huge pile (See Figure 4)—often with an Irish flag on top of it—which burns through the night from July 11 to July 12, leaving an unpleasant site contaminated with toxic ashes. (See Figure 4.)

During July, William's victory is also commemorated by parades held by members of the Orange Order, a Unionist fraternal organization. While critics argue that these marches represent a spirit of anti-Nationalist triumphalism, most of them are not

FIGURE 4

Almost Anything Combustible is Collected in Preparation of a Unionist Bonfire

contested and are only visible for the short period during which the men with their bowler hats, orange sashes, white gloves, banners, flutes, and drums march by. In areas where the Nationalists do oppose the march, or its particular route, the problem affects the urban fabric for days before and after the parade in the form of barricades, security forces, and armed vehicles trying to keep the contesting groups apart. In an attempt to channel these differing opinions into more civilized forms, a Parades Commission, an independent, quasi-judicial body, was set up in 1997. It consults with the contending parties and rules on the admissibility of the more than 3,000 parades in Northern Ireland—mostly Orange Order marches but also some Nationalist parades around St. Patrick's Day, marches of university teachers on strike, or organized drives of veteran car lovers. Applications have to be filed at least 28 days in advance and the application form as well as the appeal form are available on the commission's website that also informs the public whether a requested parade is contentious and how far the review process has progressed. The commission has the power to impose restrictions on dress, flags, etc. and even the types of songs played by the marching bands. Particular conditions are often issued for areas "where the majority population of the vicinity are of a different tradition."² Another sample of the commission's politically correct prose is the determination that "participants should refrain from conduct, words, music, or behavior that could reasonably be perceived as intentionally sectarian, provocative, threatening, abusive, insulting, or lewd."

²A recent ruling, for example, demanded in minutiae that "no music, other than a single beat on a side drum, shall be played between the entrance to Hazelwood Integrated School on the Whitewell Road, and the junction of the Shore Road and the first slip road leading to the M2 motorway to the left of the notified route" (Parades Commission, 2006).

Parades Commission 2008

Parades Commission 2006

Grand Orange Lodge

This Parades Commission is a typical exemplar of the common attempt in Northern Ireland to bureaucratize conflict. Nevertheless, it's rulings, which are meant to be neutral, are not always quietly accepted. The Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland issued an angry statement against "this ridiculous Quango because of its arrogant failure to think through its decisions and its pathetic readiness to appease republican fascists wanting to eradicate Loyalist culture." The Orange Order also disapproved of the Commission's ruling in 2005 to re-route the Whiterock parade through a former factory site in order to prevent it from passing through a Nationalist section along Springfield Road. The Order argued that this verdict violated their religious and cultural rights to follow an old traditional route while the Parades Commission was concerned about the troubles the contentious parade would create in an area that has become Nationalist in recent decades. The Commission upheld its decision despite an

official appeal, which sparked such anger among the Unionist community throughout Belfast that the resulting riots kept Belfast in the international news for a week in September 2005. In a statement, the Belfast County Grand Orange Lodge claimed that Orangemen were “faced with a further attempt to humiliate and suppress their culture” and that Nationalists would have to realize that “exercising a cultural veto [through their] Parades Commission puppets.” will have consequences. The scale of the resulting disturbances became visible when the Police Service published the estimate that their deployment for the Whiterock parade and the subsequent rioting caused expenses of about £3 million. The negative effect of the related headlines in the international press for Belfast’s economy certainly exceeded that sum by far. Analysts have argued that the riots were not exclusively about the Whiterock parade itself but that many Unionists and their leaders simply took it as a valve event to release their anger with a number of recent political concessions to the Nationalist side that were intended to coax them into the next step of the peace process—in particular into the decommissioning of the IRA. In other words, Unionists were indignant that Nationalists were seemingly rewarded for stopping something that was never legal anyway. Their anger, however, was heard and led to plans for an investment and regeneration program for Unionist neighborhoods. One of my former colleagues at Queen’s University Belfast described this phenomenon of creating trouble to increase the government’s financial attention as “the crying baby gets the tit” mechanism. He added: “Both communities are very good at that.”

“Officers Injured...”

Denominational and Sectarian Paraphernalia

It is not only Belfast’s built environment that is full of visual manifestations of denominational identities, cultural heritage, and sectarian ideology. Belfastians, and in fact all people in Northern Ireland, also employ much more subtle strategies to show or to hide their religious, ethnic, and political allegiance. Some of them are deliberate, others have simply been associated with either community over time. School uniforms fall into both categories because the decision to applique either Nationalist or Unionist symbols onto them was once certainly made with the intention to make their wearers stand out with pride. The downside is that children with such conspicuous signals of their community background are easier to single out and to harass or even to beat

up at bus stops, which is an all too frequent occurrence when community tensions are high.

Many sports enthusiasts choose to wear the jerseys of their favorite team and thus identify themselves as Nationalists or Unionists. The former are easy to spot by their Celtic Football Club jerseys or GAA shirts (Gaelic Athletic Association), the latter by the club colors of the Glasgow Rangers. Other symbols that a trained eye can spot include orange or green ribbons, poppies, Easter lilies, the shamrock, the British crown, Celtic ornaments on key rings, badges, pens, wrist bands, handkerchiefs, or tattoos. Even special hairdos can have tribal significance and the way the letter “h” is pronounced can be a clue to someone’s religious background. If the perceived balance between such subtle signals in any given space—say, a shopping mall, an entertainment complex, or a public park—is tilting towards either of the two groups, people begin to perceive a place as being “claimed” by one community that can then accelerate the segregation process in what appears to outsiders as a neutral place. Young people play an enormously important role in this regard, and some even argue that they are encouraged by informal powers to do so.

Private territories are also marked, for example through stickers on cars, paintings on trash bin lids, posters on rolling shutters, brewery-logos (a die-hard Loyalist would not drink Irish beer) and a range of other artifacts. A friend of mine recently moved to Northern Ireland and was told by her Nationalist neighbors that it would be wise to remove an orange scarf that was part of her Christmas window decoration because it could be interpreted—and punished—as a sign of Unionist defiance. Sometimes, of course, it is hard to decide at what point caution turns into paranoia.

I do not feel entitled to answer this question, and I am not even sure whether it is only paranoia that made a caller to a BBC radio show express her disquiet about Irish folk music when she passed by a pub. Music and particular forms of dance are indeed being used as a strong carrier of cultural and ethnic identity, especially when they are played or performed in public or semi-public spaces. Nationalists report feeling at reciprocal unease when they hear the characteristic drumming patterns of Loyalist marching bands or the penetrating sound of a lambeg drum. The lyrics of many songs are obviously heavily value-laden, and it might be fortunate that Unionists usually do not understand the content of Gaelic songs. But even ordinary words are subject to heated debates in Northern Ireland. The very term

“Northern Ireland,” for example, is not acceptable to obdurate Nationalists because it implies more legitimacy than their preferred terms “six-county statelet” or “the North of Ireland.” The “armed struggle,” as many Republicans call their effort to move towards a reunited Ireland, is called the “terrorist campaign” by the Loyalist side. The second largest city in the area is called Derry by Nationalists and Londonderry by Unionists, and it is obvious whose side is responsible for the many street signs that have the “London” part crossed out. Local wisdom has suggested to refer to this city as “Derry stroke Londonderry” which has been abbreviated by the radio moderator Gerry Anderson to “Stroke City.” But even the seemingly fairest, although somewhat circuitous, approach to combine English and Gaelic/Irish expressions wherever possible is perceived by Unionists as a partisan modification of the status quo which does not need anything else but English. Bilingual street names are, therefore, only found in Nationalist neighborhoods.

Intervention Attempts

Quick fixes will not solve Belfast’s problems, but decisions have to be made nevertheless: on planning permissions, building designs, neighborhood renewal plans, development proposals. Extreme caution must be employed in these cases because infrastructures, buildings, and all kinds of physical objects always influence people’s perception and social practices—whether we acknowledge and like it or not. They can, therefore, reinforce and/or ease sectarian divisions. The rationale of an action research project at Queen’s University, Belfast states in very similar terms that “planning . . . can inadvertently accentuate as much as ameliorate divisions in contested space.” Of course, nobody would seriously suggest that well designed physical structures can whisk away sectarian problems. But the above statements express the hope that they might be able to facilitate friendly interaction where previously the physical or semiotic nature of certain artifacts prevented that.

One particular attempt to facilitate friendly encounters of all people of Belfast is manifest in the design of the Odyssey complex, a large sports and entertainment center on a former shipyard area, roughly located between the Unionist heartland in east Belfast and its largely Nationalist counterpart in the west of the city. Because sectarian undertones plague most traditional types of sports in

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³*Hurling, for example, is a traditional Irish game and therefore associated with Nationalists whereas rugby is typically played by Unionists.*

Northern Ireland³ it was decided to incorporate an ice rink into this new 10,000-seat complex where an artificially created ice hockey team, the Belfast Giants, could build its support base from scratch. So far, the strategy seems to have worked. Nobody had to be bold and courageous to attend the first match in the Odyssey arena because it was a *tabula rasa* and, therefore, unclaimed by either of the two communities. The attempt to create neutral or shared space might be much different, however, in traditionally territorialized areas.

These are situations where I wanted to test the suitability of my previous research findings about social dilemma situations in which a number of people actually agreed on the desirability of a particular mode of behavior but nobody wanted to be the first one to start. I argued that in such a constellation, which I called a “first-mover disadvantage,” it should be possible to get everyone’s agreement to install certain infrastructures or design solutions that facilitate the socially desired behavior for *everyone*. The reason for this mechanism is that it is easier for people to communicate and agree on certain issues “in principle” than to act. Such a synchronous development, or co-evolution, between the material and the social thus requires a frank and open dialog as step one of the design process. It does not seem a far fetched idea to translate this concept to Belfast in order to facilitate civil behavior without the brutalist use of concrete and steel.

My initial hopes were dampened when I first heard the following anecdote: An experienced planner was called after the nasty Holy Cross dispute⁴ in 2001 to explore the possibility of a physical solution to the problem. He went into both communities with a blank sheet and a pencil to see what proposal they would come up with. Eventually both groups suggested that it might help if the “others couldn’t eyeball us any more.” Just a slight curve in the road might have done this trick but the idea collapsed when one side found out that the other side had approved of it. “In that case we are against it” was the final verdict. One of my further interviewees complemented this story, arguing that a bend in the road would have created new practical concerns. It would have made it impossible to look after children and elderly people who venture into the “other” territory, for example, for some basic errands. It is unfortunate, of course, that these concerns exist at all, but they are very real for the people living near this interface. My interlocutor suggested that these down-to-earth concerns might have influenced the eventual failure of the proposed

Brand Synchronizing...
Brand “Urban Infrastructures...”

⁴*Nationalist primary school children and their parents were verbally abused and attacked on their way to the Holy Cross school as they walked through a Unionist residential area. The conflict, which lasted 14 weeks, triggered violence throughout North Belfast and received wide international media coverage.*

design solution at least as much as the above account of childish refusal seemed to indicate. If this is the case, the story does not have to be a final blow to my hope that good design, which has been developed with (not only for) everyone involved can ameliorate social dilemma situations.

Supporting evidence for this idea can be found at the Stewartstown Road interface.⁵ There used to be some derelict buildings with empty shops and abandoned flats above them. Both communities came together, decided to demolish the old structures and to build new ones that included shops, offices, and a café where Catholics and Protestants *can* mingle if they want to. What struck me in terms of the building's design is the fact that it has two different entries/exits. This is not a deliberate attempt to keep the two communities apart but a design response to their legitimate concerns about accessibility from their own safe turf. Also the shape of offices, the color of carpets, the decision to install roller shutters on all windows or to plant no bushes around the building all owe their existence to the particular social context in this location. In short: design matters. The complex opened in 2002 and generates income that is equally shared between the Nationalist and Unionist side. Meanwhile, the project has completed a second development phase with a new nursery that facilitates friendly encounters between the mothers and future teenagers from both sides of the ethnic divide. Theoretically speaking, the Stewartstown Road Regeneration Project is an example of how social and material changes can go hand in hand, can develop simultaneously, can co-evolve.

It must be clear that no co-evolutionary measure can ever solve the plethora of ideologically hardened problems that beset Northern Ireland. Politics, big politics is absolutely crucial. But, as one of my interviewees who works with communities on physical neighborhood improvement projects, argued: "The 'moving on' happens on the ground [and] some people 'up there' are not aware of all the conversations and all the good work that's been done...on the ground. Politicians aren't particularly aware of it." At this local and experiential level, co-evolutionary measures might help create or maintain an atmosphere free of immediate violence within which the seedlings of future dialog and conflict resolution can grow. I admit that this is not a direct corollary from the above empirical data. In fact, it is more a forward-looking attempt to shape the agenda—a rather educated one that rests on the above description and analysis of empirical examples

⁵<www.stewartstownroad.org>

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of how social conditions influence the shape of the urban environment and how the urban environment influences social conditions. In this sense, the purpose of this paper is to inspire practitioners in a very practical sense about what to try out next in their attempt to create successful shared spaces. At the same time, it is meant to invite researchers to critically evaluate the role of the material in these efforts.

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