

## **BACKGROUND**

### **The Belfast Conflict Resolution Consortium**

The Belfast Conflict Resolution Consortium (BCRC) is made up of loyalist, republican, and community activists who have, for many years, been working at the interfaces where they live, to respond to tension and develop best practice for conflict intervention. Since its formation in 2007, BCRC has cultivated tentative contacts between activists and created effective working relationships into a cross community steering group, response network, and staff. One of the project's overarching aims is to build cross community strategic alliances to address disadvantage and social problems in interface communities.

In 2010 Belfast Conflict Resolution Consortium decided to commission research that would critically examine the connection of inner city interface communities to the city and analyse the implications for shared space in the city. The research was to investigate the spatial connections of interfaces areas to the city and city centre and assess how planning, development and policy decisions have contributed to connection or disconnection. Forum for Alternative Belfast was appointed to carry out the research.

As part of the research process the Forum carried out a series of community meetings across the city in May and June 2011 to contribute to discussions about the strategies that are needed to repair disconnection and blight.

### **The Forum for Alternative Belfast**

The Forum for Alternative Belfast was set up by a group of architects and urban planners in November, 2008, and formally launched in June, 2009. The Forum is constituted as a Community Interest Company. It has seven Directors and a support network of around 30–40 people from various backgrounds who have contributed to both projects and events. The directors include practicing architects and academics from both Queen's University Belfast and the University of Ulster.

## **THE ISSUES**

### **The Concept of Shared Space**

Definitions of shared space in Northern Ireland have evolved over the last 10-15 years and to some extent have been subsumed into the vocabulary of government and agency bureaucracy. In the context of Belfast, two key points are consistently made: one refers to the city centre as a 'successful' shared space, a place that is safe and devoid of sectarian paraphernalia; the other focuses on the segregated spatial geography of working class areas. The creation of shared space in relation to the latter

is about breaking down the barriers of territory and developing spaces, sometimes simply a building that both communities can have access to and indeed share. While these are laudable objectives, arguably they do not fully address other serious issues of division within the context of Belfast's urban environment. This report attempts to look beyond standard definitions of shared space in Northern Ireland and seeks to understand the broader spatial environment of Belfast's inner city.

Worldwide there has been a gradual erosion of our collective 'right to the city' by institutions, governments and by private interests. It was out of this pressure, played out in the subtle micro design of buildings and spaces that originally prompted the emergence of the term *shared space*.

The use of this term in Belfast should be reclaimed and demonstrated around the original definition. It is important for designers and communities to counter the forces that constrain or limit the use of public space: corporations, insurance industries, notions of security, government institutions and private sector interests. These issues are complex and difficult. It would be unfortunate, however, if the concept of 'shared space' in Northern Ireland is limited to a definition that relates simply to space and facilities close to interface areas, this would be to misunderstand wider thinking on the subject. Rather, shared space is about access; it is about having access to the city and all the facilities that the city offers. The structure and layout of the city is key to this, as is the development of civic ownership of spaces. Careful mapping of the city allows the identification of those barriers and obstacles that effectively hinder easy movement and connection. This is particularly important for those communities who depend on walking and public transport. For more affluent communities the city and its facilities are largely accessed by car. Indeed, this is how Belfast has been designed in recent decades, to meet the needs of the latter.

An analysis of city structure and layout would identify destination points including employment areas, shopping areas, parks, education and training centres, health facilities and so on and would then examine not only existing and potential access routes but also the quality of those routes. Of course, moving around the city and using space also requires an understanding of how communities and citizens more generally read the environment. Is it safe and welcoming or is it alien and scary; is it inclusive or is it exclusive. So we are talking not only about the functionality of space but also perceptions of space. It is important that a community perspective and methodology should be evolved and that this should become a powerful tool to enforce 'shared space' on private sector, public sector and institutional interests which currently, sometimes unwittingly, promote exclusion.

We should recognise, as many independent urbanists around the world have, that making *shared space*, civic space and public space in the contemporary world requires constant vigilance on behalf of those who care about our civic realm. *Unshared space* is a chameleon, it rarely shows its true colours, nor its motivations. It is perhaps significant that some of the most entrenched boundaries in Belfast are economic, between rich enclaves and poor enclaves. If we are to honestly tackle our peace-lines and interfaces,

we must, perhaps first, turn our gaze to social inequality and how poor design and planning, led by the public sector, has entrenched, perhaps unwittingly, working class communities, and moreover, tended to support the creation of subtle enclaves for the rich.

In the context of Belfast, we have a governance approach which is unsophisticated in terms of urban analysis. Largely driven by a bureaucratic culture it tends to latch onto easy-to-measure, politically endorsed criteria. Shared space as currently understood here falls into this category. However, everyone has a responsibility for creating a more inclusive and accessible city. While we can point the finger at government in all its guises as well as private development interests we must also recognize that communities have responsibilities too: to help politicize the issues that government and others are not confronting, but also to provide leadership for outward looking strategies and broad alliances for change.

### **Is it a Question of Access?**

Definitions of 'access' cannot simply be confined to physical or spatial access. People's access to places also depends on their class, gender, age, sexuality and so on. However, physical or spatial access remains very important in the city not least because employment, services, and leisure facilities are all physically located. During the last 40 years a number of significant phenomena have affected the access of working class communities in and around Belfast's inner city. Firstly, the city has, since the late 1960s, been shaped and designed for the car. This has been manifested in some very obvious road infrastructure such as the Westlink and the Inner Ring Road, but is also evident in the layout of social housing and in the development of car parks to support the daytime economy of the central city. In essence the design and layout of Belfast's inner and central city has been driven by the needs of a car owning public. This is illustrated in figure-ground maps which compare city layout in the 1960s with the contemporary layout and demonstrate the space now afforded to the 'needs' of the motorist. Significantly too, the historical grid layout of streets around the radial roads had facilitated good connectivity and with that good access to services, many of which were located along the arterial routes.

A second key phenomenon that has affected access within the inner city relates to community reaction to the conflict. As a form of protection, communities became more insular and self reliant tending to stay within their own territorial boundaries. Indeed during the years of the conflict many key services and community facilities were purposively located in the heart of community neighbourhoods, and, of course, this helped to reinforce their insularity. All of this, moreover, contributed to a territorial psyche that helped to reduce contact with the rest of the city and between communities.

The post conflict city, in some respects, is a very different place. We now have what Murtagh calls the 'twin speed' city<sup>1</sup>. In his view, the 'social disadvantage' and

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<sup>1</sup> Murtagh, B., 2011. Desegregation and Place Restructuring in the New Belfast. *Urban Studies*, 48(6) 1119–1135.

'segregation' which characterizes the west and north of the city effectively excludes these communities from 'the economic optimism of the south'. More than this, we are seeing the development of a more overt class divide being expressed in the spatial geography of Belfast. The growth of the Catholic middle class has brought a fresh focus on this and, indeed, on how class division relates to the so-called 'traditional divisions'. In this regard, Shirlow has argued that *'while sectarian animosity is still visible among all social classes, a growing body of evidence supports the thesis that the middle classes, irrespective of their religious affiliations, increasingly share similar lifestyles and socio-economic pursuits, which are mutually agreeable and inherently less antagonistic'*.<sup>2</sup>

All of this finds expression in the spatial geography of Belfast and in the movement patterns of people. The concept of 'urban bubbling' has relevance here. This refers to the way in which the middle classes use the entire city and its environs as their neighbourhood. Of course the key to this level of access is the car; in other words 'the bubble'. Working, shopping, pursuing leisure and so on around the city is very much the middle class lifestyle. Significantly though, the city has been designed, developed and managed to facilitate this. Extensive car parks, ongoing roads development and even traffic management are all designed to assist this lifestyle.

For working class neighbourhoods on the other hand, movement is largely limited to walking and public transport. Local facilities are therefore more important, as are safe walking environments. However, in inner city Belfast we now have a double bind. We have, as mentioned above, the real and psychological constraints of territory and how that plays out in terms of movement and access, but then, in addition, we have a city designed for the car. What we might call physical or spatial pedestrian access to the city centre and indeed to other parts of the city is poor.

While the comfort of neighbourhood has been important for communities, particularly during 'the conflict', it should not distract from the need to create a more open and accessible city. So while the car owning middle classes are enjoying the wider city, should a substantial section of the population be 'confined to barracks' to live a very localized existence?

Interestingly, Jane Jacobs was making the very same point back in the early 1960s. She argued that the notion of 'neighbourhood' was a somewhat sentimental concept that was ultimately 'harmful to city planning'. Moreover, she lamented its central place in traditional planning theory and practice as well as its ongoing influence on the regeneration of cities. For her *the city is the neighbourhood*, offering its citizens 'wide choice and rich opportunities'.

*'Whatever city neighborhoods may be, or may not be, and whatever usefulness they may have, or may be coaxed into having, their qualities cannot work at cross-*

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<sup>2</sup> Shirlow, P., 1997. Class, materialism and the fracturing of traditional alignments: In B. Graham (E), In Search of Ireland. London: Routledge, p. 89.

*purposes to thoroughgoing city mobility and fluidity of use, without economically weakening the city of which they are part'.<sup>3</sup>*

In the context of Belfast, the *location* of, and hence *access* to, centres of employment as well as educational and training facilities is crucial to creating a fair and equitable city. Currently, Belfast city centre and increasingly Titanic Quarter are being further developed as centres of employment and further education, as well, of course, for entertainment and leisure. The draft Metropolitan Area Plan confirms this:

*'The promotion of Belfast City Centre and the development opportunities within Belfast Harbour will support the provision of new job opportunities in central locations accessible to all sections of the community.'<sup>4</sup>*

All of this suggests, that, at the very least, facilitating good quality and direct access to key areas of the city should be a planning and regeneration priority. A study by Queen's University students showed that the city centre and Titanic Quarter were, potentially, within 5-10 minutes walking distance of Duncairn Gardens in the heart of inner north Belfast. However, the route to the city centre is frustrated by road barriers and poor quality frontage environments, while the route to Titanic Quarter is circuitous by both bus and walking. Titanic Quarter is, of course, similarly cut off from the adjacent East Belfast neighbourhoods. Given all of this disconnection, should any further public investment be made in Titanic Quarter until these major access issues are resolved?

## **Unshared Regeneration**

In the last 20 years we have regenerated many parts of the city, but none of these initiatives have included meaningful connections to neighbourhoods. In other words, they haven't addressed issues of urban structure. Indeed for many local neighbourhoods there is only one way in and they have become 'dead end' places. Issues relating to the structure and layout of the city are not, however, confined to longstanding inner city residential areas; the redeveloped Laganside areas, for example, have no recognisable streets with shops, restaurants and consequently there is no sense of anyone actually 'living' there. An opportunity was missed to make living civic spaces, and ironically perhaps, most of the river frontage is completely blank. On Oxford Street one of the buildings is planned back to front, with bins facing the public street. It may feature fine paving, but the adjacent Markets area remains totally isolated and disconnected.

The Gasworks area has some good buildings and retains some good frontages to Ormeau Road. However, these closed walls were not reinvented. There is only one way into the Gasworks and the rather unnecessary security

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<sup>3</sup> Jacobs, J., 1993 *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, The Modern Library Edition, New York

<sup>4</sup> Department of the Environment NI, 2004, draft Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan 2015 Plan Strategy: Promoting Equality of Opportunity.

hut communicates unwelcoming signals. This sort of critical reflection is important if we are to learn from our mistakes and if we want to create a shared and accessible city.

The development of the University of Ulster's campus in inner north Belfast represents a major investment by our community. It is important therefore to 'get it right'. So what can we learn from elsewhere? The growth of Queen's University since the 19<sup>th</sup> Century is a very good example of a university integrating into its city. The campus extended through the public streets of south Belfast in an open manner with separate buildings.

The development of the University of Ulster in the north of city provides an opportunity to create a similar open campus. There is now an exciting potential for a city diagram of polar universities with the flows of people between them. Critically though, the new campus should, indeed must, evolve into an open campus of separate buildings. If a gated and internalised institution is built then a key opportunity to create accessible and shared space will have been squandered due to poor civic leadership.

Similarly, the issue of student housing needs to be addressed. The planned increase in student numbers in recent decades was not, however, matched with the management and regulation of student housing. In south Belfast this has evolved largely unchecked, with most of the housing now owned by a small number of private landlords. Significantly too, there is strong evidence of religious division across student housing areas.

The design, layout and management of the new campus in the divided north of the city should learn from the mistakes of the last decades. This is a key opportunity to build a shared space that connects with the surrounding communities and which integrates into the city fabric.

## **Population and Sustainable Community**

The city of Belfast has been losing population since the 1950's. More particularly, it has lost 35% of its population during the last 35 years; in consequence, the suburbs and the surrounding towns and villages have grown at an unprecedented rate. It is estimated that over the last 30 years, districts such as Lisburn, Carrick, Banbridge and Down have seen their populations increase by, on average, 40%. While recent statistics suggest a modest increase in population (0.5% between 2006 and 2010), nevertheless, Belfast remains one of the few cities in the British Isles that has not recovered from the depopulation effects of deindustrialization during the 1970s and 1980s. Much of the city's depopulation relates to redevelopment design which saw, in some areas, a

decrease in population of over 60%. The Shankill area, for example, saw an overall decline in population of over 70% (1971-2001).<sup>5</sup>

The key to a good, well functioning and sustainable city is to have a density of population that can support local services. Low density housing together with large areas of vacant and underused land in Belfast's inner and central city contribute to an unsustainable and inequitable living environment. Of course sustainability is not only about the physical environment but it is also, importantly, about the social and economic environment, and about sustainable community. Over the last 10 years Planning has attempted to address the issue of low urban densities in Northern Ireland by setting a target for 60% of all new residential development to be built on brown-field sites. In the Belfast Metropolitan area, this target was surpassed. However, the detail of how this was to be achieved in terms of design, integration and supportive infrastructure was not addressed. Rather, it was left to the development market to identify sites and come forward with individual proposals. This, in turn, has created a number of problems.

Firstly, over the last 10-15 years speculative apartment developments have been built in and around the central city area. By and large, these are unplanned, one or two bedroom flats, often located within, or adjacent to, longstanding working class communities. A study undertaken for the Community Relations Council in Northern Ireland<sup>6</sup> surveyed eight of these new apartment developments and discovered that: the majority of residents (72%) were in the 19-34 age group; over 79% had tertiary level qualifications; and, interestingly, the vast majority (77.2%) either did not know their neighbours, or knew only a few. Moreover, a number of the developments sit cheek by jowl with communities who have some of the highest levels of educational underachievement in Northern Ireland. So although, in statistical terms, these developments have brought new residents to the inner city, their physical detachment through gates, walls and security doors seems to reinforce their social detachment from the communities around them. Indeed this new layer of division in inner city Belfast does not bode well for long term community sustainability. As Gaffikin et al argue:

*'The new gated and secured apartment communities are in the inner city, but arguably, are not of the inner city. In other words, these new spaces are like little islands in the urban landscape. Good local planning would not only have considered how to integrate such new developments into the fabric of the city but would also have thought through the supportive infrastructure that would have assisted that integration.'*<sup>7</sup>

Secondly, Belfast has no vision for how the inner and central city might be developed. The accumulation of individual speculative developments does not add up to a coherent

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<sup>5</sup> Greater Shankill Partnership & the Department of Social Development NI, 2008, Greater Shankill Strategic Regeneration Framework.

<sup>6</sup> Gaffikin, F, Sterrett, K., McEldowney, M., Morrissey, M. and Hardy, M., Planning Shared Space for a Shared Future (Belfast, The Community Relations Council, Northern Ireland, 2008)

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p. 123.

strategy for creating a sustainable city. Even some developers recognize this and acknowledge that good area planning can bring more certainty to their investment decisions. A vision for a re-populated inner and central city should surely be about building and developing sustainable communities that are socially and religiously balanced. Architecture, urban planning and urban design all have a role to play in achieving this. Active ground floor frontages, higher space standards for living accommodation, the avoidance of gates and barriers, good pedestrian space, and the supportive infrastructure of local services, including schools and open space are some of the basics of such a contribution.

Thirdly, communities themselves need to show leadership and vision. This requires a cross-community coherent voice about a vision that extends beyond individual community areas and which sets a framework and key objectives for both public and private development processes. The politics of this are potentially very powerful and ultimately rewarding for those working class communities who have had little or no place in the planning and development of the city.

### **Governance of the Built Environment**

The governance of Belfast's environment over the last 30+ years has been characterized by fragmentation and incoherence. As Liam O'Dowd recently argued, 'contemporary Belfast remains nobody's project'. In his view, its 'fractured environment . . . expresses the "invisible hand" of modern consumer capitalism married to hopelessly fragmented systems of urban governance . . . this is a cityscape marked by incoherence, exclusion, and disconnection.'<sup>8</sup>

The disjointed governance of Belfast's built environment has undoubtedly contributed to many of the problems now facing inner city communities. A number of commentators have argued that the period of direct rule during the conflict generated a certain administrative culture that, to some extent, still prevails. This is a culture of technocracy and bureaucracy that protects itself from challenges of bias and partiality. It is a culture of regulation which practices within a 'silo mentality'. Most significantly though, it seeks to justify the decisions of individual departments without seeing the holistic nature of the problems we are facing.

All of this has had an impact on the shape, form, quality and ultimately, the sustainability of Belfast's built environment. As elsewhere in Northern Ireland, transport and roads, housing, regeneration and land-use planning have all been administered quite separately for Belfast and with little attempt to consider the city, or indeed its component parts, holistically as a place. The consequences of this are all quite evident in the environment: roads planning, that is exclusively about roads; social housing that deals singularly with housing and doesn't address the overall living environment; land-use planning that is two dimensional and overly focused on the 'technicalities of zoning'; and regeneration which lacks vision, quality assurance and authority.

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<sup>8</sup> O'Dowd, Liam, 'Belfast Transitions', in, Downey, Karen, *Where are the people: contemporary photographs of Belfast 2002–2010* (Belfast, Belfast Exposed Photography, 2010).

The outcomes from the review of public administration in Northern Ireland have yet to be agreed by the Stormont Executive. However, it seems likely that spatial planning, community planning and regeneration powers will be devolved to the new councils. For Belfast City Council, this potentially will offer greater opportunities to plan, design, and manage the development of the city. Community planning can, as elsewhere in the UK, play a significant role in all of this. Such Community Planning, however, treats the city as a whole community and seeks to advance a consensual vision for its development across a wide range of services. And, of course, the vision should, in turn, give direction to the city's spatial development plan as well identifying priority areas for comprehensive action.

For example, a vision for the spatial development of Belfast might highlight the long term decline in population, the spatial disconnections, and the need for the regeneration of vacant land in and around the central city. It might also identify inner north Belfast as a problematic area of the city which requires co-ordinated and comprehensive action. However, within inner north Belfast there are a number of planned, publicly funded projects such as: the University of Ulster's new campus; the York Street road interchange; the Gamble Street railway halt; the development of the Crumlin Road Gaol and Girdwood; the Royal Exchange regeneration scheme; and the City Quays development. Under the current system these would be planned and developed quite separately and without the benefit of an overall community agreed framework or vision. Good spatial planning, on the other hand, should employ an urban design practice that worked with local communities to agree a set of objectives that would not only maximise local and city wide benefits but would also seek synergies to make the best use of public and private sector investments.

This sort of spatial planning has been operative in England since 2004. Research shows that where good practice occurs, a number of key approaches are evident:

- there is a community owned **vision** for the local authority's spatial area;
- this **drills down** to those areas where action is required;
- there is an **integrated** approach to both the analysis and development of these areas; and
- the planned **delivery** of any overall scheme is regarded as an essential part of process.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The issues raised in this report trigger a number of recommendations:

- Shared space needs an agreed definition; one that goes beyond the sometimes simple definitions offered by government and other agencies. Perhaps through widespread consultation and discussion an agreed check list could be developed

that can be used to test how the design, layout and management of major new developments can contribute to the creation of shared space. Such tests should be undertaken by an independent civic society body to ensure both effectiveness and reduced risks for public investment;

- For inner city communities, and indeed others who depend on walking, access to the city, and particularly to key areas of the city, needs to be addressed. This should be enforced in planning and regeneration processes. For planning this should be as important a criterion as car parking requirements and for regeneration practice there needs to be a new investment focus on improving access. In relation to the latter, a regeneration practice that seeks to create a shared city would prioritize the repair of the broken structure of the city.
- Potential new governance arrangements can make way for a more integrated approach to planning, developing and regenerating the city. However, in advance of that, government departments and agencies together with Belfast City Council can begin the processes of co-operation and collaboration to tackle those built environment issues raised in this report. A series of pilot studies should seek pragmatic solutions to the problems to be rolled out over priority areas.
- The issues raised here are vitally important to the quality of life for the city as a whole. Moreover, it is vital for the image and economic health of the city *as a place*. Many inner city communities have shown through collaborative effort how very difficult interface issues can be tackled through bottom up approaches. This co-operation around shared issues can, and should be extended to lobby for a safe, accessible and high quality inner city environment. Addressing the issue of the interfaces, therefore, should be twinned with addressing access to a shared city.