

June 2013

Discussion Paper on the Regeneration of Interface Areas

Belfast Conflict Resolution Consortium presents this position paper as a contribution to the overall debate about interface areas and to respond to an ongoing discussion about interface walls and barriers. Our position is that the issue of interface walls and barriers needs to be seen in the context of local regeneration of interface areas in which residents and local communities decide their priorities and give direction for strategies to improve the living conditions of residents. We have set out below six principles that we believe should underpin future strategies for development of interface areas and this is followed by a discussion of the arguments and supporting evidence for our position.

Six principles that underpin BCRC's position:

- 1 Residents must be at the heart of decision-making about interface areas.
- 2 The regeneration of interface areas is at the core of addressing the problems experienced by residents.
- 3 Residents have identified their priorities and should be listened to.
- 4 The focus on walls/barriers in isolation from other issues is detrimental.
- 5 The walls/barriers are a symptom rather than a cause of division.
- 6 Public policies (including planning, education, health, housing) should support the regeneration and sustainable development of interface areas.

BACKGROUND TO PRINCIPLES



Background to principles

1.1 Although it is widely acknowledged that residents need to be consulted about the future of interface walls this has not translated into recognition in public policy of the priorities of residents. This is evident in the debate about interface walls and barriers, most of which has been generated externally and does not come from interface residents and communities themselves.

1.2 Research reports carried out in 2008 and more recently in 2012 support the conclusion that the walls are not the immediate priority for interface residents. The 2008 US Ireland Alliance research survey of people living at interfaces found that 60% want the walls to come down but only when it is safe enough to do so.ⁱ The research carried out by INCORE for BCRC, also in 2008, found that the majority of residents felt the walls were not an immediate priority with over 60% of respondents believing that the walls would come down in the future.ⁱⁱ The most recent research on attitudes to peace walls carried out by Byrne et al in 2012 for the Office of First Minister and Deputy First Minister also identifies the walls as an issue for the future for residents living at peacelines. Only 14% would like the walls to come down now while 44% would like them to come down sometime in the future. This survey also indicates that 39% wish to keep the peace walls in some form.ⁱⁱⁱ

1.3 What would residents say if given a more open question about their priorities? A series of workshops carried out by BCRC in 2008 for interface communities across the city indicates that many other issues would be raised with the walls being a

minor rather than major issue. The major themes that emerged from the workshops (as outlined in the BCRC report of the meetings^{iv}) were community safety and policing, youth, education, employment, health, housing and development. The walls were mentioned by a few people in some workshops and were agreed to be an issue for the future rather than an immediate priority.

1.4 Because the continuing focus on the removal of interface walls is not supported by pressure from residents living at interfaces, there is an implication that residents themselves are part of the problem and are holding back progress. However, BCRC believe that rather than lagging behind other stakeholders, residents and communities are in advance of many others because they have developed strategies that offer a way forward. These include the recent community planning processes developed through the Belfast Interface Trust project, the recommendations from the West Belfast Task Force and the Shankill Task Force and the recommendations of the North Belfast Interface Steering Group.

1.5 BCRC's approach to the issue of interface walls and barriers is informed by the understanding that these barriers are a symptom rather than a cause of division and disadvantage. BCRC are therefore focused on tackling the underlying shared conditions of poverty and marginalization in working class interface areas rather than taking down the barriers. We believe that the focus on the walls in isolation from other factors is a mistake and works against the most pressing concerns about social and economic disadvantage identified by local communities and residents.

1.6 This position is supported by research from Gaffikin et al in 2008 exploring the concept of shared space in the city in which they argue that the policy implications are complex and layered.^v The research considers the wider question of segregation in the city and points out that this is a long term issue and demonstrates that very large numbers would have to move in order to desegregate the city. The research points to another aspect of division i.e. social segregation and argues that this has been exacerbated by property development in the city. It argues that social segregation is as important as sectarian segregation when considering the idea of a shared city. The research highlights the underdevelopment and disadvantage experienced by those areas most affected by the conflict, most of which are interface areas, and points to the need for local communities to be involved in planning the development of their neighbourhoods.

1.7 The policy of community planning offers an approach to community led development of interface areas and was piloted through the Belfast Interface Trust (BIT) project in 2011. The BIT project involved a number of interface communities with technical support from Community Places and PPR (Participation & Practice of Rights project) and provided an overall framework for identifying priorities for future development. This enabled each locality to arrive at priorities and conclusions appropriate to the needs of the area. The walls and barriers formed part of the spatial landscape that was considered but were not the sole focus or even the main focus.

1.8 In 2010 BCRC decided to commission research that would critically examine the connection of inner city interface communities to the city and examine the implications for shared space. The resulting publication Shared Space 2011 reveals the extent to which the inner city working class neighbourhoods (which are also interface areas with walls and barriers) are disconnected from the city core by motorways and ring roads which service commuters rather than residents and which enforce inward focused communities. The research highlights the way in which traditional arterial streets have been degraded into urban clearways. Fifty years of housing renewal has removed 60% of the population as well as local shops and local employment and has created barren low density cul de sacs. The research also demonstrates the failures of major regeneration projects in creating connections to neighbourhoods within the city. Shared Space 2011 calls for a new debate about shared and unshared space as well as actions to repair neighbourhoods and restore connections in the city.^{vi}

1.9 BCRC argues that the most effective way of dealing with the walls is to bring about social and economic regeneration in the deprived working class areas of Belfast in which the vast majority of walls exist. BCRC believes that if there is regeneration, the walls and barriers would inevitably be addressed as part of this wider process of change. BCRC does not agree with the argument that regeneration will follow from the removal of the walls, rather the BCRC position is that the walls are only one factor in a process of regeneration.

1.10 The segregation of loyalist/unionist and republican/nationalist communities has deep historical roots that predate the construction of the walls and barriers. While BCRC recognize therefore that the walls may reinforce the symbolic and physical segregation of our communities we believe that this division will not be addressed by simply taking them down. This position is supported by the 2012 Attitudes to Peace Walls research referred to above which shows that the general population in Northern Ireland believes that segregation is common even where there are no peace walls and concludes that respondents see segregation and division as something much bigger than the walls.

1.11 BCRC believe that sectarianism is a wider societal problem involving institutional as well as individual responsibility. Although the effects of sectarianism may be most visible in interface areas, our society as a whole is implicated in different ways. Interface residents bear the brunt of a larger social and political dynamic.

1.12 BCRC welcomes the focus and input of external commentators and policy makers on the issue of interface walls. We believe there is a clear role and responsibility for policy makers to use their influence and resources to work with local communities in the regeneration and development of interfaces areas and we call for them to use this influence to support local strategies of regeneration.



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