"The City is Yours"
Desegregation and Sharing Space in Post-Conflict Belfast

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To the people of Belfast who gave generously and willingly of their time to talk to me. May you one day live without walls.
Abstract

This study examines how borders are socially produced and deconstructed in “post-conflict” North Belfast. Twenty years after the signing of the historic Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland, a peace model lauded for the resolution of conflicts worldwide, Belfast today remains a highly divided city with the existence of numerous segregation barriers, among them so-called peace walls, physically separating Protestant from Catholic neighbourhoods. Indicating a failure to achieve social accommodation, this thesis seeks to examine how people in North Belfast understand, negotiate, and experience space and borders around them. In particular, it illuminates the processes and agents involved in modifying and transforming borders, as well as the resistance engendered in doing so amidst considerable intra-community debate and competition over place identities and their attendant narratives. Placed firmly within the anthropological study of borders and space, it shows how borders and their regimes are socially constructed and should be understood as practices and imaginations rather than simply as inert objects which render individuals as passive “victims” of their urban environs. It furthermore seeks to challenge prevailing cognitive and analytical constructs of borders and border crossing. Based on ten weeks of fieldwork in Belfast by the author, this study employs extensive participant observation and semi-structured interviews.

Keywords: borders, space, ethnicity, peace wall, interface, Belfast, identity, shared space, segregation, Protestants, Catholics, paramilitary
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Acronyms

CNR – Catholic Nationalist Republican
DUP – Democratic Unionist Party
IRA – Irish Republican Army
PUL – Protestant Unionist Loyalist
RUC – Royal Ulster Constabulary
T:BUC – Together: Building a United Community
UDA – Ulster Defence Association
UVF – Ulster Volunteer Force
1. Arriving in Belfast

On August 11, 2016, a small group of Protestants and Catholics gathered to witness the demolition of a section of wall between their two communities in an area of North Belfast. Present too was Martin McGuinness, former Irish Republican Army (IRA) commander and then Deputy First Minister in the Northern Ireland Executive, who used the hashtag #courage to tweet about the event. Billed as a symbolic step towards reconciliation between the two communities, it was hoped that it would pave the way for the removal of nearly a hundred so-called “peace walls” or segregation barriers dotted across Belfast (Belfast Interface Project).

First erected by the British Army at the beginning of the Troubles, as the thirty-year period of violence between 1969 and 1998 is commonly termed, the peace walls constitute the most visible manifestation of the physical segregation of working-class Protestant and Catholic neighbourhoods. North Belfast in particular, with its mosaic of largely single-identity enclaves, bears the traces of such barriers – built variously out of concrete, brick, and steel. However, the term peace wall is also somewhat of a poignant misnomer, in that while intended as short-term measures by the authorities to prevent cross-community violence – and to make it easier to police areas – they have also served to reinforce spatial patterns of residential segregation, thus maintaining the existence of ostensibly discrete social worlds. In fact, some of the walls were even put up, or consolidated, after the main period of the Troubles just as political peace was breaking out (Byrne and Gormley-Heenan 2014).

With Northern Ireland having largely receded from my mind since the so-called Good Friday Agreement in 1998, the removal of the section of wall piqued my interest in Belfast’s lingering legacy of “conflict architecture” (Byrne et al. 2014: 447-48) and the potential for its transformation. Yet this initial interest also stemmed from deeper antecedents. In so doing, the motivations which lead a researcher to their field and topic of inquiry, as Davies argues (2008: 29-30), are also important to examine.

1 Over 3,500 people lost their lives during the Troubles and tens of thousands were injured.
Unknowingly at the time, my arrival story already started as a teenager growing up in England in the mid-1990s, when Northern Ireland\textsuperscript{2} was a regular fixture on the BBC evening news. As the fragile peace process inched forwards, so too the IRA escalated its bombing campaign on the British mainland, with huge bombs detonated in Manchester and London. Thus already in my young mind, Northern Ireland became associated with violence, and what simplistically seemed to me and many others to be an anachronistic, internecine struggle pitting Catholics against Protestants.

Northern Ireland came back into focus during my degree in peace and conflict studies at university a decade later. Here we studied in detail the negotiation process that led to the peace agreement in 1998 – a model lauded for other peace processes around the world. Here bitterly opposed parties had pledged to lay down their arms and enter into government together. While difficulties lay ahead, the conflict had essentially been “resolved” once all sides had inked the agreement, or so I was led to believe.

I came to grasp, however, that I had already passed judgement and claimed knowledge of the conflict without ever having been to Northern Ireland. I had not tried, as Eriksen puts it, to grasp the “experiential world” of people’s lives there (2015: 8). Furthermore, a puzzle became apparent that my prior focus on the political aspects of the peace process could not explain. If the peace agreement had brought peace to Northern Ireland and the competing parties found political accommodation with each other (albeit not always harmonious and prone to breaking down), why then, some two decades after the agreement, Belfast continued to be a highly divided city?

Indeed, this seemed to me to present a contradiction – a failure to achieve social accommodation – demonstrating that the relative absence of war and violence does not necessarily equate to peace.\textsuperscript{3} Furthermore that, as Richards argues, conflict cannot be understood without considering its “social content” and hence the need to “re-socialise” war and peace (2004: 1-3). Naively confident in my understanding of the political contours of the

\textsuperscript{2} Note that lower-case “northern Ireland” or even “north of Ireland” is often used, especially by nationalists, instead of Northern Ireland, which, to some, falsely signifies political legitimacy. Commonly heard too are the terms “Six Counties” and “Ulster.”

\textsuperscript{3} Famed peace scholar Johan Galtung (1967) coined the terms “positive peace” and “negative peace.” While the latter term denotes the “absence of organized collective violence,” it implies a broad failure to achieve cooperation and integration, which may arguably characterize parts of Belfast today.
conflict and its main actors, it was nonetheless with trepidation that I boarded a plane to Belfast to be confronted with its social and spatial reality.

On the Estate

My research question still felt vague and ill-defined as I stood waiting on a street corner one February afternoon in Rathcoole, a large housing estate in the north of Belfast. As I waited for John, my informant, I noted the faded red, blue, and white of the kerbstones on the side of the road, painted in the colours of the Union Jack. A couple of British flags also fluttered from houses further down the road. I noticed, too, a phone box daubed in white graffiti with the block letters KAT. I would subsequently learn that it stood for Kill All Taigs, a derogatory term for Catholics. Nearby was a signboard with a basic map of the estate. Closer inspection of it revealed that it denoted three different walking routes of varying lengths around the estate. Under the heading “Highway to Health” and with the logo of the local borough council, it was part of an initiative to encourage a healthier lifestyle among residents. But it was not this that struck me. Rather it was that none of the marked walking routes left the “boundaries” of the Rathcoole estate; and nor were any of the other surrounding neighbourhoods marked on the map. I would later ponder on its significance.

I had first met John at a training weekend for volunteers in my home city of Birmingham. Part of a volunteer scheme to send young people abroad to gain experience of development work, I had been posted to Tanzania as a team leader while John went to Botswana. In the intervening years, we had not stayed in touch but I knew from my Facebook feed that he was still living in Belfast and was employed as a youth community worker whilst finishing his university degree in the same subject. Sending off a message to him that I was coming to Belfast to do fieldwork soon elicited a reply, and we arranged to meet close to his home in Rathcoole. John was late, so I took out and read a leaflet by the Rathcoole Regeneration Group, which listed a number of issues facing the estate, including the absence of a community centre, lack of affordable social housing, a dearth of jobs and training, and a general lack of facilities.

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4 The term “informant” has an unfortunate connotation in Northern Ireland, referring to someone who secretly cooperates with the police or security services. This is obviously not intended here.
among others. It was obvious that this was a place which urban planners, and others, might negatively label as “deprived” or even a “ghetto.”

Half an hour later, it was with relief that I finally spied John, then in his mid-twenties, strolling down the road. Stocky of build, he was dressed casually in track-suit bottoms and wore a broad grin on his face. We shook hands and he immediately offered to take me on a walking tour of the estate. Rathcoole, “apart from a few Indians and Pakistanis, must be 99 percent Protestant,” he told me. He went on to explain how people had been rehoused here from the crowded inner city before the Troubles when it had also been more mixed between Protestants and Catholics.

Chatting away, we turned a corner when my eyes were suddenly averted by a large mural painted on the windowless end of a small block of flats. Seemingly staring at us were three figures, their faces masked by balaclavas and each brandishing a semi-automatic weapon. Behind them were painted four high-rise tower blocks, easily recognisable as the same ones rising from the centre of Rathcoole. In the left and right-hand corners of the mural were painted the emblems of the Ulster Freedom Fighters and Ulster Defence Association (UDA). I found the scene almost jarring: here, in the middle of what appeared to me to be an ostensibly ordinary suburban housing estate (as can be found across many cities in Britain and Ireland), was an overt paramilitary mural of a supposedly illegal organization – one which, along with the IRA, had declared the “war to be over” in 2007 and would finally stand down its armed units after nearly 40 years.

I asked John what he thought of it. He told me that he had not really thought about it much before – such murals were an everyday part of his environs. But, gathering his thoughts, he soon launched into a scathing criticism of it, saying that he felt it was inappropriate and did not represent his values and outlook, or, indeed, that of other young people on the estate. It may have belonged there in the period of the conflict, he argued, but it had no place here today. I made a mental note that he would have had little or no direct memory of the Troubles. Our walk would take in many more murals of masked men bearing guns, as well as evidence of other officially banned paramilitary insignia such as flags. Painted in bold black letters on another such mural was the message: “To Protect the Loyalist Community, Retain Our

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5 I find the use of the term “ghetto” a form of othering and pejorative. I often heard it used by those to refer to a neighbourhood other than their own. I prefer here to use the terms community, neighbourhood, or estate interchangeably, which are often used by residents themselves to describe their areas.
Britishness.” John told me how frustrated he felt that there were few symbols that expressed his identity as Northern Irish rather than British.

John wanted, however, to also show me a very different message. Behind the youth centre where he worked, and largely hidden from public sight, was another mural of a youth graffiti art project he had recently been involved in. Here, in striking contrast to the paramilitary murals, was artwork rendered in comic-strip style, which depicted the everyday issues of the local youth. One image showed a waste bin overflowing with beer cans and tablets, a reference to the problems of alcohol and drug abuse. Another showed a hand reaching down to grab the hoodie of a frightened boy. John explained how both depicted the influence of the paramilitaries. In a low voice, he pointed to the building next door, telling me that is was the local headquarters of the UDA, who, he charged, were involved in supplying the drugs. Moments later, a door opened and a bald, middle-aged man emerged for a cigarette. When we were out of sight, John told me that the local youth hated the paramilitaries.

Walking around the estate, it was obvious that John was known and well-liked by the local children, three of whom stopped to chat. We also briefly greeted two young men putting up election posters for the People’s Unionist Party, a party linked with loyalist paramilitaries. Stormont – the name for Northern Ireland’s regional government – had recently been dissolved amidst a corruption scandal with new elections scheduled to be held. “Probably been ordered to put them up,” John quipped as we walked past. A hundred metres on John suddenly paused. “You see that building?” He pointed to a house with a paramilitary mural on it. “That’s the border between the Ulster Volunteer Force [UVF] and the UDA controlled parts of the estate.” He proceeded to relate how he had had problems getting children from the other side of the estate to visit the youth centre as it was in UDA “territory.”

Crossing the ring road encircling the estate, we approached the Valley Leisure Centre, a Union Jack flying prominently from a flagpole in front of it. Walking round the building, we entered a park with a new children’s playground and playing fields for sports. “This used to be a wasteland, an interface where local boys would arrange to fight. It was so muddy it was hard to walk through,” John explained. He pointed to a distant line of houses on the other side of the park. “That’s Longlands, a Catholic area.” My eyes duly followed a narrow paved path that led to a gate at the park’s far perimeter several hundred metres away. A young boy walked along it with a football in his hand. Otherwise the park appeared largely empty except for a couple of families in the playground and an older man walking a dog.
Funded by the European Union’s Peace III programme, the park had been developed as a shared space for all surrounding communities regardless of identity. John explained how firework displays had been staged in the park, and that the new floodlit Astroturf pitch was used not only for football, but also hurling and Gaelic football – sports associated with the Catholic community. Several commissioned monuments also stood in the park including a “Wishing Tree,” where young children had written their hopes and aspirations for the future. “I hope to be a policeman when I’m older,” a nine-year-old Jamie Kerr had written. Others expressed a future of equality, justice, and peace. A large steel arch meanwhile represented the “Peace Gate” which bore the following inscription: “In Ireland generations of people have inherited ancient mindsets and conflicts, without question. The Peace Gate is a symbolic gateway for a new attitude, a new understanding, towards tolerance.” John was positive towards the development of the park, hoping though that more inter-community events would be staged in the park in the future.

**Re-imagining Space and Borders**

If Rathcoole, with its paramilitary murals, almost exclusively single-identity community, and underinvestment, seemed to hark to an antagonistic, inward-looking past, the transformation of this wasteland into a shared space appeared to foster the potential for a more peaceful shared co-existence between adjoining housing estates. It had also been de-territorialized: graffiti, murals, flags, and other markers of identity were conspicuously absent. Accordingly, a border or no-man’s land previously used chiefly by boys from rival communities to fight had been transformed – or so the new narrative led me to believe – into a *place* in which all had a common stake in based on positive mutual interactions.

Leaving Rathcoole, I later learned of a strategy unveiled by the Northern Ireland government in 2013 to seek to address the bitter legacy of division and segregation. Known as Together Building a United Community (T:BUC for short), the initiative had the aim of dismantling the peace walls (among other interface barriers) by 2023, as well as increasing opportunities for building cross-community relationships through investment in the creation of new shared spaces. I wondered, however, to what extent the government scheme reflected the hopes of, or, instead, instilled anxiety, among the city’s inhabitants, especially in North Belfast which had arguably witnessed the worst of more than three decades of violence on its streets.
My study thus crystallized into wanting to study public space and spatial relations in North Belfast and especially the evolving geographies of borders and boundaries between Protestant and Catholic neighbourhoods. This accordingly led to the articulation of the following research question guiding this work: **How are borders socially produced and deconstructed in “post-conflict” North Belfast?**

Borders here are understood as material manifestations in urban space – whether walls, fences, gates, or other forms of frontiers such as wasteland – which serve to separate and distinguish ethno-national communities on the ground. Intersecting with borders, Wilson (2014: 114-15) argues for the persistent salience of identity and territoriality for everyday life in divided cities such as Belfast. But while physical lines representing division, they are also “cultural meanings, imaginaries, rationalities, affects and knowledges exhibited through and by these materializations” (Nonini 2014: 4). As such, I wanted to know if and how these meanings were changing during a period of relative peace and how they were reflected in Belfast’s border architecture as well as mobility of the population across the city’s bordered landscape. Recognizing that space is never static, but rather is socially constructed and shaped by everyday human actions (Lefebvre 1991), I sought to better understand not only the dynamics and everyday practices of boundary making, but also its unmaking, the agents and relationships involved, and the challenges faced. I wondered too if and how collective memories of violence informed spatial and border practices, and if they were being transmitted to John’s generation with little or no direct memory of the worst of the conflict. Accordingly, my study fits squarely into the anthropological debate on borders which views them not so much as presupposed facts or objects, but rather as the dynamic subjects of practices, processes, and relations which may reinforce or modify their borderness (see e.g. Barth 2000; Green 2012; Paasi 2011).

In so doing, I hoped to also illuminate what has been termed as “invisible peacebuilding” or border work at the street level by agents of desegregation, individuals and NGOs, and thus also contribute an anthropological perspective to the field of peace and conflict studies all too

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6 Belfast North is officially a constituency representing 25 wards with a total population of approximately 103,000 (see Northern Ireland Assembly, “North Belfast Profile.”) I use more the geographic term of North Belfast to describe neighbourhoods located north of the city centre which largely overlap with Belfast North. It should also be noted that this study also includes the Shankill and the Falls, which are regarded as being in West Belfast.

7 By “invisible” I largely mean civil society initiatives which are often relatively unknown outside of the neighbourhoods where they take place.
often focused on political actors and larger-scale processes (Rumford 2011: 67). Drawing on the rich literature on border studies, moreover, this study utilizes insights not only from anthropology and other comparative literature, but also cultural and political geography, history, sociology, social psychology, urban planning, and peace and conflict studies.

Outline of Chapters

Following my arrival story and methodology chapter “Going About Fieldwork,” the third chapter “A Parting of Worlds” provides necessary background to how Belfast came to be segregated, weaving historical accounts with oral memory. Thus, we need to understand Belfast not only as it is, but also as it has been. To cite Prakash (2008: 2), cities form a “distinctive constellation of social space, history and memory.” This is amply demonstrated in the fourth chapter on micro-territories “Parading the Streets,” which seeks to portray how territorial and symbolic space is organized in present day Belfast, but also how it is changing in response to new dynamics and influences. Indeed, before we move on to a discussion of borders it is important to understand what those purported borders contain – the places within. The fifth chapter “Sticking to Your Side” then seeks to understand the different kinds of border regimes in North Belfast and how people experience border crossing, including the avoidance strategies they may adopt. Following this, chapters six and seven form strategically-sited “spatial stories” focusing on two particular borders in the city – an “open” interface and a closed “peace wall.” Whereas the first story “It Was Like World War Three” focuses on efforts by agents to modify its borderness, thus clearly showing the social reproduction of space, the subsequent chapter “It’s Too Soon to Bring the Wall Down” emphasizes more the fears and resistance engendered in processes of debordering. The penultimate chapter, before the conclusion, is entitled “Let’s Start Sharing It” and it takes up the increasingly promoted narrative of shared space in Belfast and the socio-political and cognitive challenges this portends.
2. Methodology: Going About Fieldwork

I spent a total of two-and-half months in Belfast divided into two main periods between January and May 2017. Inevitably such a short period of time proved inadequate to integrate in or be “accepted” by a community to the extent that the anthropologist desires. I found accommodation through Air B’n’B in the largely Catholic nationalist area of Cliftonville in North Belfast, where I stayed throughout. This choice certainly influenced my research outcomes in terms of my encounters with informants and selection of sites where I employed strategically sited ethnography (Marcus 1995: 110-12). Another, temporal factor influencing my research was that I was not present in Belfast during the summer months, particularly the month of July when Protestants have their main parades. This meant that I missed the main period when inter-communal tensions may run particularly high.

My primary means of gathering information was through recorded semi-structured interviews with informants (Bernard 2011: 157-158). I conducted 15 such semi-structured interviews ranging from one to two hours in length. On three occasions, my interviews were with two informants simultaneously and also included a larger focus group interview with a women’s community group. While to some extent I was limited by whoever was willing to talk to me, I tried to be as “representative” to the extent possible by interviewing persons equally from both Catholic and Protestant communities, of both genders, of different ages, and occupying different positions within their respective communities: for example, ex-paramilitaries, youth leaders, heads of housing associations, clergy, shop-owners, and so on. While this was arguably too broad, it was also necessary to learn that there are a diversity of experiences, practices, and attitudes in regard to segregation. One drawback perhaps was that as I focused on actors actively participating in initiatives of desegregation, I was less exposed to more “sectarian mindsets” and accompanying behaviours. The social desirability effect (Callegaro 2008: 825-26) may also have been an issue in that certain individuals may have been unwilling to disclose their real views or practices for fear of being labelled sectarian.

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8 Interestingly, a map of such accommodation showed very little available in working-class, especially Protestant, areas of the city, perhaps indicating higher levels of social housing as opposed to private ownership.
Informants were found in different ways. This included knocking on the doors of relevant organizations and requesting interviews, by volunteering in a Food Bank operated from a church, as well as chance encounters in cafés, among others. Often suggestions were made to me regarding whom I should talk to which I then followed up by phone. Where obtaining a recorded interview was not possible, I also conducted a number of unstructured interviews, engaged in dozens of more spontaneous casual conversations, as well as used “street survey” intercepts (Bernard 2011: 123, 191) to gauge opinions and practices. Extensive participant observation was also employed (Davies 2002: 6-93). The latter chiefly involved participating as an observer in commemorations and parades. I also engaged in direct, nonreactive observation (Bernard: 306), namely observing people moving between districts or crossing interfaces. While one could raise ethical dilemmas about practicing deception (Curran 2010: 104), such passive observation, as Bernard argues, does not entail “taking in” informants nor constitutes a real invasion of privacy (328-330).

Additionally, I also used social media, such as community group Facebook pages, as a means of eliciting views and attitudes. In this regard, Underberg and Zorn (2013: 85-86) advocate the use of digital media as a useful tool for anthropological study. A similar use was made of local newspaper articles, editorials, and letters’ pages. A staple diet of my reading was to pick up a copy of the local weekly North Belfast News, which was an indispensable resource for finding out about events in the vicinity. As I was living in an environment rich in symbolism, including murals, flags, graffiti and other markers of identity and territory, I also employed interpretive text analysis. As Bernard argues, such analysis can help us gain insight and understanding into thought and behavior (2011: 407-09). Arguably more novel was my use of Google Streetview. The latter proved a useful tool to show how the urban environment in various districts of Belfast had changed over the course of the past decade, for example by allowing me to see how new murals had been painted or even removed to reflect evolving social and political realities.

Lee and Ingold advocate exploring a new place on foot and that this helps the anthropologist to better understand the routes and mobilities of the population living there (2006: 68). Bernard, too, also recommends that the anthropologist learns about his or her new field site – its physical and social layout – by walking it and recording one’s impressions (269). Heeding this advice, and given that my study was partly based on how people move around the city, I conducted a lot of fieldwork on foot, walking perhaps a total of several hundred kilometres during the course of my research. Being on foot enabled me to explore narrow
alleyways and paths inaccessible by car. It also allowed for serendipitous discovery such as coming across a demonstration or a car boot sale in a disused carpark between a Protestant and Catholic area. It further enabled me to physically “test” the architectural boundedness of the city by learning which routes were available to me. Furthermore, I felt more fully immersed in my surroundings which heightened my sense of vulnerability in certain districts. This could be contrasted with the popular “black cab” tours which take tourists to see murals and walls through the comfort and security of a vehicle and guide.

Nevertheless, I was also acutely conscious that my own spatial behavior was very different from that of my informants – both because of the nature of my research and curiosity, but also that I was relatively free to cross barriers, both real and imagined. Maček (2009: 3) charges in her book on life in wartime Sarajevo, “how can people who have never experienced war understand what it is like to live in a city under siege?” The truth is, of course, that I cannot. Thus my understanding of the current and prior local lifeworlds my informants inhabited, and their opportunities and constraints, was inherently limited. And while I gained a conversant knowledge of the streetscape of Belfast, I also spent frustrating periods alone in-between interviews wondering what people were discussing around their kitchen tables. Thus while my study was primarily about public space, as is perhaps common to many urban anthropologists, I felt that I did not sufficiently penetrate more private spaces. Accordingly, if people’s social worlds can be considered as thick with experiences, practices, and memories (Prakash 2008: 2), my reconstruction of them is decidedly thinner.

**Situational Ethics and Other Considerations**

Entering a highly politicized context required me, as Robben argues, to reflect on my subjectivity (2012: 90). As other researchers studying Northern Ireland have noted, it can be difficult to remain strictly neutral when studying a conflict. How one chooses to represent and interpret it will inevitably be influenced by personal viewpoints, whether inadvertent or not. I entered, furthermore, into many conversations with informants who tried to convince me of the legitimacy of their side’s claims and cause. While I tried to remain as even-handed and objective as possible, during the course of my research I also inevitably developed certain opinions and even sympathies. What is more, as Schep-Hughes (2004: 26-27) writes, “anthropological witnessing … positions the anthropologist inside human events as a … morally or politically committed being.” In view of that, my identification with the “need” for desegregation and peacebuilding between communities should be no secret. Whether this has
undermined the impartiality or objectivity of my research is for the reader to judge. Another ethical consideration is, as Irwin (2007) argues, the risk of negatively stereotyping life and attitudes. As anthropologists we have a care of duty to the communities we reside in and choose to depict. Our interpretations and writings can do harm, even if unintentional. I hope therefore that I have not fallen prey to such fallibility in this thesis. Therefore, for reasons of confidentiality (Davies: 59-60), I have given pseudonyms to all my informants as well as used fictional place names in one chapter.

While open about my purpose and research aims, it was nevertheless wise to employ situational ethics in certain situations (Davies: 61-66). For example, I did not disclose my British identity at Republican events in contrast to Unionist parades. While I was not an active participant per se, I was nonetheless placed in situations where it was wise to “play along” such as singing the British national anthem (the first time in my life!) at a Unionist rally, or joining in with prayers at a Republican commemoration. I learnt to relax about this a little with time, but I always felt very self-conscious about being identified as “a Brit” going into staunchly Republican areas on foot. My wife, visiting me for a weekend, remarked that I kept looking over my shoulder when walking through one neighbourhood. Indeed, I was told on at least three occasions that I should keep my wits about me, and I refrained from entering certain spaces, for example some local pubs, where my identity would be easily revealed and suspicion cast over my intentions.

But in reality the dangers, absent of actually studying active paramilitary groups, were small, and despite a (non-lethal) New IRA⁹ gun attack on a police patrol close by to my accommodation, the chances of being caught up in a violent incident were also minor. Thus the context I faced was very different from the one described by Sluka (2012: 283-295) in “Dangerous Anthropology” when he conducted fieldwork in Belfast in the 1980s and early 90s. On the other hand, in a social media age it occurred to me that other kinds of dangers may exist. By virtue of my presence at commemorations and parades, I inadvertently found my image in several social media feeds, including by a prominent Sinn Fein politician. While highly unlikely that I would be recognized, I could imagine in other fieldwork settings where this could potentially incur significant problems.

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⁹ The self-styled “New IRA” was formed in 2012 as a merger of several pre-existing groups. As of June 2018, it and the separate Continuity IRA remain opposed to the peace process.
A perhaps less anticipated challenge was that Northern Ireland is a much researched conflict in a number of different disciplines, including increasingly in inter-disciplinary studies involving sociological and anthropological approaches. Furthermore, with two universities in the city, it meant that there is a lot of “indigenous research” conducted. On two occasions, I was told that I could not meet with community groups as they had just been interviewed the previous week by university researchers and would not like to be interviewed again so soon.

A Note on Terminology

Finally, it is necessary to have a note on terminology employed in this research, though a full discussion of such goes beyond the scope of this thesis. Categorizing individuals and communities as Protestant or Catholic is unsatisfactory for a number of reasons. Not only does it do a disservice to other minorities and those who wish to self-identify in ways that are more fluid or transcend such a simplistic binary, but it also fails to acknowledge the complex affiliations within each group. Indeed, it is increasingly politically correct to talk of the Protestant Unionist Loyalist (PUL) community and the Catholic Nationalist Republican Community (CNR). Nevertheless, as the majority of my respondents primarily self-identified, as well as referred to others, as Protestant and Catholic, these are what I have mostly employed here. Such a designation can moreover lead to a misrepresentation of the conflict as being religious. While there are indeed religious dimensions, broadly speaking the conflict in its present-day context should rather be understood, I would argue, as concerning two competing ethno-political identities.

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10 Unionists refer to those who wish Northern Ireland to remain part of the United Kingdom. Loyalists are those who have asserted the right to resort to violence to maintain the Union, hence the term loyalist paramilitaries. Nationalists are those who regard themselves as Irish and desire a united Ireland. Republicans are those who have traditionally emphasized the legitimacy of armed struggle to achieve such. Since the peace agreement, Republicans have moved to political means to achieve their objectives. The term dissident Republicans refers to those who continue to espouse violence, though the term “dissident” is objected to by them. It should be noted, furthermore, that not all Catholics are nationalists nor are all Protestants unionists, though the two are largely used interchangeably.
3. A Parting of Worlds

Belfast was up until the nineteenth century a predominantly Protestant town. This started to change with the onset of the industrial revolution, however, as large numbers of Catholics left the countryside to work in the burgeoning cotton industry. This was to be replaced by more lucrative linen mills, which would see Belfast rise to become a world leader in the production and export of linen. While the industry had all but collapsed by the 1950s, one of the old linen mills still stands today off the Crumlin Road in West Belfast as testimony to not only this heritage, but also of conflict – used by the British Army as barracks during the Troubles, a large part of the building now lies derelict, buffering the Catholic neighbourhood of Ardoyne from Protestant Woodvale.

The influx of Catholic workers meant that while Catholics had accounted for only around 10 percent of Belfast’s population in the eighteenth century, this had increased to one-third by 1830. Indeed, the city was to see rapid expansion, with the total population more than quadrupling to nearly 90,000 by the mid-nineteenth century. While Belfast’s industrial growth attracted migrants in search of jobs and new livelihoods, a major push factor for rural Catholics were the hardships of the Irish famine in the 1840s (known as the “Great Hunger” by nationalists), which saw thousands flee the countryside stricken by hunger and poverty (Maguire 1993). This episode is memorialized by some of the city’s murals in Catholic areas, a particularly striking one on the Springhill Road in West Belfast accusing the British government of culpability in genocide that led to one-and-a-half million deaths.

Migrants arrived from the countryside to the south and west of the city, a principal route of entry being the Falls Road which runs south-west out of the city centre. This is where many of them settled, and even today, the Falls area either side of the road remains a predominantly Catholic area. This is furthermore where Sinn Fein (currently the largest nationalist party and formerly the political wing of the IRA) has its main office, a repeated target of attack by loyalist groups during the period of the Troubles.

Just a few hundred metres to the north of the Falls, and today divided by a long, high wall, lies an overwhelmingly Protestant area centred around the Shankill Road. This leads west out
of the city towards Divis Hill which, sweeping up to a height of 500 metres, dominates Belfast’s skyline, its upper slopes attractively dusted in snow on cold winter mornings. Beyond the hills, to the north and west, lies “Protestant farmer country,” as a Catholic taxi driver told me one afternoon as we looked down from a pass over County Antrim’s green, fertile fields.

Belfast’s demographic increase was thus also accompanied by broad patterns of settlement that still find resonance today. Accompanied by a growing density of population, forthcoming social unrest was perhaps predictable. In his textbook history of Belfast, Maguire writes that the first reported riot in the city occurred in 1813. More were to follow with, in 1843, “a pitched battle between the Pound Street Boys and the Sandy Row Boys.” By 1860, asserts Maguire, the basic contours of the conflict had emerged with Catholics testing the Protestant authority in the city, while many Protestants looked upon the new Catholic arrivals as unwelcome intruders (1993: 31-58).

More serious conflict was to erupt in the period 1920-22, following the partition of Ireland into a newly independent Republic in the south and the creation of a Protestant-majority, six-county Northern Ireland in the north – the latter remaining part of the United Kingdom. Over 450 people died in the violence in Belfast alone (Ibid: 135-36). While his testimony should be treated with a degree of caution, the Catholic priest Father Hassan published a valuable eyewitness account of this period of what he termed “pogroms” (Kenna 1922 [1997]: 17). Describing one violent incident, he recounted how:

In the evening, crowds from the notorious anti-Nationalist district of the Shankill … assembled at the ends of the streets leading into the Nationalist quarters and kept up a menacing and offensive demonstration … Three Nationalists, who were going about their legitimate business, were killed and seven were seriously injured.

In his historical study of sectarian conflict in Belfast, Doyle argues that such memories of violence became a feature of the city’s landscape, taking an important place in each side’s collective memories (2009: 220, 244-45). Indeed, in his childhood memoir of growing up in the Shankill some two decades later, John Simms (1992) describes that being “weaned on demonic priests and bloody accounts of the 1922 riots, the Falls Road was a place to be avoided

11 While detailing primarily attacks on the Catholic community, notably he dedicated his account to “the many Ulster Protestants, who have always lived in peace and friendliness with their Catholic neighbours, this little book dealing with the acts of their misguided co-religionists” (2).
if at all possible.” Revealingly, he describes a funeral procession from the Shankill to the city cemetery that necessitated going through the “fearsome Falls.” He describes how many people stopped and turned back before reaching the Catholic area. Continuing on with the hearse, he noted how similar the streets seemed to be to his own district. He felt fear, however, wondering if people knew that it was a “Prod funeral”\(^\text{12}\) given the name of Melville was written on the hearse. He further described how “a Priest emerged from a side door and all eyes fastened upon him but he didn’t move to shoot.” Apprehension gave way to relief when the procession returned safely back to the Shankill (Simms 1992: 75-76).

**We Mixed Brilliant in Them Days**

Yet such accounts also paint a too simplistic division between the two communities as living in strictly segregated urban enclaves. In reality, as one informant employed part-time as a history guide told me when walking through the Shankill, many streets housed families from both groups, although Catholics would tend to be concentrated at one end of the street, and Protestants the other. Furthermore, it cannot be argued that social interaction between the communities was characterized only by fear and hostility. On the contrary, it was common to venture into each other’s areas as well as maintain friendships with the “other” group.

It was at The Foundry, a café on the Shankill Road, that I met Neil where he came to eat breakfast most mornings, and which I also often frequented. Directly opposite was a souvenir shop selling an array of Protestant and loyalist paraphernalia, including flags and fridge magnets. Growing up in the area in the 1940s, Neil had fond memories of playing on the swings with Catholic children at the end of his road, or playing cricket and football. “We mixed brilliant in them days,” he asserted, adding that he would go to the Catholic Falls Road “no problem at all.” Leaving school at 14 in 1950, he went to work in a pawnbroker’s, which he remembered as having customers from both communities. He also became active in the church in his teens, joining the Church Lads’ Brigade. But while the church was for Protestants only, evening dances were a popular way of socializing with members, especially girls, of the other community:

Catholics had their dances in their part of the country and we had our dances but we all went to the same places … in fact they came over and danced in the [Protestant] Orange Hall dances … and we’d go over to their ceilidhs and you’d be singing

\(^{12}\) “Prod” is a shortening of Protestant.
Republican songs, and then you would’ve been singing the fucking Sash [a popular ballad] and all that, the ones about the Shankill, kick the Pope, kick him to fuck [chuckling]. It was all mixed up.

Thus despite Neil’s growing political and cultural consciousness of his own identity, putting it that “I began to learn from my dad that we’re Unionist and we’re always going to be Unionist,” this did not prevent him from associating with Catholics whereby, as he remembered it, mockery and even the sectarian nature of some of the songs were taken in good humour.

Of a similar age to Neil, but born in a predominantly Protestant area to the north of the city, Elaine recalled walking to the Falls Road Baths to go swimming as a teenager in the 1950s. As we sat down in the Duncairn Arts Centre, where she volunteered part-time as a receptionist, she also remembered inter-community relations as having been largely peaceable:

I don’t remember my mother or father saying to me, ‘Where are you going? Don’t do it’. I mean I don’t remember hearing of anyone being attacked or that sort of thing in a Catholic area or likewise [in a Protestant area] … ok there would have been a lot of teasing among youngsters, school caps and school berets would have been pinched and thrown, but that was only a bit of childish nonsense … and you wouldn’t have, at least to my knowledge, boycotted a shop because it had a Catholic owner. You went where there was good service, and that [ethnicity] didn’t matter.

Memories of pre-1969 Belfast vary, however, depending on individual experience, including which street one grew up on. In contrast to Elaine and Neil, Jim – today a well-known figure in cross-community initiatives – painted a somewhat different picture growing up in the 1960s in Protestant Sandy Row in the south of the city. He recalled having no contact with Catholics in his childhood, with his neighbourhood and school having been exclusively Protestant. Furthermore, he lived on a road separating Catholic and Protestant communities where there were occasional riots in times of heightened tensions. He related to me how, “there was almost an invisible line in the road where on this side you were safe, on that side you weren’t safe.”
Don’t Go to Dangerous Areas

In spite of their different experiences of segregation, all of them would be affected to varying degrees by the onset of the Troubles in 1969. Jim remembered barriers and then a more permanent wall being erected along his street. Whereas he had used to cross the road to go to school, it was now on the “wrong side” – on the Catholic side. But while he could no longer attend the school, in hindsight the walls for him simply represented a way of making the segregation physically visible of what previously had been “invisible.”

Neil meanwhile recalled the early days of the Troubles when mobs would chase each other back and forth between the Shankill and the Falls. “At first they were throwing sticks and stones, and then the guns appeared.” He tried to keep away, following his routines of going to church and to his work, at that time as an engineer in a local factory. Walking with his cousin to work one morning, he remembered coming across a Catholic family, who were putting their belongings in a cart and getting ready to move to the Falls having been intimidated out of their home by loyalist gunmen. He recalled apologizing to them for what was happening. But just as people were forced out of their homes by emerging paramilitary groups and others, so previously shared public facilities such as the swings he had used to play on as a child “were wiped out for Protestant people,” as he put it, appropriated into Catholic territory.

Between August 1969 and February 1973, some 60,000 people – 12 percent of Belfast’s population – were forced to leave their homes, settling in areas predominantly inhabited by their “own” group. Indeed, 1972 was a peak year for violence with over 14,000 homes damaged in 284 bomb explosions (Brick by Brick 1991: 25-26). Thus patterns of residential segregation and ghettoization, already apparent, became even more pronounced. People’s spatial behavior also started to change as areas associated with the other group were deemed to be unsafe to venture into. Elaine recalled that:

You were less keen to go out at night generally … If I was out somewhere with a friend they would always insist on leaving me right to the gate rather than the corner of the road. I think that going to the cinemas and theatres would have dropped back a lot during the Troubles. I wouldn’t have chosen, if I was still going swimming … I wouldn’t have gone to the Falls Road, I would have gone to Templemore Avenue because that would be a more Protestant area … The attitude was don’t go to dangerous areas if you don’t have to.
As the violence escalated and barricades were put up by the British Army – as well as in certain cases, paramilitary groups – which then became permanent walls physically dividing adjoining districts, people became increasingly separated and friendships torn apart. Neil remembered somewhat bitterly: “We were fucking divided then, we couldn’t see our [Catholic] friends. If I went down the Falls they’d put me down as an Orangeman or a fucking gunman. I couldn’t get on their part of the world.”

But while walls physically segregated areas and entering the other group’s area was associated with danger, segregation was also enforced by paramilitary groups, and other hard-line elements, who began to exert increasing control over their territories. This was a particular concern for Neil who had met his Catholic wife at a dance shortly before the Troubles erupted: “Once they [the loyalist gunmen] knew a Protestant had taken a Catholic on, there was guns pointing at me.” He was warned numerous times by friends to be careful and it was out of the question, he asserted, that he could have brought his wife to live with him in the Shankill. As it was, both of them decided to emigrate to Australia in 1970. Upon returning a decade later, they were again warned that they could not live as a “mixed couple” in Belfast, and had to move to a town twenty miles away on a predominantly Catholic housing estate.

Get Him Out of Here

Of a younger generation with no direct memory of the period before the Troubles, Jane grew up in the New Lodge in the 1970s, regarded as a staunchly Republican area and former IRA stronghold. Over the course of my fieldwork, we would often chat in the café where she worked. “The basic rule was that you stuck to your own areas,” she recalled of that time. While this was reinforced at an early age by her parents, as she grew up she became aware of “places that you couldn’t go.” Just as Protestants would not have come into the New Lodge, “I wouldn’t have gone on the Shankill Road,” she asserted. But the dangers were not always external. One’s own area could become insecure with rioting at any time and regular shootouts between the IRA and the British Army, who would enter the area on patrol. She remembered the whistles and the deafening clang of steel bin lids as warnings that the army was entering.

13 Paramilitary groups increasingly took on “policing” functions during the Troubles, especially in Catholic areas where the overwhelmingly Protestant police force, known as the Royal Ulster Constabulary, was seen as biased and sectarian. Extrajudicial justice, including verbal warnings, beatings, and shootings, were meted out for perceived transgressions.

14 Assenting to an interview, she casually told me afterwards that she had been targeted for assassination on two separate occasions in the early 1990s in a feud between the Ulster Volunteer Force and the Irish National Liberation Army – of which her husband had been a member.
One vivid early memory was a bomb going off in a pub and seeing her first dead body, the “blood like jam.”

A close-knit community where practically everyone knew or at least recognized each other, a sense of territoriality and that of insiders and outsiders is aptly demonstrated in the following incident. Jane recalled one day a young Scottish man who had become lost wandering into the New Lodge and who was asking for directions to a pub in the close-by Protestant neighbourhood of Tigers Bay:

He was walking down the street, I was thinking ‘oh my God’ … jeez he’s in the wrong area, get him out of here … there was a wee bit of a crowd sort of watching … my ex-husband and a neighbour told him ‘come with us’ and walked him along to the [edge of New Lodge] and crossed him over the road to Tigers Bay very quickly and ran back very quickly … if no-one had shown him where to go, he would have got a hiding maybe.

But while aware of certain boundaries, this did not mean that she could not maintain friendships with Protestants. In fact, of mixed parentage, with her father being an English Protestant and her mother Irish Catholic, she was proud of how her parents had brought her up not to be sectarian but accept that “people are people.” Other parents, she recalled, were not so accommodating and refused to allow their children to socialize with Protestants. She recounted incidents of girls found to be dating Protestant boys having their heads shaved, being “tarred and feathered,” and then tied to lampposts as a warning to others.

In her teenage years, she got into the then popular “mod” music and fashion scene and would meet with other young people outside the City Hall on a Saturday – the main rivalry rather being between mods and skinheads, she recalled. It is thus noteworthy that the mod group identity could encompass both Protestants and Catholics. That Jane could be both a Catholic and mod reveals the notion of segmentary identities in that people can simultaneously be members of several groups and which may not be formed on the basis of ethnicity (Eriksen 2015: 341-42). The city centre also performed an important function as a “neutral space” where they could meet in relative safety; although she also remembers that one had to be careful of

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15 Interestingly, Jane recounted how her English father lived and worked in the New Lodge through the Troubles without any problem.
gangs who would go into the clubs asking people’s names and give someone a beating if they gave an Irish name.

Behavior and attitudes could change depending on the political situation or violent incidents. As an adult, Jane would sometimes visit the swimming baths and gym on the Shore Road, located in a predominantly Protestant area. Thus the physical proximity and convenience of the swimming baths close to her home was a more important factor than making a longer trip to a pool in a Catholic area further away. However, the IRA bombing of a fish and chip shop on the Shankill Road in 1993, in which nine Protestants were killed, stopped her from visiting the baths: “When the Shankill bomb happened you just knew not to go. Understandably people were outraged … I just felt my blood run cold, why would [they] do that?” By implicitly knowing not to go, we can see in Jane’s behavior what Maček (2009: 41-42) in regard to residents of wartime Sarajevo calls a “constant calculus of danger” which can be recalibrated. But while a fear of blame and even possible retaliation caused her to avoid the baths, an equally important factor in her case was a sense of shame of being identified as Catholic and what had been perpetrated in her “side’s” cause.

Legacy of Segregation

Prakash (2008: 12) argues that we cannot comprehend cities “outside of their constitution by their political histories.” Thus as anthropologists we should not be content with accepting at face value the given “time-space” in which we enter. Accordingly, as this chapter has shown, the origins of ethno-religious divisions – and their spatial production – in Belfast can be, broadly speaking, traced back nearly two hundred years. But while these have endured and evolved over time, periods of relative peace and stability also witnessed degrees of inter-communal cohabitation or “neighbourliness” despite identity differences.

However, the most recent and most serious phase of violence that erupted with the Troubles significantly exacerbated the already existing patterns and practices of segregation in the city. Displacement of population saw the expansion and consolidation of single-identity neighborhoods, the breakdown and partial absorption of others, while still other new areas came into being. In North Belfast especially this left a mosaic of closely adjoining ethnic enclaves that still exists today. Moreover, ethnic boundaries which had to some extent been blurred and/or porous before became more sharply delineated.
It would be wrong, however, to view this as a somehow passive or inevitable process in which borders simply appeared (Jansen 2013: 29). As this chapter has also demonstrated, paramilitary groupings – and others – served as agents of expulsion and territorial appropriation. Barricades with rolls of barbed wire were externally imposed, erected by the British Army for purposes of control and preventing inter-communal violence; these were later “upgraded” and maintained by responsible government departments into more permanent physical structures of division.16 Thus while physical borders arose as a result of violent inter-community interaction, it is also necessary to emphasize the active role played by what O’Leary (2012: 32-33) terms as “agents of partition” in border-marking, which will be returned to later.

The consequences of this reordering and bordering of the city were profoundly disruptive. Just as Lofranco (2017: 42) in her study of neighbourly networks in Sarajevo writes that war led to a “destruction and reconstruction of social networks and neighborly ties,” as borders shifted around them, so too residents of Belfast such as Neil found themselves having to re-establish or redefine their social networks and mobilities. This is not to say, however, that others did not manage to a certain degree to maintain their friendships or acquaintances.

Yet by the time the peace agreement was signed in 1998, a whole generation of Protestant and Catholics had grown up with no direct knowledge of their relative co-existence beforehand. While individual experience could of course vary, and the course of the conflict itself waxed and waned over three decades with periods of relative peace, a large majority of people, especially in working class areas of North Belfast, grew up and lived in single-identity neighborhoods and were more likely to be educated, shop, socialize, and work with members of their own group (Pringle 1990: 157-177). Moreover, the latter activities, apart from the partial exception of the city centre, were also to a large extent territorially bounded along ethno-national lines. Boundaries between neighbourhoods also became unsafe, contested spaces prone to rioting or other violent incidents. If a perceived fear for one’s physical safety acted as a constraining variable on going to “dangerous areas,” being seen as associating with or inviting in members from the other group could single one out for criticism by disapproving family, friends, and neighbours; or, worse, come to the attention of paramilitary groups who exercised control over the streets within its borders.

16 In his study of the history of the use of barbed wire, Netz (2010: 156-57) argues that a key feature of history has been the prevention of motion for a variety of reasons including control over space.
Viewed more critically, it is of course necessary to be wary of such a neat, totalizing picture. While useful as a generalization to provide context for the reader, segregation and its lived experience was by no means complete or clear-cut. For, as illustrated, individuals such as Jane found not only ways to assert alternative, mutually inclusive identities, but also, albeit limited, still find places to meet and mingle with members of the “other” group.
4. Parading the Streets

Fast-forwarding to the present day, a first-time visitor to Belfast might be struck more by the ostensible similarities between neighbourhoods than the differences. As mentioned in the previous chapter, even a young John Simms had remarked how similar the Falls appeared to his own district of the Shankill. The architecture of red-brick, often terraced houses, the kinds of shops and services – from laundrettes and newsagents to takeaways and bookmakers – as well as the layout of streets, may render a Catholic area practically indistinguishable from a Protestant one in this regard. In fact, greater distinction may be drawn along lines of class and income. In wealthier areas of the north and south of the city especially, streets tend to be lined with mature trees, the houses larger and detached, while expensive-looking cars adorn the driveways. Conspicuously absent are markers of ethno-national identity such as flags and murals. Looking at a street map of North Belfast, one informant, her finger pointing to one such area at the bottom of Cave Hill, exclaimed to me somewhat resentfully, “it doesn’t matter if you are Catholic or Protestant there!”17 Thus, as Aretxaga notes, the topography of Belfast is closely associated not only with ethnic distinction but also social class (1997: 32).

In contrast to the leafier suburbs, the predominantly working-class neighbourhoods of North and West Belfast exhibit many overt symbols of identity, including, among others, flags, graffiti, painted kerbstones, and lampposts (painted in the colours of the Union Jack and Irish tricolour, respectively), as well as monuments and murals. The latter are typically painted on the highly visible gable ends of houses and display different meanings and messages, which may change and be repainted by designated community artists according to the political and social climate of the time. These may include references to historical events, commemorate certain individuals such as dead paramilitary members, as well as celebrate an aspect of a particular neighbourhood’s cultural heritage such as a hurling or football team. Accordingly, murals as a form of “place-branding” are used to express collective identity, shared values and pride, as well as may contain political criticism (Chakravarti and Chan 2016: 406).

17 In The Good Son (McVeigh 2015: 181), a semi-autobiographical novel about growing up in the Catholic area of Ardoyne during the Troubles, a young Mickey Donnelly goes on a school outing to Cave Hill, where he observes: “No flags here. No painted kerbs, broken windows … So rich people don’t have the Troubles. As well as havin’ everything else. It’s just not fair.”
Furthermore, as Rolston asserts, “even if the symbols and rituals are those of the wider state, they are infused with local knowledge and memory” (2011: 293).

But markers of identity and difference can also be more subtle or reflect individual choices. These may include the number plaques on houses bearing a short Irish-language inscription, or a scarf hanging in a bedroom window showing allegiance to a particular football team, typically Rangers or Celtic. Furthermore, while the local corner shop in a Catholic area will invariably stock *The Irish News*, it would be highly unlikely to sell *The Newsletter* – regarded as a hard-line unionist newspaper. Similarly, posters in the shop windows may advertise an evening of Irish dancing in the local Catholic community centre. On the other hand, a newsagent in a Protestant area may display a poster for Armed Forces Day, celebrating the British military. Thus the longer one spends residing in and navigating the city, so too one becomes highly attuned to the manifest symbolism of the built environment (Bollens 2012: 60-61), the semiotic differences, and when an identity border has been crossed.

Accordingly, in the physical and symbolic organization of space, we can see in Belfast the existence of what Handelman (1977: 196-98) terms distinct “ethnic communities” which correspond to a territorial base. Moreover, Kenney (1991: 16) deploys the term “micro-territories” to describe Catholic and Protestant neighbourhoods. In so doing, territoriality at the neighbourhood level can be regarded as a microcosm of the conflict at the ethno-national level and the partition of Ireland. Thus, when Neil in the previous chapter talked about walking a couple of blocks from the Shankill to the Falls as going to “their part of the world,” this underlines a sense of crossing a de facto border into a different country, even if formally remaining part of the United Kingdom.

Nevertheless, the concepts of ethnic community and micro-territory are not static. In order to be better understood, they need to be enacted. As Eriksen (2015: 332) puts it, invoking Barth, “The existence of the ethnic group thus has to be affirmed socially and ideologically through the general recognition, among its members and outsiders, that it is culturally distinctive.” Rituals, in particular parades and commemorations, are important enablers – socially, symbolically, and politically – by which ethnic communities and their corresponding territories are reaffirmed (and contested) and group goals articulated (Kenney 1991: 80-81). Thus, as Eller notes, the ethnic group can be seen as “moving, as movements, in the sense of ‘doing something about’ their culture or social situation” (1999: 14-15).
In doing that “something,” parades and commemorations are an important feature of social and political life in Northern Ireland, among both Catholic and Protestant communities. These can conform to what Schramm (2011: 7) terms as a form of “spatial choreography,” whereby the ritual functions of such events and their performative aspects play out and interact with specific spaces. I attended at least a dozen such events during my fieldwork, which ranged from anniversaries of significant historical events and commemorations of local atrocities committed during the Troubles, to demonstrations related to the political present.

**Easter Rising Parade**

It was one morning on Easter Monday that I found myself on the New Lodge Road outside Fitzpatricks pub awaiting a parade commemorating the Easter Rising of 1916.\(^\text{18}\) Almost overnight, it seemed, the road had been transformed into a sea of Irish flags fluttering from lampposts, with reams of bunting stretching across the road. A huge tricolour had been fixed atop one of the cluster of tower blocks – visible from much of the city – while roughly every third house flew its own flag from a bedroom window. Affixed to the lampposts meanwhile were placards bearing the words “A 100 Years of Resistance”\(^\text{19}\) with an image of the Proclamation of Independence and portraits of martyrs who died in the Easter Rising, as well as more recent victims of the Troubles such as Michael Neill killed by the British Army in 1977. That these had been put up seemingly overnight pointed to a high degree of collective mobilization.

Consisting of two flute bands – the local Jim O’Neill-Robert Allsopp Memorial Flute Band, and the Coatbridge Republican Flute Band invited over from Glasgow – the parade made its way down the road, while I followed its progression from the pavement. Tunes played included Irish classics like *Fields of Athenry* but also a version of *The Sound of Silence*. The bands briefly paused on a residential street where a large group of people were waiting, including an ice cream van which did a brisk trade with the young children present. “Are you going to be playing the drums?” a man asked a visibly excited young boy. The parade then took off again – this time expanded by so-called colour parties in the front consisting of a flag-

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\(^\text{18}\) The Easter Rising in Dublin of 1916 saw a group of prominent Irish nationalists including James Connolly and Patrick Pearse declare independence from Britain. The rising was forcefully put down by the British military and its leaders were subsequently executed, becoming martyrs in nationalist political folklore.

\(^\text{19}\) Given it was the 101\textsuperscript{st} anniversary, these had obviously been recycled from the previous year’s commemoration.
bearing group clad in black berets, black gloves, bomber jackets, and green belts. Behind them marched a group of five girls dressed in more traditional green military garb and hats in honour of the 1916 rebels, with one even carrying an imitation rifle. In turn, they were followed by a group of families including young children bearing tricolour wreaths and portraits of relatives who had died in the Troubles. The parade itself was followed by a hundred or so locals while others watched from bedroom windows or stood in doorways. I kept pace with a man carrying his toddler son on his shoulders waving a miniature Irish flag. Others, typically young males, wore football-style tops with the message “Unfinished Revolution.” Except for on the main Queen’s Road, which denotes the eastern boundary of the New Lodge, the police were notably absent. I noted the conspicuous graffiti sprawled on the brick walls including “Smash British Stormont,” referring to the Northern Ireland seat of government, as well as anti-police slogans.

In response to an order barked out in Irish, the colour party in front stopped in front of a mural bearing the words “Out of the Ashes of 1969.” An elderly woman, her arms crossed, presumably the house owner, stood in front of her door as a wreath was laid at the foot of the mural. The parade proceeded to twist and turns through the different streets of the area, following at one point the course of a wall dividing it from Protestant Tigers Bay. The designated route of the parade thus ended up covering many of the streets of the area, the booming bass drum almost seeming to rattle the windows of the houses. No-one in the area could thus fail to be aware of the parade’s presence. The parade, again anticipated by the ice cream van, terminated at the New Lodge memorial garden, tucked away behind a cluster of residential houses and which honours those in the area who had died during the Troubles. A close-by mural depicted the “New Lodge Massacre,” when the British Army shot dead six people from the area in February 1973.

The bands proceeded to form two columns while a roll call of those killed in the conflict, accompanied by sorrowful music from a loudspeaker, was read out by name and year. A minute’s silence ensued in which relatives were invited into the memorial garden to lay the wreaths they had been carrying. The main speaker was then announced as former IRA member and today prominent Sinn Fein politician Gerry Kelly. His speech made reference to the events of 1916 while drawing parallels with its relevance in terms of the struggle today. Referring to forthcoming elections in which Sinn Fein was anticipated to do well, he finished with the rallying call that, “the countdown to Irish unification is on.” All those present were then urged to join Sinn Fein if they were not already members. After the event was over, I quickly departed on foot, hoping that no-one would enquire as to who I was.
Comparison of the above account with another parade in Protestant Shankill illustrates the differences but, more importantly, the similarities in the way ethnicity is enacted and how it also interacts with the physical geography of place.

**Shankill Road Parade**

Arriving on the Shankill Road one morning for a parade commemorating the 100th anniversary of the Battle of Ypres in the First World War, I watched as men in regal red blazers, and another man wearing a kilt and clutching bagpipes, hurried up the road to assemble in Woodvale Park. A Union Jack flew outside the gates of the park, while three police officers and two armoured land rovers kept watch. A few minutes later, the note of the bagpipes sounded together with drums. The Shankill Road Defenders Band appeared from behind a grassy rise in the park, led by a man in a long grey trench coat, his head buried in a bearskin hat and his right hand brandishing a large mace. The band members meanwhile wore navy blue blazers and trousers complete with highly polished black shoes. Behind them marched men dressed as soldiers carrying mock rifles, while four women clad in white with red sashes represented nurses. Making up the rear were members of the 1st Shankill Somme Association in red blazers and black trousers, predominantly consisting of older men.  

As they marched down the main road through the Shankill, which was closed to traffic, small numbers of people congregated outside the entrances of pubs and shops, a group of men emerging from McLean’s bookmakers. Occasionally someone on the pavement would gesture a thumbs-up to a member of the band. No one clapped, instead just smiling or watching in silence. The parade stopped at a carpark where another group of exclusively men were waiting. Within sight, further up the road, loomed the huge Cupar Way peace wall diving the Shankill from the Falls – today a popular site for tourists to scrawl messages of peace. Wearing different colour blazers, this new group joined the parade representing other Somme associations in different Protestant areas of the city. On the return route up the Shankill Road, the parade swelled to around 150 people.

As the procession reached a memorial, the band leader barked out the order “eyes left!,” in response to which all eyes swivelled to fasten on a newish looking memorial erected by the Bayado Somme Association. Its dedication on a stone slab read “to five innocent Protestants

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20 Referring to the Battle of the Somme, an infamous battle in 1916 which claimed the lives of many from Ireland and Ulster fighting in the British Army.
slaughtered by Republican murder gangs” in 1971. Behind the memorial, in a fenced-off exhibition, highly graphic images of atrocities committed by the IRA over the decades were depicted, as well as one showing the Islamic State attacks on Paris in 2015. In bold red letters was written “IRA – ISIS – Sinn Fein – Same Thing.”

A few minutes later, the parade halted at the memorial garden behind the Mountainview Tavern, site of a deadly IRA attack in 1975 memorialized by a poppy cross outside the front door. A priest then appeared to lead a memorial service to honour those who had died in the First World War. The names of individuals from the Shankill as well as their street addresses were read out. Servicemen who had lost their lives in other conflicts, including in Northern Ireland, were also acknowledged. As I stood observing, I also noted prominent Unionist politicians standing solemnly in the crowd.

Symbolic Organization of Space

Comparison of the two parades reveals striking semiotic differences in regard to clothing and other paraphernalia. The rather formal outfits of blazers and pin-stripe trousers of the unionist parade signify loyal allegiance to the solemn institutions of crown and country. Meanwhile, the more militant garb of the nationalist parade – of black gloves and berets – expresses struggle and resistance. Accordingly, these different narratives and identities are woven into the very clothing that each group chooses to wear (see e.g. Hansen 2004 for anthropological perspectives on importance of dress).

Notwithstanding, and more relevant to this chapter, both parades reveals striking similarities in the symbolic organization of space. Both are highly public displays in the heart of their respective neighbourhoods. By physically taking to the streets, participants and observers alike are engaged in an active process of affirming territoriality over a clearly defined ethnic space, thus “claiming place” (Hurd, Hastings, Leutloff-Grandits 2017: 5) for the group which excludes the other; hence the name of the Protestant flute band – the Shankill Road Defenders Band.

Specific murals, memorials, and buildings also assume a particular significance which may vary depending on the parade, thus occupying a specific role in the memoryscapes of the neighbourhood which are evoked and activated through such acts of remembrance or sacralization, in effect corresponding to an “enshrinement of place” (Michael, Murtagh, and Price 2016: 224). This conforms with Aretxaga’s observation that, “space sediments collective
history that endow the past with visible immediacy” (1997: 38). Thus, especially for older people who witnessed violence, the streets and specific locations within them are pregnant with memory and meaning. Here we find use for the metaphors of “wounded cities” (Till 2012: 3-4) and “landscapes of violence” (Schramm 2011: 5-6), where memories of violence are etched into space.

Connection is also made between seemingly disparate historical events. Thus while there may seem little to connect the events of the Somme or Ypres in World War One with IRA bombings during the Troubles, in the case of the Protestant parade both are woven seamlessly into a single narrative – what Switzer calls a “continuity of commemoration” (2005: 125-27) – centring on community sacrifice and loss, but also resilience. The Republican parade also inextricably links the events of the Easter Rising in 1916 with the “unfinished” present – that of Ireland’s continued partition. And while such parades are intensely local, they also link to expressions of shared identity and solidarity with other Protestant or Catholic neighbourhoods. Furthermore, symbolic markers may also express solidarity with other groups and struggles, such as Palestine and Israel, reminding us that in the dynamics of peace and conflict, the local, regional, and global intersect and intermesh (Björkdahl and Buckley-Zistel 2016: 7-8).

Apparent too is the politically important appropriation of a shared history. Thus the presence of politicians at both parades connotes that such events are charged with political meaning and mobilized as part of the contemporary ethno-political competition. Accordingly, as Eller (1999: 41-42) asserts, the “past” is an important resource that gives the “group terms to understand the social present and to make claims on it.” Indeed, when I asked an older man observing the Shankill Road Parade why there were so many poppies on display despite it not being November 11,21 he replied, “that’s what happens when they try and take your history away from you.” Thus commemoration of a past event – and its symbols – is intimately identified with a present-day political struggle. Yet, in so doing, as Eller (44) also argues, ethnicity is not invariably a backward-looking continuation of the past, but also a “product of modern factors that exacerbate, or create, ethnicity and conflict.”

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21 November 11 is traditionally celebrated as Remembrance Day across the United Kingdom as the end of World War One. Poppies, typically made of plastic, are usually displayed and worn for a few days around this event.
In sum, as this chapter has clearly shown, at the “highest level of ethnic incorporation, group members have shared interests in their ethnic identity, their ethnic networks, their ethnic associations and shared territorial estate” (Eriksen 2015: 337-38).

**Erosion of Neighbourhood Life**

Clearly, then, ethnicity and territory have a high degree of salience in parts of Belfast such as described above. However, again, we risk subscribing to a simplistic and homogenous depiction of such ethnic incorporation as “capturing” all of its members, as well as having remained “frozen milieus” impervious to dynamic processes and influences such as globalization and immigration (Krase and Uhurek 2017). Indeed comparing and contrasting with Belfast ethnographies (see e.g. Aretxaga 1997, Kenney 1991) from twenty or more years ago also enables one to observe striking continuities but also social changes in neighbourhood life and its fabric. While a full discussion of such goes beyond the scope of this study, some observations are in order.

In reality, while the neighborhoods under study are predominantly single-identity, Protestants and Catholics may live, albeit in small numbers, in each other’s areas. Furthermore, migration – both from abroad and within the island of Ireland – has also had a significant influence. On several occasions, I went shopping at a Polish foodshop on the Antrim Road, where also other Eastern Europeans frequented. In need of a haircut, I went to a Turkish-run barbershop on the same road. Next-door to an Orange Hall at Carlisle Circus stood a Sikh Community Centre. The food hub in a church where I volunteered was frequented by Iranians, Sudanese, and Mongolians, among others. This ethnic heterogeneity also engenders its own networks and practices not rooted in those of the “pre-existing” community. Indeed, just as there were those following the Easter Rising Parade described above, I also observed an Asian-looking family and others walking in the opposite direction, clearly not participating.

Furthermore, some of the parades I witnessed featured relatively low numbers of people both participating and observing. One Catholic informant expressed to me her view that the parades were not as big as they used to be, linking it to her feeling that there was no longer the same sense of community in her neighbourhood of Ardoyne, in contrast to before where “we

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22 Orange Halls can be found in virtually every Protestant neighborhood and represent the headquarters of local Orange Lodges, which can be described as hard-line Protestant religious organizations and which often engage in parades.
were united fighting a common enemy [the British] … With the peace the paramilitaries turned inward on the community and caused a lot of resentment. Before you could leave your door open, not now.” Of another relatively small Republican parade I attended, a Sinn Fein activist told me somewhat disapprovingly that it had not been a “Sinn Fein-approved” parade, a reminder that even within the ethnic communities there are rivals and factions that vie for influence. Whereas “existential interdependence” or “neighborly solidarity” – to adopt Maček’s (2009: 106-7) descriptions of close everyday living in wartime Sarajevo – had to a degree characterized the Troubles period, arguably this solidarity has begun to break down or fragment whereby cohesive neighborhood organization (Hannerz 1980: 268-69) is no longer needed or desired (even if certain actors strive to maintain it) to the same extent in “peacetime” to counter an adversarial government or defend against perceived hostile outsiders.

The sentiment of community change was especially expressed by older informants. Walking past a row of houses with one 60-something man in the Shankill, he casually remarked, “I bet you the people living in that house don’t even know their neighbours three doors down.” Another underscored how cars and traffic had eroded neighbourliness, fostering anonymity as people move around the city enclosed in their vehicles. Furthermore, it may be that what Augé (1995) calls an age of “supermodernity” is, at least to some extent, leading to an erosion in the importance of place as people frequent a multitude of different spaces and so-called “non-places.” Accordingly, life is increasingly lived in spaces of circulation, consumption takes place in out-of-town shopping malls, and communication through mobile phones and cyberspace (Creswell 2004: 43-44). Educational, recreational, work, and travel opportunities increasingly bind people less to one particular place as their lifeworlds spill over on many scales. While self-identifying as Catholic and living in a Catholic neighborhood, my landlady travelled regularly to London for yoga classes, ran a yoga studio to which she commuted by car in a different part of town, and socialized predominantly in the city centre with a diverse group of friends. Her travel experiences and interests had also served to shape her values as being open and receptive to new people and ideas. Such expanding horizons, as Kirby (2009: 214) asserts, offer “the increased potential to move between social frameworks and to experience the lively imbrication of social realms.”

Accordingly, people can and do maintain networks and associations which transcend the locality of where they reside and may choose not to participate in local expressions of ethnic identity and association. Thus as Lofranco (2017: 54) puts it, a “new concept of modernity rooted in a globalized society creates changes [that] decouple neighbourliness from housing
proximity.” Yet, for others, concepts of ethnic community and neighbourhood may be much more significant and strongly felt; and indeed, as argued in later chapters, be reinforced by perceived external threats and challenges undermining ethnic delineation. In sum, place and locality is clearly still important – and identity and memory within it – but the point is rather, as Creswell (2004: 39) makes, that we should not falsely overstate its boundedness and permanence.
5. Sticking to Your Side

“After that experience, I would not leave my front door”
(a plaque outside entrance to Tigers Bay)

If inner-city North Belfast can be described as a patchwork of largely single-identity enclaves, it is also an urban landscape with a typology of different borders and boundaries delineating and dividing them. Peace walls or peace lines, as previously discussed, constitute the most visible and “neat” barriers of segregation between areas. These may be self-standing and run for hundreds of metres; others may be integrated into the existing architecture such as bridging would-be gaps between a row of houses. They are not, however, impermeable barriers. Many typically have gates at various points through which people – and, in places, cars – can cross during the day; they are typically locked at night for security reasons, as well as during periods of high tension. Furthermore, if one is determined enough, they can often be walked around, though this may entail a significant detour.

Another significant type of boundary in Belfast is the so-called interface, which denotes a kind of open no-man’s land between two communities. Typically a stretch of road or a road junction may constitute an interface. CCTV cameras are often located in such spaces continuously beaming back live images to a police station. Many interfaces also bear the scars of previous intercommunal violence, including derelict buildings with a consequent lack of investment. Houses still occupied close-by will often have metal grills over the windows. They may thus be considered to be dangerous spaces fraught with the potential for negative encounters, such as during an event I observed one day when a Republican parade was greeted

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23 Some of my informants took exception to the term “peace wall.” One expressed the opinion that it was a shocking term in that they prevented peace. Another said it would be more accurate to call them “scars.”

24 Note that a wall may also be considered an interface barrier or a closed interface. For the purposes of this study, I intend an interface to denote a border which may have security features but does not contain a substantial material structure which prevents access between neighbourhoods.
by a small but noisy protest outside an Orange Hall located on an interface amid a heavy police presence.25

Both walls and interfaces can be sites of hostile messaging such as sectarian graffiti intended as warnings to the other side. In the case of Tigers Bay, a low whitewashed wall at the western entry point of the neighborhood bore the words, “You are Now Entering Loyalist Tigers Bay.” Accompanied by the symbol of the Red Hand of Ulster which formed an intimidating stop sign, the words serve the double function of not only marking territory but also issuing a warning to outsiders. Conversely, boundaries can also bear messages of peace and reconciliation, although these can also be somewhat dubious (and humorous) as in the example of a message scrawled next to a gate in a wall providing one of the few points of direct passage between the Falls and the Shankill: “Irish, forget the past!” under which, by a different hand, it had been written, “da war ain’t over yet.” They are thus dynamic spaces charged with meaning which may also reflect the current political climate.

Additionally, border zones and boundaries may also be constituted by other forms of “buffering” space, including among others waste ground, abandoned buildings, warehouses, motorways, natural features, as well as retail outlets and parks. Some of these, particularly the road infrastructure, are the result of 1960s and 70s’ urban planning interventions that have fostered physical disconnection in favour of mobility by vehicle (Sterrett, Hackett, Hill 2012: 49-55). Roads aside, often such spaces have fallen derelict as a result of conflict and general neglect, deterring would-be investors. Increasingly, however, such spaces are being redeveloped as shared spaces to facilitate interaction between communities, as is explored in the final chapter.

**Patterns of Movement**

In his study of segregation in Johannesburg, Murray (2008: 148) writes that “the built environment – its shape, contours, and accessibility sets limits and possibilities for the conduct of everyday life.” So too patterns of movement around Belfast are inevitably influenced by its structural configuration of streets and buildings, as well as other material features including

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25 A Parades Commission was established with the Good Friday Agreement to rule on parades. These include stipulating criteria which need be adhered to by parades in regard to their route, composition, as well as songs and even clothing (for example wearing paramilitary clothing is regarded as a contravention of the Commission’s regulations).
walls and fences. These serve to channel, but also impede, the flow of people and traffic through the city.26

Accordingly, the city’s layout provides inherent opportunities and constraints regulating spatial behavior, enabling some routes whilst discounting others, and in so doing, determines how people encounter each other, or not as the case might be. Caldeira (1996: 314) writes of walls and fences as “instruments of segregation” in elite enclaves in Sao Paulo, where relationships established with adjoining poorer areas is of one of avoidance. While in Sao Paulo they are for very different reasons, that is, in defense of a “luxury lifestyle,” the function in Belfast remains the same – “to ensure different social worlds meet as infrequently as possible in city space” (Ibid.: 319).

But whereas the physical architecture of the city plays a role in determining spatial activity – after all, a brick wall cannot be simply waked through – agents who navigate space are not merely passive “victims” of division that generates what Shirlow and Murtagh (2006: 10) call “sectarianized immobility.” Indeed, their practices and attitudes may both serve to not only reproduce and reinforce the significance of such borders, but also undermine them. Space and agency are therefore mutually constitutive (Björkdahl and Buckley-Zistel 2016: 1). This dual dimension is elegantly articulated by Strüver, who argues that: “a borderscape ... relies on narratives, images and imaginations as imagined realities of the border which are constitutive of its meanings and effects, including the practices with relation to the border” (cited in Dell’agnese and Szary 2015: 4-5).

**Be Careful When You’re Going That Way**

The processes underpinning the reproduction of borders need to be understood in the context of a set of informal rules which serve to categorize space, its boundaries, and what is “accepted” as safe spatial behavior. Aretxaga (1997: 32), in her ethnography of Belfast, calls these an “implicit code of social relations that organises the movement of people through urban space, determining some routes, discarding others.”

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26 Bus routes, for instance, tend to follow the main roads radiating out of the city centre in the manner of a hub-and-spokes system. In so doing, they rarely cross ethnic boundaries. Thus to get to the Falls and Shankill, spread out along the roads of the same name, requires taking different buses, with no direct bus connection between the two areas.
These are acquired and given meaning at an early age. Now in her early thirties, Sara explained to me how:

Coming from North Belfast you knew what areas to stay in, what areas not to go to … as a kid you were constantly hearing messages from your parents and other adults of ‘be careful when you’re going this way, be careful when you’re going that way.’ I grew up beside the Waterworks Park and the park was divided so that half the park was for the PUL community and the other half was for the CNR community, and it was very much that you stuck to your side of the park. There was no structure dividing it, it was in-built knowledge of knowing not to go to the other side of the park.

Similarly, Jim, who was involved in cross-community youth work, described bringing Protestant youths from the Shankill to his community centre located in a predominantly Catholic area. This necessitated crossing Carlisle Circus – an interface between Lower Shankill and the Antrim Road.

My youth group … when I first started bringing them here physically from the Shankill, even though they could walk here in less than 10 minutes, they wouldn’t, they couldn’t, and still wouldn’t go up the Antrim Road. Crossing Carlisle Circus – that was their barrier, when they started coming here. There’s a shop there, it’s now a Spar and Subway. One of the kids lives a hundred yards away, he’d never been in that shop, never, and the novelty of me picking them up in a minibus and driving them, one of the things they always had to do for the first month or so was to stop at the shop so that they had to go in.

From the above accounts, it would seem that children in North Belfast grow up with a strong conception of bounded spaces beyond which it is deemed “unsafe” to venture – as is transmitted to them by their parents and other adults. While beyond the scope of this study, the specific experiences of youths in navigating place and “layers of socio-spatial exclusions and inclusions” in urban environments, especially those marked by ethnic and other social divisions, would represent a fascinating area of study (Gough and Franch 2005: 159).

Notwithstanding, what underpins such unwritten social codes? In their study of Belfast, Shirlow and Murtagh (2006: 82-83) refer to “chill factors” which “militate against intercommunity mobility.” These, as I gleaned from various informants, can be various, including: a direct fear of violence or abuse whether real or imagined as a vulnerable minority
(one young man described it to me as a fear of being “jumped on”); an unwillingness to associate with members of the other community reinforced by negative sectarian stereotyping; or, more indirectly, a violent memory associated with a specific place. These factors in turn influence segregatory spatial behavior through the adoption of avoidance strategies (Ibid.).

Striking up conversation with Patrick in a local café, he explained to me an encounter he had recently had while walking back home – which necessitated passing close to an interface with a Protestant housing estate. As he talked, I noted how his conversation, while friendly with me, was laced with bitterness at the perceived discrimination he felt Catholics, and that he personally, had faced in his life. He continued how after shopping in a supermarket one evening, he had been recognized by a woman from the estate who was collecting material for a bonfire along with 20 or so “other hoods.” Drunk and brandishing a whiskey bottle, she had shouted upon recognizing him, “there’s that fucking Fenian bastard,” with the group proceeding to chase him down the road where he escaped to safety in a passing car; but not before being warned that next time he would be “knifed to death.” While having to trust only to Patrick’s account, this encounter had caused him to change his route home to avoid passing the estate, even though it took longer. He proceeded to lament that he wished he had bought a house well away from an interface area, concluding that it was “safer to be among your own.”

In another episode, Martin, a former loyalist paramilitary, recounted to me how he had been walking on the Falls Road when he tripped and badly hurt his leg. Feeling a rising sense of vulnerability that he would be “found out” if questioned, instead of asking for help, and despite being in considerable pain, he dragged himself out of the area back into the Shankill where he lived. In this case, it was not a specific incident which had prompted such fear, but rather an imagined fear of what could happen once his identity was revealed.

Notwithstanding, chill factors and associated avoidance behaviours can also manifest themselves in less direct ways. As previously observed, memories of violent incidents during the Troubles are interwoven in the physical fabric of Belfast through plaques and other memory markers, including derelict houses and even bullet holes from firefights. Thus one may speak of violent geographies of space that may assume a particular significance for residents, whether as places of remembrance (as seen in the previous chapter) or as places to avoid. Indeed, even though murders may have been committed many decades ago, their occurrence may continue to influence spatial behavior down to the present day among generations who had no direct memory of their occurrence.
From the Protestant housing estate of Springmartin, Johnny explained how neighbours from his area would, even today, not walk down a particular side of the road which is bounded by a peace wall separating it from Catholic Ballymurphy. He attributed this avoidance to two killings which took place there in May 1972:

If you see someone walking down the left side of the road, you can guarantee they are not from the area. Before the wall was there, there used to be a steel fence and two guys got shot dead [next to it]. So it just became normal not to walk on that side of the road … my mammy didn’t walk on that side of the road so I didn’t either. Even my kids, I’m sure, have never walked on that side of the road. They have heard about it [the shootings], they’ve never been told not to [walk there], but we just generally don’t do it.

From this account, while there could also be other reasons, it would seem that memory of a violent incident nearly half-a-century ago has been transmitted through three generations. In this case, it would appear that proximity to the Catholic area incurred danger which forced residents to keep a physical distance by keeping to the farther side of the road. This behaviour then became “routinized” over time with children taking the same route as their parents as adults – this even though the subsequent construction of a high wall largely obviated concerns to personal safety regardless of the side of the road one walked. This also reminds us that even if border regimes are revised or disappear, there may continue to exist “phantom borders” and their memories which exercise social power (Hurd, Donnan, Leutloff-Grandits 2017: 3).

**Border Crossing**

Yet if individuals are not passive agents of their environs but also act to shape and give them meaning, it stands to reason that they are not merely hostages to memory and structures of fear. Therefore the salience of boundaries can also be deconstructed by the actions and behaviours that individuals undertake. With a diminution in the “chill factor” as intercommunal violence has receded in recent years, many of my informants related to me that they felt less fear in crossing borders or visiting “other” neighborhoods to go shopping.

Such a change in behavior was demonstrated by Rosalin, who I met in a café on the Antrim Road where she worked. Living in Ardoyne, an area often characterized as staunchly Republican, walking east to the Antrim Road entailed taking a convoluted zig-zag route that avoided the Protestant areas of Lower Oldpark and Lower Shankill on the Crumlin Road.
“She’s a Westie, not a Northerner like us!” two girls, also working in the café, humorously intervened, curious about my questions. In her early 40s, it was not until just four years ago that Rosalin started walking the shorter, more direct route down the Crumlin Road. Asking her what had changed, she explained that, “things seem to have normalized” and that because other people from her area were walking that way, she felt emboldened to do the same having overcome her initial fear. Her mother, however, still refused to go down the road even using a taxi; her husband had been shot dead during the Troubles. Changing her walking route to work also meant that she had started visiting what she called a “Protestant bakery” on the Crumlin Road.

But in spite of this change in her spatial behaviour, she was still careful to adopt certain avoidance strategies when going into Protestant areas and shops. Accordingly, she demonstrated to me covering up her necklace – a Celtic cross – as well as turning her ring the other way round, which also had a Celtic symbol. Such jewellery, in addition to clothing, would easily betray her as a Catholic. Herein we can see the performative aspect of bodily experiences of border crossing (Hurd et al. 2017: 18-19). Rosalin’s behavior could also be described as being conversant with “street etiquette,” which Anderson defines as “a set of informal rules [which] allow members of diverse groups orderly passage with the promise of security, or at least a minimum of trouble and conflict” (1990: 210). It was nevertheless clear that certain areas or activities were still off-limits. Despite living just a few minutes’ walk away, she had only visited the Shankill on two occasions and would “never go to a pub or a party there.” I asked whether she would go for a haircut there, to which she replied laughing, “you mean get your head cut off!”

**Alex Park**

As Bernard cautions (2011: 306), it is important to not to simply take at face value what people say they do, but that direct observation can also reveal what people *actually* do. It was thus on several afternoons that I found myself in Alexandra Park, or “the Alex” as most locals call it, close by to my accommodation to observe how people used the park and experienced border crossing.

For much of the period of the Troubles, the park had been undivided. However, a local resident explained to me how in 1994 following the IRA ceasefire, a fence had been erected by security services after what he called “daily running battles.” While political movement was
being made in resolving the conflict, this did not necessarily trickle down to local communities where relations often worsened with fear and distrust, stoked by paramilitaries and anti-peace process politicians, at the unfolding developments. The park thus came to be divided into two parts, with one side used primarily by residents of the Protestant areas of Tigers Bay and Mountcollyer, while the other side was used by residents of the mainly Catholic area of Newington. Only 15 years later in 2009, after cross-community consultations, was a gate finally put in the fence, allowing residents to directly access the other side of the park during the daytime; it remains locked at night.

Investment in gardening and building paths meant that when I visited, the park was an attractive green space, except for the ugly metal fence, overgrown with ivy and in places scrawled with colourful graffiti, which continued to divide the park. In the middle, in a noticeable dip surrounded by higher ground, was a large industrial steel gate in the fence topped by spikes. KAT graffiti had been scrawled on it in a black marker pen, only to have been whitewashed out on a subsequent visit. I also on several occasions witnessed police or city council staff patrolling around the gate monitoring for any anti-social behaviour such as teenage drinking.

The Newington side of the park was much larger in terms of area, while the park closer to the Protestant housing areas was narrow and had a litter-strewn stream coursing through it, albeit attractively lined by trees. A bridge crossed the stream with a mural depicting children laughing and playing together with the words, “On sunny days, all communities used the Alex. My family would meet up with friends to listen to the music and the gardens had beautiful flowers. Bring back those days.” Today there are separate children’s playgrounds, though plans were underway to build a joint playground close to the top of the dividing fence.

Walking round both sides of the park, or else sitting on a nearby bench, allowed me to observe people coming from Tigers Bay and Mountcollyer, crossing the gated interface, and coming back with shopping bags from the Tesco’s supermarket on the far side of the park. Others were walking dogs and accessing both sides, though not necessarily interacting with anyone. Others still, particularly teenagers, would stop short of the gate, those on the Newington side occasionally looking down from a small rise over the fence. Despite witnessing several groups of children and teenagers on both sides, no one actually crossed through the gate; though most seemed curious to see if anyone was on the other side. Nevertheless, those crossing the interface seemed to be in the minority. Many more, especially on the Catholic side,
Forss

used the park as a short-cut, for picnicking, for playing football, or other activities. As such, I observed fewer people coming from the Newington side and using the other side of the park. Noteworthy was that on both sides were paved routes that allowed one to walk a loop through the separate parts of the park without having to cross through the gate. Deciding that it wasn’t enough to simply observe, however, I also conducted several short street survey intercepts (Bernard 2011: 123) to gauge people’s attitudes and use of the park.

A young boy of 11 or 12 hanging out together with two friends near the gate. When I asked him if it was safe to go through, he answered:

“Yeah, it’s safe to go there but I don’t go there. Because I’m Catholic and that’s Protestant.”

An older woman with two dogs coming through the gate from the Protestant side, walking a loop through the Catholic part, before returning through the gate:

“I come here every day. I walk wherever I want, I’m not scared. There’s no reason today for the wall to exist.”

A man in his 40s or early 50s walking his dog. He stopped short at the gate from the Protestant side and turned around:

“I’m quite happy to go through the gate, no problem ... there was a time you wouldn’t have gone through but now it’s much better. But in the summer, if it’s good weather, the [Catholic] youths sit on the top of the hill in their football tops and shout abuse.”

A man in his early 50s with a small child who also stopped short of the gate on the Protestant side and turned round:

“I used to cross the park to do my shopping in Tesco’s, but I wouldn’t come through the park after dinnertime. It’s not necessarily sectarian. It’s just anti-social behavior shit. The gate looks like a Danish fortress. It makes it look like an object worth fighting for.”

A woman with her two children at the playground on the Newington side of the park:

“I don’t use the other playground because this one is closer to me. If they built a shared playground I would bring my kids there.”

The time constraints of doing such intercepts, the high degree of reactivity, and the possible factor of social desirability, meant that I could not delve deeper into their spatial
behaviour. The above observations are therefore unsatisfactory and impossible to generalize from. However, this “messiness” probably simply reflects the nature of the field site which the anthropologist encounters. Yet it is clear that people do engage in border crossing for a variety of reasons – to go shopping, to walk the dog, and so on – just as there are those who may not.

**Understanding the Border**

In so doing, would-be border crossers have to negotiate not only the borders themselves but, perhaps more importantly, the practices, memories, and narratives that distinguish and define the time-spaces they enclose (Hurd et al. 2017: 1-3). These, in turn, may be informed by any number of factors including age, gender, political and sectarian attitude, and personal memory.27

Notwithstanding, as Jansen (2013: 34) argues, it is important not to overemphasize too much the meaning, representation, or intention attached to border crossing. While there might be a temptation to see this as a conscious and deliberate act of defiance at structures of control and oppression – which indeed it might in the case of the abovementioned woman who answered that she “walked where she liked” – we need also to acknowledge what Jansen calls the “suburban workings of government, provision, and consumption” (Ibid.) In other words, the person crossing the gate to go shopping in Tesco’s may be engaged less in seeking to undermine the salience of a border, than fulfilling his or her instrumental needs by going to the closest available supermarket or driving to get to work by the shortest route possible. In so doing, furthermore, they may have little recourse for reflection on the significance of such crossing, nor indeed interact in any meaningful way with members of the community on the “other side.”

This then hints at a further issue – that is, the border as an analytical construct may be fallible in that the planner’s, local government’s, or even scholar’s understanding of a “border” does not find cognitive coherence in those who experience it. Thus as Barth (2000: 30-31) argues,

We need to distinguish between the cognitive premises that construct the boundary … and the sociology of people living there and acting around that boundary and

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27 Casual observations and conversations gave me the impression that women were more likely to engage in border crossing than men. While intriguing this is not grounded in rigorous empirical observation, so I prefer not to speculate if and why this might be true.
thereby shaping an outcome. Those contingencies produce the effects from which people in turn reconceptualise boundaries.

Accordingly, whereas one person might perceive a boundary that cannot or should not be crossed, thereby reinforcing such a function and significance in his or her head, another person might hardly notice its relevance as a border and cross it with relative impunity. Thus to reiterate Barth (2000: 23), boundaries might indeed be useful albeit abstract metaphors for division, but other lives may “create other images and schemas.” Indeed, one informant emphasized that he saw the peace wall next to his house as more part of his back garden wall than a barrier designed to enclose or divide; and which, in any case, did not prevent him from maintaining relations with individuals from the neighbourhood on the other side of it.

In sum, in line with Green’s argument (2012: 579-580), we can see that borders and boundaries are not just inert objects but are active human practices, relations, as well as the projections of imaginations and fears. But if everyone is involved to varying degrees in such borderwork, whether consciously or not, then so too there are agents more deliberately engaged in modifying and reshaping borders – to which the next chapter turns.
6. It Was Like World War Three

It was mid-afternoon one damp, cold January day when I first walked down the Limestone Road in North Belfast, early on in my fieldwork. It appeared unremarkable – the wide road lined by houses, shops, a school, and church, much like any other street. Catching my eye, however, were the election posters fastened to almost every lamppost. Regional elections to the Stormont Assembly had been triggered by Sinn Fein’s collapsing of the power-sharing executive over the Democratic Unionist Party’s (DUP) alleged corrupt handling of a renewable energy scheme. As I walked down the road, the green posters of Sinn Fein above my head bore the slogans, “Stand against corruption,” “Equality, Integrity and Respect for All,” and another written in Irish, “Comhionnanis anois!” (Equality now!) While Sinn Fein accused the DUP of disrespect, the latter in turn blamed Sinn Fein of electoral opportunism in bringing down the power-sharing arrangement.

The mood among many was weary. “I just hope people don’t vote green-orange,” a taxi driver had told me somewhat pessimistically. Furthermore, despite a recent generational change in political leadership with two women leaders, Michelle O’Neill and Arlene Foster, of Sinn Fein and the DUP with no previous paramilitary connections, the editorial in The Belfast Telegraph (January 27, 2017) thundered, “Tribalism will always trump gender here, so rise of Foster and O’Neill not dawn of new era.” Tucked away on the letters page, meanwhile, was an impassioned letter by an Arnold Carton, which argued for a focus on issues over identity: “Too many of us, especially the young, first-time voters, feel forgotten and ignored. We don’t feel the politicians represent us … we can vote for the smaller parties that want to change society and move away from past failures” (Ibid.)

It was with the election in mind when I noticed that the placards had come to an abrupt halt, before resuming again a hundred metres further down the road; except this time they were for the DUP, photos of the party’s candidate for the constituency framed by the colours of the Union Jack, albeit without any accompanying slogan. Somewhat curiously, in the space in between, election posters were conspicuously absent. Instead, five CCTV cameras, spaced several metres apart, were mounted on tall metal posts, which had been painted in vivid colours depicting flowers and animals. These stood in front of a modern-looking redbrick apartment
block, while situated next door was a primary school. Directly opposite, on the other side of the road, was a large derelict house overgrown with weeds and showing signs of considerable fire damage.

A middle-aged man in a bright yellow vest with the logo of Belfast City Council was picking up litter nearby. Informing me that this was an interface area, he pointed over to the other side of the road and informed me, “that’s Protestant over there,” referring to the neighbourhood of Tigers Bay, and “this is Catholic,” denoting Newington. The apartment block “is mixed,” he said. Asking him why there were CCTV cameras, he replied, “Because there’s always been fighting here. It was like World War Three! It’s much better now though.” Later I would find out that the Limestone interface had been considered one of the most notorious interfaces in Belfast for violence.

While newspaper reports should be read with caution due to potential biases, they nonetheless provide some understanding of how violent incidents on the interface occurred. Thus, on April 14, 1997, *The Belfast Telegraph* reported that:

Eight Catholic families were forced out of their homes after rival gangs clashed in the Limestone Road area on Saturday night. Early today, RUC [Royal Ulster Constabulary] officers came under attack for the second night running as they clashed with a loyalist mob. Two men were arrested during the clashes. Unionist and nationalist politicians warned that worse violence could come as the marching season reaches its peak …

In another account from March 25, 2002, it was reported:

In a separate incident at the weekend, a woman in her 30s was treated for an eye injury and numerous superficial facial injuries. Four police officers also suffered minor injuries in the sectarian violence, which flared up in the Limestone Road area at around 3pm on Saturday … The disturbances involved around two groups of around 100 people each.

**“Softening” the Border**

After 2007, however, there are notably fewer newspaper reports of violent incidents on the interface. Concomitant with the decrease in violence, furthermore, has been a significant
change in the material appearance of the interface and its immediate surrounding area. Using Google Streetview allows one to track the changes that have taken place.

Whereas in 2008 there had been a permanently closed roadblock on a nearby street, this had been opened by 2012, and fully removed by 2015. A Protestant primary school in the vicinity had had metal grills fixed over all its windows in 2008. These too had been removed by 2015, however. And while the CCTV camera posts were still present as of May 2017, as previously noted they had recently been painted in bright colours as part of a project by a local youth club to detract from their somewhat ominous presence. These examples point to a certain de-securitization process in either dismantling or softening the physical security features of the interface.

Investment had also gone into new housing on and around the interface. In 2008, images display a row of empty houses on the Tigers Bay side of the interface, which are boarded up with their roofs showing damage, possibly by petrol bombs. A similar story is described with uninhabited houses on the Newington side, including an abandoned former newsagents daubed with sectarian graffiti. Furthermore, images show the nowadays “mixed” apartment block described above as still under construction, its windows fitted with grills and its base surrounded by fencing. Whereas the impression is of depopulation and vandalism, by the time of my research it had been significantly redeveloped and occupied by new tenants.

What is more, there would appear to be fewer markers of ethnic space around the interface. While a Union Jack had been visibly flying from the first lamppost at the entrance to Tigers Bay in May 2014, this had gone by the time of my field research, in addition to the kerbstones painted in red, white, and blue. Another, Republican flag, flying around the corner from the entrance to Newington Street in June 2016, had also been taken down. Much of the sectarian graffiti visible in images from 2008 was also either gone, or else had been whitewashed out nearly a decade later.29

28 Known as “run throughs,” certain streets allowed would-be perpetrators to easily escape by car after an attack back into their own areas, hence the installation of a roadblock.
29 It should be noted, however, that such symbols can be temporal, such as coinciding with parades or other important events.
Sharing a Vision

None of these changes could be regarded as having coincidentally manifested themselves. Wanting to understand further how the interface had changed, I met with Rori from a local cross-community organization, one of whose slogans was, “Encouraging contact, dialogue and reconciliation between Protestant[s] and Nationalists in interface areas.”

He explained how 2006-2007 was a key turning point on the Limestone interface. Whereas there had been six serious incidents of conflict on the interface in 2006, the following summer there were just six minor incidents. Rori:

A lot of the violence on the interface was emanating from the loyalist area [Tigers Bay], and the leadership within loyalism at that time were quite happy for it to happen, encouraged it, and orchestrated a lot of it. But that leadership changed and the new guy who came in had a totally different approach, mind-set, he was progressive, he saw the benefits for the community of working together. At the same time there was a guy in the New Lodge, a senior republican, well respected in the area, shared that vision. And we also had a police officer who was willing to take chances, to take risks, and support the work that was going on. So we had those three guys meeting and that kind of gave permission for other people to then get involved.

Accordingly, Rori’s description above shows the importance of key individuals, with a requisite degree of influence over their respective neighbourhoods, and their disposition towards the peace process. Such leaders helped set the tone and agenda for cross-community relations and initiatives to develop, giving confidence to other community members to participate. Such individuals also took large personal risks in doing so, however, with Rori recounting pipe bombs thrown at certain individuals’ houses, their cars burnt, or other acts of intimidation by small, typically criminal groupings opposed to any “normalization.”

The above therefore shows the significance of local political relations between communities. As Belfast ethnographer Kenney writes (1991: 78), “political processes reflecting integration and division operate on the micro-level of the urban neighborhood.” However, it would be false to view such processes as operating in a vacuum divorced from broader political and socio-economic developments which impinge on the local (Donnan and Wilson, 1999: 25). Thus, as Rori also asserted, a significant turning point was in 2007 when

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30 The organization included, among others, representatives of local youth clubs, residents’ groups, housing associations, as well as statutory partners representing official bodies such as the Department of Justice, the Police Service of Northern Ireland, and Belfast City Council.
Sinn Fein officially recognized the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), sanctioning nationalist communities, for the first time, to directly engage with the police. Thus a combination of community leadership (the right people) facilitated by the political environment (the right time) allowed cross-community partnerships to be formed and trust built.

In turn, this process of relationship-building allowed discussion of removal of barriers and other material changes at the interface to occur. For Rori’s group this involved a cross-section of stakeholders sitting around the table and discussing what could be done, knocking on people’s doors, and conducting surveys, such as gauging local opinion on the removal of the roadblock as well as consulting with the relevant statutory body in charge. This process of consultation allowed fears to be gradually allayed and a sense of local cross-community ownership instilled regarding changes subsequently introduced.

Here we may ascribe significance to what Mack (2014: 157) calls urban design from below in which “users,” that is members of the surrounding community, becomes “makers” in actively intervening in the built environment. In so doing, there is a dialectic – and negotiation – between the needs and intentions of security interests and organs to maintain order on the interface, and those of local residents wishing to reshape and reimage it according to their spatial needs and desires. Removing the roadblock and painting the CCTV cameras therefore constitute ways of modifying a “technical landscape of control and surveillance” into a bordering that permits greater openness and, through the use of children’s artwork, a form of emotional bordering that seeks to downplay its securitization (Rumford 2011: 63).

Managing the Border

Notwithstanding the above, the interface by virtue of its buffering of two different neighbourhood communities still retains a potential for violence. Thus maintaining peace at the border has to be actively managed, especially during periods of tension such as parades or protests at political developments, such as the flag protests in 2012-13 when Unionists demonstrated against a resolution which restricted the flying of the British flag on Belfast City Hall to a limited number of days a year.

Managing the interface thus involves a network of activists who enforce what can be termed informal social control mechanisms (Drakulich and Crutchfield 2013: 383-85). While these may also be enacted in cooperation with the police force, such practices do not necessarily find any legal basis as such. Especially during the early days when there was more violence on
the interface, Rori described how adults on both sides would take it upon themselves to stand on street corners on evenings late into the night, in order to prevent young people from gathering at the interface. On one occasion he recalled escorting a boy, who was about to let off some fireworks near the interface, to his parents. Indeed, many of my informants recounted how just a small incident, such as children “messing around,” could escalate if someone got hurt, bringing out adults to confront or defend the said perpetrator. A significant change too was the introduction of mobile phones with activists exchanging numbers with each other. This allowed such activists to relay information in real time to warn each other if they foresaw potential for a serious incident developing and to take actions to prevent it.

A further concrete example of what can be called “self-policing” is shown in the following incident related to me by Connell, who worked for a local housing association:

One of the new houses [showing a map] … when Celtic and Rangers played, I got a phone call on a Sunday that somebody put a tricolour [Irish flag] out on one of these houses … it was a community rep who went and asked him to remove the flag, respectfully asked him can you remove the flag. He didn’t even realise, he came from another part of the city, didn’t even realise the issue he had caused, shocked, embarrassed, took it down immediately, apologized to everyone all-round. But we had twice as many calls from people from the nationalist community as we did from the unionist community … so people are policing their own areas and saying look … so there’s a degree of sensitivity.

That the interface has also been “repopulated” with new housing developments means that there are more stakeholders with greater incentive in not sustaining material damage from any violent incident. In this regard, it is necessary to note that interface violence may often be perpetrated by co-ethnic “outsiders” with a greater degree of anonymity, and for whom there is less risk of material damage, as they do not live in the interface communities in question.

In addition, efforts have also been undertaken to turn the interface into a more positively charged space with the opportunities for positive mutual interactions between both communities. Organized by the cross-community organization in question, “fun days” involving food stalls and activities have been held on local interfaces before contentious parades so as to help alleviate tensions building up in the days beforehand. Other events have had a more overt peacebuilding agenda such as commemorating the international day of peace on September 21. As such, as Barth (2000: 27-28) argues, there is a need to dispense with the
conventional view that boundaries automatically divide and distance neighbours. In this case, the interface has also to some extent provided a point of connection for positive social engagement both within and across the boundary.

For Connell, who grew up in the area and whose office is located close to the interface, he has witnessed a huge change. Before it was not possible to build a viable sustainable community around the interface with a high turnover of tenants, he stressed. But through what he called a “general reclamation of the area” there has been an underlying normalization of what the area represents with a “massive reduction in the fear factor” and increased connection between communities across the interface.

What I have noticed is that there is better connectivity between the two communities so in the past where wouldn’t have had people going from Tigers Bay to Tesco’s or people walking down the Limestone Road, now you’re seeing that … [Catholic parents] will even [cross the interface] and take their kids through Tigers Bay with their school uniforms on – now that is a huge dramatic symbol of how the times have changed.

**Conclusion**

The material and social changes witnessed on the Limestone interface clearly signify the importance of individuals and specific groups engaged in borderwork to modify its degree of borderness (Jansen 2013: 23). Accordingly, whereas previously it had been characterized by avoidance or violent encounters, its renegotiation has changed how agents maneuver and encounter each other. In turn, the social re-configuration of the border has contributed to changing, at least to some extent, the relational quality of the two communities, as demonstrated by people crossing the interface and coming together in that space in non-threatening interactions, such as celebrating fun days or other shared events. Nonetheless, as Balechard asserts (1994: xxxvi, 8), space carries with it the subjective histories it contains, and thus it may take years or generations even for it to be fully re-imagined. We cannot therefore take for granted that its gradual de-bordering is a linear process immune from the burden of fear and memory, as suggested by the “World War Three” remark by the city council worker in the beginning of this chapter.

Furthermore, while the Limestone does reflect or respond to broader dynamics, it is also a specific place that requires understanding on its own terms. Indeed, as Green (2012: 585-87)
Forss argues, borders “represent a coming together of people, places, things and ideas in historically, politically, economically and spatially specific ways.” Accordingly, the dozens of interfaces across Belfast share commonalities but also each display their own unique dynamics reflecting an evolving constellation of local personalities, histories, and political relations. That tensions have reduced at the Limestone interface, and that is has undergone a degree of spatial reimagining through its desecuritization, may or may not be replicated at other such border sites in the city.
7. It’s Too Soon to Bring the Wall Down

It was a sunny afternoon as I took a stroll around the peace wall dividing the Protestant estate of Hampton from the predominantly Catholic neighborhood of Newards. Walking down Broughton Street on the Newards side, with the wall directly in front of me, I stopped to chat with a middle-aged woman smoking on a bench outside her front door. She told me she had never been on the other side of the wall, and did not know anyone living there. She gave her opinion that she thought it was too soon to bring the wall down: “I mean they still have their bonfires when they put all their flags up.” She suggested, however, that it could perhaps be reduced in height or made transparent. A man wearing a Manchester United top joined the conversation, saying that he would like to see a gate put in the wall so that he could access the park on the other side. Asking what was preventing bringing the wall down, he shrugged and simply replied “society,” without explaining further.

With the wall ahead blocking my way, I turned back and zig-zagged via several streets to Park Road. CCTV cameras testified that I found myself on an interface between the two neighbourhoods. On my left was a large, newish-looking building complete with astro-turf playing fields on which a few boys were kicking a football around. Recently constructed with European Union funding as a designated shared space facility, it had formerly been site of a British military barracks. It was surrounded by see-through black wire fencing, though the gates to the complex were open. I didn’t realise then that the fence had in fact replaced part of the peace wall which had been recently knocked down, and that a roadblock had previously prevented vehicle access across the interface.

What remained of the wall started on the other side of the road, running for approximately 600-700 metres and roughly describing the shape of an “L” if seen from the air. Following its course, I entered a thin strip of grassy land, a few metres wide, wedged in between the 3-4 metre wall painted light blue, and another, lower brick wall separating it from the backs of several houses. CIRA and other graffiti was scrawled on the walls, the space in-between

31 For reasons of sensitivity, in addition to using pseudonyms for interviewees, I have also given fictional names to places mentioned in this chapter. They are nonetheless real.
32 Continuity IRA. Formed as a splinter group of the Provisional IRA in 1986 and opposed to the Good Friday Agreement.
Forss

strewn with rubbish and debris. Close by to the community centre, I met a woman working at the centre who told me that they were building some container cabins for men’s sheds and allotment beds. She hoped that this section of the wall would have a transparent fence so that the Protestants on the other side would see “what they were doing” and also want to buy into it. Noticing that part of the wall was burnt, she related how it was the result of a bonfire the previous year to commemorate the anniversary of internment without trial.³³ She looked disconcertingly at the wooden pallets in preparation for the allotment beds, hoping that they too would not be burnt. Moving on, the corrugated steel wall transitioned to a mixed brick wall topped by a wire fence, some eight metres high, running along the backyards of a row of terraced houses on the Newards side. I continued to follow it as it looped around the estate as far as Green Street, representing the boundary of Newards.

I then turned left, past several houses with their windows covered by metal grills, and entered via a narrow passageway into Hampton itself. Immediately noticeable were the tethered, tatty remains of Union Jacks fluttering from the lampposts. More conspicuous still were paramilitary emblems consisting of plaques and flags. Abutting the wall was an area of wasteground with a stack of wooden pallets being assembled for a bonfire. “Police No Go Zone” had been sprayed on the wall in large white letters together with the letters “UDA.” A larger park-like space, absent of houses, occupied the north of the estate together with a fenced-in children’s playground. (It was here where houses had been demolished to make way for the wall). In front of the wall was another tall, see-through fence, which enclosed a ten-metre wide strip of what appeared to be a kind of buffering space; it would take a strong arm to throw anything heavy over such as a brick.

It was nevertheless striking just how close the backs of the houses on the Newards side were to the wall. Just metres away, I watched as a topless, ginger-haired boy brushed his teeth in the upstairs bathroom, half leaning out the window covered by a protective metal grill. He seemed not to notice me staring at him from the other side of the wall, though he would have had a clear view of much of the estate. Minutes before, I had been walking past the front of his house.

Close by I entered into conversation with a forty-something man standing outside his house. I recognized popular loyalist songs blaring out on the stereo inside his living room

³³ Internment (or imprisonment) without trial was introduced by the British government in 1971 to incarcerate those suspected of paramilitary involvement. Many innocent civilians were also caught up in the operation. It fuelled much grievance against the British state and military.
including the words “Battle of the Boyne.” He related to me that he had a metal plate in his skull, explaining that many people in the area had lost their lives when a loyalist feud broke out between the UVF and UDA in the early 2000s. I pointed over to the wall and asked him why he thought it was there. “The wall’s there for a reason,” he answered, “it keeps the thugs and gangsters out. I think they should block the road off, but then how would people get to work? They’d have to drive down the [Skelton] Road.” He proceeded to argue, “there would be war if they take it down,” before qualifying, “well not war, but you know.” Taking my leave, he cautioned that it was safer to leave from the back of the estate rather than be seen crossing the interface – advice I duly ignored.

Later I would ponder on Lofranco’s metaphor of the border as a “moral line” (2017: 45), where those on the other side could be perceived as morally to blame for violence. Indeed, a vernacular of “Sinn Fein terrorists and their supporters,” “murderers,” and “it was them that started the violence,” seemed to liberally pepper the local Unionist newspapers as well as comments under social media posts. And while more mainstream Unionist papers in their obituaries emphasized Martin McGuinness’s path from warmonger to peacemaker, harder-edged opinion unremittingly referred to him as the “Butcher from the Bogside” for his role in IRA violence. Meanwhile, a stereotyping was also at play in nationalist areas where those on the other side were seen as “sectarian,” “hostile,” and “unwelcoming,” and their parades “triumphalist.” According to Eriksen (2015: 332-34), such stereotyping functions as a tool of social classification that may strengthen group cohesion, self-identity, as well ethnic boundaries. In the popular narratives of both communities, therefore, both sought to assert their own moral high ground embodied in the physical structures dividing them.

Yet reflecting on our conversation, I found it hard to square his sense of fear with the freedom I personally felt to cross boundaries and walk with ease between the two estates. Furthermore, symbols aside, they appeared remarkably similar in terms of housing and the everyday street scenes witnessed, such as young mothers pushing prams, men mowing their front lawns, or youths riding their BMXs down the street. Beyond the physical materiality of the wall and fences, and the sense of enclosure afforded by it, there was little to indicate to an outsider an atmosphere of tension or objective danger. In fact, it almost seemed banal. The following questions circulated in my mind. What were the societal structures that kept the wall

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34 The Battle of the Boyne refers to the battle between the Protestant Dutch Prince William of Orange and Catholic King James II in 1690, which took place in Ireland, and in which William emerged victorious. The victory is memorialized on several murals in Protestant neighbourhoods.
in place? Why was it too soon to bring the wall down? And who were the “spoilers” and associated attitudes resisting change?

**The Wall Goes Up**

A couple of weeks later, I arranged separate interviews with two community workers, Ciaran and Alice, from Newards and Hampton, respectively. Both had lived their entire adult lives within the two neighbourhoods, and were involved in cross-community initiatives.

On the origins of the wall, Ciaran remembered it going up in the mid-1980s during a period of considerable tensions:

The housing stock on both sides where the wall is now was all old, a lot of it was derelict … it was like a no man’s land … When they built new houses, they built them first on the Protestant side and as that worked its way down to where the wall is now, they actually built them, without consulting people, back to back with the Catholic houses with no barrier between them. It didn’t work. People started attacking each other’s houses with petrol bombs, blast bombs, pipe bombs, bricks, stones, and paint. They had made a blunder … and [so] they built a dividing wall.

Alice:

I remember going down [Broughton] Street to go to primary school. And then it all stopped [the wall blocked the road]. I remember they built new houses in [Hampton] back to back with the nationalist houses … and in a matter of time the missiles started going back and forth.

While the conflict had already exacerbated division without the wall, with people moving away from more “mixed” streets to majority single-identity neighbourhoods, the wall’s construction more formally reinforced segregation. Both Alice and Ciaran characterized levels of interaction between the two communities as having been “very low” over the decades since until quite recently. It was clear, however, that it was not the wall in itself – although a contributing factor – that had prevented such exchanges; and nor did it represent an impermeable barrier to relationship-building *around* the wall at different levels.

Ciaran talked about the early days of when he initiated attempts to build relations and the obstacles encountered:
As an interface worker I had tried to make contact with [Hampton]. Difficult, because it was sort of reactive and I wanted to make it proactive. Not waiting for [managing] the next incident but trying to prevent it … One of my colleagues was interested in regeneration and he was trying to talk to them about building an enterprise centre together. We were way ahead on that and they just said, ‘you want to take over our land?’ That’s the type of fear that you had to overcome.

It took a number of years … by 2007 I had convinced a number of people in [Hampton] to go to a hotel … [through a neutral] facilitator and sit down and talk and chat about what we thought were the issues … After two days everyone shook my hand and said thanks, brilliant what you’re trying to do. The problem that happened then was that there was a contentious march over in West Belfast and all hell broke loose … loyalists were saying anyone caught talking to a nationalist or Republican would be hung from a lamppost … the first engagement fell apart because they were under too much pressure.

For her part, Alice stressed the pro-active role of women in early cross-community initiatives:

We actually devised a programme called Neighbours Over the Wall. And it’s Protestant and Catholic ladies. And we did tours of each other’s communities. One lady [from Newards] did a barbecue for us. So there are relationships built up. But there are people frightened to move on, not ready to move on, others who are willing to move on.

Nevertheless, the building of such relationships over the wall allowed discussion to move on to mutually addressing the physical barriers dividing the two communities, including repainting the wall and even dismantling part of it.

Ciaran:

Once the issues over the interface had calmed down, we put a peace walls project together … It has helped us to engage with youth and women’s groups on both sides … We have changed a lot of wee bits, eyesores, such as repainting the wall from a shitty yellow to sky blue … It took both sides of the community to agree … It took a lot harder to agree to take down the barrier on […] Avenue but we got that too. We’ve now got people saying ‘this is great’ on both sides … but we still need to constantly reassure people.
Alice too stressed the positive developments that had taken place, including removing a section of solid wall and replacing it with a wire fence:

Having that transparent fence, you can now see the hills and the cranes of the city. It was beautiful. Because before you would not see nowt. Just cladding and cladding. You didn’t realise what was beyond there … you’ve now got increased footfall between communities.

In this context, we can see how the repainting of the wall from “shitty yellow” to “sky blue” and the wire fence replacing impervious cladding represent metaphors for openness contraposed to enclosure. While the objects of practices, that is, they were agreed on and enacted by community members, it is necessary to note the growing anthropological debate that seeks to posit how “things” also exert agency (e.g. Latour 1996, Jansen 2013). Accordingly, the materiality of things by virtue of their design may directly or indirectly impinge on how individuals perceive and interact with their surroundings. In hindsight, greater focus on how other informants received such “design work” in the intersection of objects and concepts would have represented an interesting avenue of inquiry.

Attitudinal Barriers

In spite of the aforementioned changes made, both Ciaran and Alice pointed out resistance to efforts to further transform and potentially demolish the entire wall.

Ciaran:

A lot of people don’t want the wall down because there is less likelihood of me being burned out, less likelihood of someone coming over, you know … you have every kind of attitude from yes, ‘bring it down’, to ‘never’. But I think that more people would like to see it come down sometime … But they are not going to come down by 2023. So what’s the process that needs to be started? First you need to get people prepared for the idea. Then you need to start with the low-hanging fruit ... To me the emphasis should be on what can you change in the short term ... If you take away the walls without building the relationships, you’re a fool as you’ll just end up building it again.

Alice:
When people talk about the walls coming down, people went mad, because they see it as protection, especially in the Protestant community … It’s still volatile. I’d get my house attacked a couple of times a month by [people] throwing stones. We had a fun day on Saturday and people came up from the nationalist community and they were spitting on the kids … another group came towards the end and verbal and sectarian abuse we got from the kids aged 11 to 13. Pretend shooting with machine guns and talking about we’ll get the INLA up for you and talking about the Shankill bombers. What kids at that age know unless they are hearing it from their homes? This is a scary thing when we are trying to be inclusive. So we wanted the fencing put up. We are not ready for that open access at the moment.

**Role of Paramilitaries**

I was keen to learn about the influence of paramilitaries in community decision-making and cross-community initiatives, particularly in regard to the wall and bringing down barriers. However, this was also a sensitive topic and I did not want to put my respondents in an uncomfortable position, especially as I was recording their answers.

Nonetheless, Ciaran seemed much more assertive and adamant in his answer:

I can only talk for my community. I don’t have to answer for anyone. I have nobody coming up to me, political or paramilitary, and saying, ‘there you need to watch what you’re doing’, or ‘you need to stop that, you can’t do that.’ I’ll take my direction from the residents … It’s not like that in [Hampton]. The manager [there] told me, ‘if I allowed you to take that wall down, I’d be hung from a lamppost.’ If that’s what I had to answer to I wouldn’t be doing it.

Alice appeared to be much more reticent, talking quickly and almost in a whisper. On the way to the interview, I had noticed what looked like a brand-new paramilitary flag flying directly opposite to the centre where she worked.

Only up until two years we wouldn’t have had any paramilitary murals or trappings [such as flags]. But now as you drive down here there are three. And you get them up outside your door and you can’t take them down … For us as a centre, we have had challenges, we have had intimidation from sources. We don’t have that in the association. That’s why we don’t have [not understandable] men’s group coming in, we’re focused more on the, well not on the women, but the men have to come in for the right reasons, you know. There was an incident a couple of years ago, they wanted in, to take over the centre. Very, very challenging times. Saying that, there
is a lot of people who have a paramilitary background as community workers who are doing a very good role. It can be both.

Noteworthy in the above incident is how specific buildings, in this case the community centre, possess a symbolic power through their representative function. Thus, the attempt to take over the centre can be seen as seeking to wrest control over the community.

**Fear of Community Disappearing**

Through the course of my interviews, I became struck by the relative difference in tone and emphasis between Ciaran and Alice. While both were very different personalities, it was obvious that Ciaran seemed more proactive and talked enthusiastically about joint regeneration, and the need for peace and reconciliation. He seemed even, on occasion, a little frustrated with what he perceived as the averseness and suspicion to change among some in Hampton. Alice, by comparison, seemed more guarded in her answers and more hesitant when I brought up the topic of taking further measures to bring down the wall. Instead, she emphasized more the needs for her own community such as new housing, tackling drug problems, employment for young people, and mental health issues. Bollens (2012: 67-68) has also noted a similar divergence in narratives in relation to the “different realities” between Protestant and Catholic communities in Belfast.

Ciaran stressed his perception that nationalist communities, including Newards, had “greater self-confidence” and that the “days of them being threatened or disappearing are gone.” He explained further:

You have a Catholic/nationalist community in [Newards] who have been fairly settled for the last 20, 30 years. A lot of [Hampton] had internal feuding within the UDA … there was a lot of damage done and created a lot of bad feeling. So they have a big fear factor there and they have lost a lot of their community, and we wouldn’t have that same problem … They have no real leaders there who know where they are going with confidence.

Alice:

Some community reps are saying, we’ll put a gate in [the wall]. That’s not an option at the moment. This community is not ready for that type of thing. They are not ready for the wall to come down in [Broughton Street] and have free access. And
it’s probably not going to happen in my lifetime because the fear is still there with this community because they talk about [Weston]. [Weston] was a small Protestant enclave. I don’t like using that scenario. But it did happen. There was a bit of ethnic cleansing. And there was fear that we are going to be the next [Weston].

**Political Context**

The micro-dynamics of relationship building around the wall cannot be divorced from the wider political context. During my fieldwork, the power-sharing agreement had collapsed amidst much acrimony between the main nationalist and unionist parties. While Alice would not be drawn on the subject, Ciaran acknowledged that the political uncertainty had led to a hardening of attitudes. In his opinion, the 2023 goal for bringing down the peace walls had mostly been paid lip service to:

Here is the irony of 2023. McGuinness and Robinson [former Republican and Unionist leaders] come out with a statement that we’re going to remove barriers by 2023. They have no plan of action to do it … to create the conditions. You are asking us as individual workers to go to residents and ask them would you consider taking that barrier down behind your house. But the reality is, the local politicians are walking round and not saying to them, ‘you should listen to your community workers’ … where’s the political endorsement for it? I’ve never heard one DUP [politician] say they endorse walls coming down, and yet it is their minister who endorsed it … While that uncertainty in Stormont is there, there is no chance. If they had a proper partnership based on equality a lot more people would buy into the idea that things are getting better.

**Resistance**

As Bernard cautions (2011: 339), the researcher needs to be careful of ascribing too much significance to the analyses of so-called prestigious informants. While both Ciaran and Alice seemed candid and well-versed with the opinions of their respective communities, their views cannot be held to be representative.

Nonetheless a few tentative observations can perhaps be put forward. The wall can be perceived of as a structure of fear based on both the lived memory of past violent events and, seen through this lens, the ever ready potential for such to recur again – magnified by the negative stereotyping of the “other” population or segments of it. Yet the significance of the wall as a security barrier to protect self and property applies especially to residents living
closest to the wall. For those living one or more streets away, the wall’s existence arguably becomes less relevant as they live further away from it and are buffered by other houses from their own neighborhood. (Indeed my landlady living just a couple of hundred metres away barely seemed aware of its existence). At the same time, however, it is not an impermeable border that serves to seal off communities, as demonstrated by Alice’s observation of witnessing increased footfall between the two estates. Cross-community consultation on repainting of the wall and its partial dismantlement also reflects a certain measure of confidence and safety that a harder security structure is not needed or desirable. Its status is thus being questioned or being diminished as violence and local tensions recede in favour of forging a new narrative for the future based on peaceful co-existence.

Yet as Paasi (2011: 62) argues, borders are “pools of emotions, fears and memories” that can be mobilized both for progressive and regressive purposes. As such, there would appear to be discernible differences between the two communities. Thus the wall is perceived in Hampton not just as a defensive security barrier, but arguably also as a “necessary” border to maintain community identity and control over a clearly delimited territorial space (Lofranco 2017: 54). Indeed as Green (2012: 577) also asserts, borders have a “classificatory logic [that] provide a means for grouping and distinguishing.” The blurring of boundaries through the removal of the wall could therefore be interpreted as a threat to the community’s coherence. This is furthermore exacerbated by the fact that Hampton is regarded as a vulnerable small Protestant enclave surrounded by larger Catholic neighborhoods. The same dynamics could also be in place if it were the other way around.

That many of the initiatives would appear to emanate, or are more proactively pursued by Newards, could be perceived, regardless of objective fact, as part of an agenda to gradually take control. Seen, furthermore, against the backdrop of political tensions, and a growing nationalist ascendancy both politically and demographically, the greater resistance can perhaps be explained by the continuity principle of Identity Process Theory (Murtagh, Gatersleben, Uzzell 2014), which contends that resistance can be strong and persistent if group goals are seen to be under threat. Indeed, Ciaran in a less scripted moment, shared his view that Protestants do not “run the show” anymore; rather that it is about running it together in terms of equality and rights. This can be counterposed to a more “zero-sum” opinion – by no means isolated – that I read by one commentator on the Facebook page of the DUP on the topic of resuming power-sharing talks:
No more concessions. Protestants/Unionists have seen the total demise of the RUC … orange parades prevented from exercising their democratic right to walk the Queens highway, orange halls attacked … our Protestant culture and heritage being demised day by day, hour by hour … do not give them an inch.

But while such resistance may correspond to present and future fears, it also has deeper roots. As such, it is quite common to hear the term “siege mentality” in regard to such Protestant resistance.\(^{35}\) As Clayton (1996: 82-83) writes in her study of settler ideologies, “it is the threatening nature of the existence of large numbers of Catholics and the well-founded fear engendered of their eventual dominance that creates the ‘siege mentality’ often observed in settler societies as well as in Northern Ireland.”\(^ {36}\) While this is probably a little overstated, such resistance nevertheless needs to be understood within the longer historical context of constituting a minority on the island of Ireland and whose political, economic, and cultural rights are perceived to be threatened under a unified Ireland. Scaling up, therefore, may arguably allow us to see the wall on the micro-level as embodying the partition of Ireland – the dissolution of which is necessary for a united Ireland, but, on the other hand, the maintenance of which is needed to retain Northern Ireland’s distinctness from the rest of Ireland and as part of the United Kingdom. Critics may brand such an analysis as a grand simplification yet, I would argue, it is not entirely without merit. Nevertheless, it does simplistically purport to categorize and so speak for the Unionist community as a whole.

In the case of Hampton, there would also seem to be a power structure or struggle between more regressive paramilitary-led elements and other more progressive community members favourable to greater engagement, but who are reluctant to go too far for fear of the latter. As Cohen (2000: 1) argues, “the social identity of a group may also be contested within the group itself, on grounds related to the cross-community interaction.” Thus we need to understand that the meaning of place and borders is created by certain people who have more power or influence over others to define what is allowable or not (Creswell: 2004: 27) – such as putting a gate in a wall. Accordingly, as much as the future of the wall is the subject of inter-community interaction and negotiation, it is also the object of “intracommunity disunity” and competition.

\(^{35}\) During the Troubles, prominent Unionist and Church leader Ian Paisley was famous for finishing his firebrand speeches with the words “No Surrender.” He later became First Minister in 2007 under the power-sharing arrangement established by the Good Friday Agreement with Martin McGuinness serving as Deputy First Minister.

\(^{36}\) Settler refers to the so-called “plantations” of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries when many thousands of Protestants from Scotland and England settled in the north of Ireland. Provisioned with land, they were expected to defend British crown interests.
in terms of exercising control over place and attendant narratives concerning its future (Shirlow and Murtagh 2006: 171).
Bearing the logos of community organizations, international donors, and local government offices, a rich literature of brochures and flyers is displayed in community centres and pushed through residents’ letter boxes in North Belfast, which urge residents to embrace a new future that transcends decades of sectarian strife and conflict. Browsing through these reveals slogans which include, among many others, “building relationships,” “sharing space,” establishing “a confident and thriving working class community,” “mutual benefit,” “making space for each other,” “change for the better,” “community participation,” and “shared future.” Residents of interface communities are challenged to “imagine a future without walls.” Images accompanying such slogans typically show smiling children, neighbours sitting around a table in conversation, and computer-generated images for proposals on the new use of space shared by all.

Promoted under the Belfast Peace IV Plan, with European Union funding, a key priority is what it calls “the creation of a more cohesive society through an increased provision of shared space and services.” This is further aligned with the priority of “the promotion of positive relations characterised by respect, and where cultural diversity celebrated and people can lie, learn and socialise together, free from prejudice, hate and intolerance.” According to the plan, the provision of shared public or civic space is seen to be instrumental to promoting inter-community relations as well as urban regeneration in redressing chronic deprivation and underinvestment.

The mobilization of a discourse of shared space therefore seeks to challenge and undermine notions of ethnic space and the existence of borders. In fact, it exhorts residents to reimagine their neighbourhood, to build confidence in travelling across the city, and cultivate a sense of belonging to the city as a whole – in effect to envision a borderless Belfast. By providing shared (and safe) civic spaces for cross-community interaction and engagement, it is

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37 Running until the end of 2021, the two other priorities highlighted by the plan include shared education and a focus on the needs of children and young people.
hoped that this will foster understanding, relationships, respect, and a reduction of fear (see e.g. *Making Space for Each Other* 2016).

Changing urban public space is thus seen as central to strategies of so-called conflict transformation in addressing the sociological roots of conflict (Komarova and O’Dowd 2016: 265-285). But while the promotion of shared space would appear conceptually and normatively appealing, a key question is whether it functions as its planners intend – that is, to change people’s attitudes as well as that of the relational quality between neighbourhoods by breaking down discreteness as people begin to share the same social worlds; and, furthermore, what the considerations and challenges are in creating and managing such spaces?

**Types of Shared Space**

Shared space can refer to many different kinds of spaces with different functions. These may range from mixed-use residential housing and retail complexes to parks, sports facilities, work offices, schools, and other community hubs providing a range of services. Common to all, however, is that they are supposed to provide safe places for individuals to frequent and interact regardless of identity. These may be strategically sited interventions – what Bollens (2012: 247-48) calls “urban acupuncture” – redeveloping previously “dead” or contested space and made accessible to surrounding communities. While much focus is placed on such larger-scale projects with often multi-million pound funding and an avowedly peacebuilding agenda, relatively less attention has been paid to smaller, bottom-up initiatives such as allotments, men’s sheds, or even car boot sales, as I observed on Sunday mornings on a disused carpark between Catholic Ardoyne and Protestant Woodvale. Indeed these may represent more “organic” forms of shared space that do not necessarily arise from the imaginations and dictates of urban planners (Mack 2014: 179).

**Contested Terrain**

Shared space projects are not without dispute and, as many of my informants emphasized, require cross-community “buy in” among residents to be successful whereby there is a lot of suspicion of top-down imposed projects. As one mural in Lower Shankill pointedly states, “nothing without us is for us.” There are also controversies over how shared space should be used. While surveys are often conducted to solicit people’s attitudes and opinions, the results are usually amalgamated so that they cannot be used to highlight and thus exploit differences (should they exist) between communities. Nevertheless, the most contentious use of shared
space is that of mixed housing amidst the context that there is a larger need for social housing among a growing Catholic population within Belfast with the existence of single-identity waiting lists. Regarding fiercely contested plans for a housing scheme on a shared site slated for redevelopment, a community officer explained to me:

They couldn’t agree because one community wanted a load of houses, the other didn’t want the other community to get houses as houses mean votes. North Belfast is getting very close between the DUP and Sinn Fein and new houses here could mean a lot more Sinn Fein votes.

The manager of a housing association further related how:

There’s huge opportunities for shared space ... but I think there’s political resistance to a change in dynamic ... it’s going to be a long, hard struggle particularly in areas like this [North Belfast] to get any form of sharing ... so shared space is largely not in a housing context ... it’s leisure, business, retail, education – those are the easy options.

Even where there are small developments of mixed residential housing, they are not immune from unofficial exclusionary mechanisms that seek to preserve single-identity space. One informant reliably informed me that he had tried to get a house on one such designated housing scheme but was refused, being told unequivocally that it was “for Catholics only.”

We can see therefore that shared space – especially in terms of housing – constitutes contested terrain where, as Björkdahl and Buckley-Zistel (2016: 4) put it, “interests and strategies collide and are determined by prevailing power asymmetries.” These in turn are subjective, exacerbated by perception and misperception. Just as the previous chapter demonstrated resistance to bringing down barriers, so too the promulgation of shared space may correspond to similar dynamics of fear and suspicion. Attending one day a Sinn Fein speech on the Falls Road given by Gerry Adams in which he stressed the need to “reach out” to Unionist communities, I later relayed the message to a Shankill resident and former loyalist paramilitary. While stressing that he wholeheartedly embraced peace and reconciliation, he was also skeptical, arguing that it was his view that shared space was part of an agenda: “I feel

38 Originally from Belfast, Gerry Adams was the long-time president of Sinn Fein and arguably the most prominent figure of contemporary Irish Republicanism along with Martin McGuinness. He stepped down in February 2018 and was replaced by Dublin-born Mary Lou McDonald.
that it’s them pushing it more than us. They know that in order to get a united Ireland they need to get us onside and convince us.”

**It’s Not Capturing Everyone**

Notwithstanding the above, a key question is how users of space act and interact in the aftermath of planning (Mack 2014: 153-185). Yet in so doing it is necessary to understand that the establishment of such spaces may involve much groundwork and relationship building before they are used.

As one closely involved informant told me of a shared space facility:

If this had opened without the project, this place would be empty. No-one would be using it. It worked because we had been working at it for nine years before it opened. We had been doing fun days out on [...] Avenue, with both communities coming together. No issues. Standing beside each other. People who would have been ex-combatants cooking burgers. And showing people, yes we can come together. You can still have differences, that’s not the issue, you don’t have to change who you are, but let’s start sharing it instead of fighting over it.

Accordingly, shared space does not emerge independent of conversations and trust-building which facilitate—or if absent, may prevent—its establishment and use. It cannot therefore be stripped of its social content.

However, even so, this does not tell us of its “transformative” potential—both at the individual and intercommunal level. The story below related to me by John, my first informant introduced in the arrival story, reveals something of this potential. As such, John described his first encounter with a Catholic, explaining how he was “scared” beforehand to tell him he was a Protestant, self-consciously asking himself “what will he think of me?” and “will he want to be my friend?” While the encounter did not take place in an official shared space facility as such, it nonetheless demonstrates how by providing a safe, regulated space for mutual encounter through a designated activity, John was able to change his insecurity and fear regarding meeting a boy from the other group into confidence and even friendship. He claimed that the experience had had a huge impact on him and was one of the reasons why he later became a youth worker:
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I actually never met a Catholic, where I said, ‘hello, my name’s [John], how are you?’ I like …” until I was 14 or 15 … the first time was part of a youth project in the Waterworks [a park] to bring young people to play football and we were the only Protestant team to go down. It was six-a-side but we only brought five players with us … we asked the organizers for another player … one came over. I never knew if he was a Protestant or Catholic or not, but I knew roughly because he was down in that area hanging about. The rules were that you weren’t allowed to say what you were or what you weren’t. We introduced each other … we had a break every two to three games and we were talking away and getting to know him and from that we developed an actual friendship. He took me into his estate. I took him into my estate.

John and his girlfriend Heather, also a youth worker, emphasized the importance of shared space for fostering meaningful interactions – what Valentine (2008: 334) calls purposeful, organized “micro-public encounters” – and representing the interests and needs of youths. While positive toward a new shared park built in their neighbourhood, they viewed its outdoor location and lack of events as undermining its potential:

It would just be good to have somewhere where the young people can go … if you could just have a shared space inside, the […] project is outside … there should be shared buildings. You cannot just expect Catholic young people to come to Rathcoole [youth centre] … [John interjects] and seeing them [paramilitary] murals, it’s so off-putting … [Heather] there’s a lot more opportunities for young people nowadays but much more could still be done … a skate park would be good, [John] a café would also be great … [Heather] if there could also be more events like the Halloween fireworks event last year [which brought youths from both estates together].

But while such spaces, if well-designed, may capture certain individuals by providing them with an opportunity to get to know each other, it is much harder to determine how they change the relational quality between communities or groups. Assessing such goes beyond the scope or capacity of this thesis. Notwithstanding, just as Björkdahl and Mannegren (cited in Björkdahl and Buckley-Zisel 2016: 9) take issue with bridges in post-war Bosnia as being “flawed metaphors” for connecting people, so too shared space in Belfast might not meet its intended expectations. An interview with a Protestant community worker elicited the following assessment of a shared space project:

Building a big new […] facility does not change an interface. It does not change people’s attitudes. No way. That comes in time. You have to appreciate it is a small
enclave surrounded by a large nationalist community … over the time people have been saying you can see they are taking over, our young kids can’t go down to play football. We don’t have a youth worker here, people to bring them down. The men don’t really get involved that much in the community that way with the kids. And if the kids do go down, there is sectarian abuse and things like that. It isn’t utilized as much for this community as it should be. There is projects, work going on, but it’s not capturing everyone. It’s small numbers.

Based on negative sectarian stereotyping, or even just apathy, individuals may not want to come into contact with others and so employ avoidance strategies. Peer pressure may also be exerted on individuals not to associate with outsiders. Furthermore, negative contact and interaction may in fact confirm and reinforce perceived stereotypes of the other side and so be counterproductive to the peacebuilding agenda. As Valentine (2008: 325) argues, we should not naively assume that contact with others necessarily engenders respect for difference. But there may be also other structural barriers such as a lack of personnel – in the above case, a youth worker – to organize activities. There are therefore issues of inclusivity in terms of those willing and able to take part in the use of shared space and those who are not, which may lead to marginalizing or not “capturing” certain sub-groups. If not equitably planned and used, there is also a risk of shared spaces becoming sites of contestation – both within and between communities.

Reclassify Minds and Spaces

While space may be designated as existing for shared use by communities, it also needs to be accompanied by a deterritorialization of mindsets. Although maps published by Belfast City Council may no longer colour-code areas according to “Orange” and “Green,” which is considered to be politically incorrect and counter to the new narrative being promoted, this does not mean that such mind maps no longer exist in people’s heads. On the several occasions I would show a map of North Belfast to my informants, I was struck by how fluent they were in defining different areas, and their borders, according to the binary of Catholic or Protestant. Notably, in one instance, a young man hesitated whilst placing his finger on a thick blue line – a motorway – bisecting two districts, before informing me that “it was probably Catholic.” That even a public utility such as a motorway could thus be categorized reveals how ingrained a
sense of territoriality is – that is, land or property should logically “belong” to one group or the other.  

Such territoriality is, of course, as Smith (1990: 3) points out, not an “innate human trait” but rather a “social construct” that has instrumental ends, which, as previous chapters have shown, includes control and maintaining group distinctiveness and survival by excluding the “other.” Thus a sense of territoriality corresponds to what Barth (2000: 27) identifies as a cognitive model, which through “systematic indoctrination … authoritative teachings are drummed in and elevated to dogma.” By contrast, shared space is a social construct that challenges the conventional model and so requires a cognitive shift to envision space, as Bollens puts it (2012: 241), as an “everyman’s land” of mutual use and benefit. First coined by Foucault in the 1960s, we can therefore view shared spaces as heterotopias comprising “various institutions and places that interrupt the apparent continuity and normality of everyday living space” (Dehaene and De Cauter 2008: 3-6).

As so-called counter-sites, their success thus depends on supplanting (or at least co-existing alongside) the previous model. This is by no means a given. While community surveys often yield largely positive answers to questions such as “do you think [name removed] should be shared by both communities?,” private conversations I had with several informants also revealed perceptions that shared space facilities were “more for them than us.” While as pointed out this obviously illustrates the need for community participation and “buy in” regarding planning and using shared space facilities, this also needs to be accompanied by a gradual deconstructing of territorialized mindsets that embraces the dual-possessive of “ours” rather than “mine and theirs.”

What is more, if shared space introduces a different concept of “de-ethnicized” space, what does this mean for symbols and other identity markers traditionally used to connote (ethnic) space? If anthropological place is as Augé (1995: 51-52) famously put it, one of “identity, of relations and of history,” can shared space be regarded as a kind of artificially engineered “non-place”? While this would clearly be a misreading of Augé’s thesis – shared spaces are very much concerned with identity and relations – it nevertheless raises the question how such space is reimagined symbolically and performatively. Indeed, Rolston (2010: 294) notes in regard to Belfast that, “symbols are part of the warp and weft of the community. They

39 A notable exception might be Belfast City Centre which throughout the Troubles was considered as neutral space. Even so, Belfast residents might choose to frequent certain pubs or cafés.
Forss

are essential to the ‘thick’ narrative which cannot be left behind by a simple act of will, even if political change pushes society towards ‘thinner’ narratives.”

Volunteering at a foodbank allowed me to meet Bob, a Protestant pastor who had recently taken up a position within a predominantly Catholic neighborhood.40 Having overcome addiction and what he said as involvement with “organizations” in the past, he had not been officially trained or ordained as a priest. Sitting on the steps to the church with busy traffic going past, I noted next door a centre for ex-Republican prisoners. Describing his work as ongoing, with it taking a long time to build trust and countering the perception of being seen to “steal Catholics,” he explained how his religious faith sought to encompass not only Protestants, Catholics, and Baptists, but also others such as migrants moving to the city. Wary of how labels had functioned to divide people, he sought to foster inclusivity in his church. This had involved renaming the church from the Clements Road Baptist Church to the Clements Road Christian Association41 as well as replacing the main Sunday service with a Tuesday evening Bible study session, creating a food hub, as well as refraining from singing the British national anthem. But as Bob described:

It wasn’t easy to change the name. Folk had been coming sixty years and they felt it was a step in the wrong direction, that they were losing identity … when I came to this church, I remember the first November remembrance day, I was told, by the way, we sing two verses of ‘God Save the Queen’ … but I said ‘we are a Christian Church wanting to reach out in a nationalist area and we expect them to sing our national anthem?’ … so I said, ‘we’re not doing it’, and I came in for a lot of criticism, some said, ‘we have lost comrades through the Troubles and this is dishonouring them.’

Where identity is inscribed in space and given meaning as place, “neutralizing” such – or removing semiotic barriers – may, as in the case above, encounter resistance and even incur a sense of cognitive dissonance. As Rolston argues (2010: 294), “forcible removal of symbols before the community is ready to have them removed is an act of violence against the memory and identity of the community and a potential source of trauma to that community.” Shorn of familiar markers of identity, the meaning of new symbols, protocols, and practices which such

40 Predominantly a Protestant-populated area before the Troubles, shifting borders and moving populations saw it become largely Catholic “territory.” Parishioners nevertheless would still go to the church, which remained, during the Troubles.

41 Name changed here for confidentiality.
spaces contain may not be obvious and may even be seen as a threat. As related earlier by one informant, there may be a perception that as social reengineering projects people have to “change who they are” and they may accordingly be wary of designated activities in such spaces.

In the case of North Belfast, therefore, it will inevitably take time and sensitivity (and engender much resistance) in order for some residents to embrace new physical and psychological models of space and place – and their symbolism – based on inclusivity and sharing. Nevertheless, as Kirby (2009: 16) points out, they have the potential “to become emplacing and orienting once actors become habituated to them” Furthermore, traditionally “subordinate” social groups – whether women’s groups, youths, or others – may increasingly find a space of representation in such venues in which their identities, interests, needs, and hopes are inscribed and through them (re)define the kind of space produced (Cenzatti 2008: 82-84). In so doing, such heterotopian spaces may offer the possibility of social change or “urban activism” (Allweil and Kallus 2008: 192-93) by challenging the grip of existing hegemonic narratives that seek to differentiate and delineate. What is certain is that place identity will be debated and contested among different social groups attributing different spatial meanings to new public spaces.
9. Conclusion

As Creswell (2004: 35) observes, “Places are never finished but always becoming.” Arriving in Belfast at its George Best City airport, large tourism posters greet the visitor which project a vibrant, forward-looking vision of the city that deliberately ignores its long legacy of conflict and division. The city centre is awash with regeneration money that has fostered the establishment of new civic spaces and museums such as the Titanic Quarter – “a Space for All” – drawing residents and tourists from all over the world alike. Conspicuous by their absence are flags signifying identity or memorials related to the Troubles. Walking a short way out of the centre, however, one becomes acutely aware of entering different time-spaces and their associated narratives – ones endowed with a collective memory of violence, loss, and seemingly uncompromising group identities and goals. These, furthermore, are circumscribed in territorial space and its boundaries that have proved remarkably residual despite two decades of political and communal peacebuilding. The continued existence of clearly defined and expressed localities in parts of the city such as North Belfast clearly shows the importance of territory and the ideologies that underpin it. As Wilson (2014: 103-4) argues, seeking to counter the narrative of increasingly boundless social worlds, “territory is an inescapable agent of differentiation and integration, of division and difference, and of union and belonging.” Accordingly, place-making and boundary-marking are woven into the everyday fabric and fragmentation of social and political life.

But despite the persistence of internal borders and their regimes, these are not frozen milieus unresponsive to local, national, and supranational processes (Paasi 2011: 62; Bollens 2012: 15-16). For as Kirby (2009: 214-15) argues, it is important to recognize that ethnographic sites are always in flux, and as he further puts it, “boundaries will continually be renegotiated and redefined.” Diminishing incidents of inter-community violence have emboldened residents to conduct border-crossing in ever greater numbers, in so doing moving out of their neighbourhoods and challenging stereotypes – often predicated on fear and antagonism – of their adjoining “others” through new forms of interaction and relations. Border pioneers such as Neil, introduced in the parting of worlds chapter, is rediscovering the city, visiting old haunts he used to go to before the Troubles. Mothers and their children are crossing interfaces to buy
a pint of milk in the neighbouring supermarket. Others, such as Rosalin, are changing their routes to get to work – previously informed by avoidance – so as to stop at the Protestant or Catholic bakery which serves good bread. Others, however, immobilized variously by fear, apathy, prejudice, or an urban provision of services that fails to incentivize the need for border-crossing, may continue to find safety and solidarity within their own areas.

All such individuals are engaged in borderwork to varying degrees in their everyday social practices and attitudes. Boundaries find cognizance in states of mind and behaviours which may reinforce boundedness and thus construct for it a segregatory function. Alternatively, others may interpret, navigate, and experience urban space and its borders that do not necessarily neatly conform with prevailing physical, cognitive, or analytical constructs; but rather reflect very individual narratives, perspectives, and memories of which there are many thousands (Hurd et al. 2017: 20-21). In so doing, individual lifeworlds with their social networks and mobilities may spill over and beyond group borders and their seemingly fixed entities. Indeed, Murray reminds us of the dangers of subscribing to a totalizing logic that seeks to impose a “fictive coherence” on what one has observed (Murray 2008: 72).

But if borders exist as ideas and practices, they also exist as specific places with distinct characteristics (Green 2012: 585). As such, this study has also sought to shed light on local actors and processes working to modify Belfast’s border architecture. These include a diverse array of actors ranging from former paramilitary members and housing associations to clergy, community workers, and other privately engaged citizens, among many others. Through cooperative relationships and partnerships, they have sought to build trust and envisage new relationships between their neighbourhoods both over and around their borders. In so doing, such bottom-up processes of borderwork are engaged in remaking borders to attenuate their security features and, despite the many challenges, to rebrand them as sites of shared coexistence rather than flashpoints of communal violence.

Subverting Pullan’s (2011: 31-32) notion of frontier institutions as underlining ethnic divisions and resistant to reconciliation, these cross-community groups and their activities are operating on Belfast’s inner frontiers to do the opposite. The border thus becomes not only a metaphor for division but also connection. Such interventions, furthermore, may exist independently from or be part of larger projects that have attracted institutional funding. Either way, segregation as a solution to ethnic differences is being challenged as the need for social accommodation through spatial reconciliation is promoted. In the process, Belfast is also being
redesigned through new architectural forms and visions, such as shared community hubs, which are impacting on and helping to reorganize interactions between neighbourhoods (Rallings 2014). These in turn may reflect the empowerment of new sub-groups of people to reimagine and refashion their surroundings according to their projected imaginations. The creation of new shared spaces at the sites of borders between neighbourhoods thus offer new opportunities and cognitive resources, but it is still too early to fully understand how their role as “heterotopias” will play out.

There is a temptation to see such debordering as a linear process – that, as the decades elapse, borders along with the conflict memories that have sustained them will eventually disappear altogether. Just as one community leader I met challenged his youth groups to see “the city as yours,” so this envisages a new form of urban citizenship not predicated on single, essentialized identities spatially reproduced with set boundaries, but rather a boundless Belfast where space, place, and identity become more fluid, freed from rigidity. Such a city would have no need for walls or other barriers between its inhabitants.

Yet segregation and its border materializations have been maintained by fear, control, and underpinned by hegemonic narratives upon which positions of influence, power, and pursuit of interests have been built. Thus there are actors with a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. Indeed, as Richards (2005: 1-21) writes, “unless the sides are thoroughly differentiated there is always a risk (from the warmongers’ perspective) of peace breaking out” Moreover, as Anderson and O’Dowd (1999: 596) argue, boundaries can be seen as “regions of infiltration, transition or separation and [which serve as] defences for the supposed ‘purity of the ‘centre’.”

There is thus a competition among memory makers, revealing complex intracommunity dynamics and power relations as they compete for influence over narratives – ones which are more inclusive and outward looking, and those which are more exclusive and inward looking. Inherently political, place identities and their borders are becoming increasingly open to differing interpretations, or more elegantly put, a “palimpsest of overlapping multi-vocal landscapes” (Michael at al. 2016: 224). Accordingly, sectarian graffiti and intimidating paramilitary murals may sit jarringly alongside other messages emphasizing common heritage or aspirations of peaceful co-existence. Whereas for some a gate in a wall offers a welcome opportunity to cross a boundary, for others it is an opening fraught with potential danger.

As this study has further demonstrated, it is important to understand the local and specific spatial dynamics of places and borders. A complex constellation of personalities, memories,
and histories intertwine to give each site its own unique characteristics and dynamics. But while these can also operate semi-autonomously, these respond and interact with wider political and social dynamics, which at times may thwart debordering and other times help facilitate it. Bollens (2012: 11) puts it well when he writes that, “polarized cities are commonly platforms for the playing out of broader epic struggles tied to religion, historic political claims, ideology and culture.” At the time of writing, the issue of Brexit and the uncertain status of the border with the Republic of Ireland has refocused much public attention on the issue of borders – both nationally and locally. It has also led to increasing political competition between Unionist and Republican parties as both jockey for power. This had led to a paralysis of the devolved political institutions as political accommodation has broken down. While this is emboldening local actors to fill the void and redouble efforts towards social accommodation, it is also encountering resistance where old narratives find new currency in an uncertain future. This would especially seem to be the case in Unionist communities where the “threat” of a united Ireland is perceived to be counter to that group’s cultural, political, and economic interests.

There is accordingly a binary between a political future of a united Ireland and remaining part of the United Kingdom that has proved resistant to concepts of a shared consensual vision of Northern Ireland’s political and territorial future. This has even sharpened in recent years as the demographic balance starts to tip in favour of Catholics and where, for the first time, politically Sinn Fein stands the chance of attaining parity and even eclipsing the seats of the main Unionist party. A contested political and constitutional future does not bode well for dealing with the legacy of the past and continuing division. As long as this endures, I sense, so micro-borders will also continue to be reproduced, putting constraints in the way of local grassroots’ and other efforts.

In the end, as Geertz argues, “our data is really our own constructions of other people’s constructions” (1973: 167-68). This study is no exception and which is furthermore fallible to labelling, generalisms, and cognitive constructs which seek to find order and patterns. Indeed how could it not? The reality is infinitely more complex and messier. As such, the stories and narratives of my informants – and my representations and interpretations of them – constitute just a small fragment of a much larger and complex truth.

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As I left Belfast, I thought of my first informant, John, and what the future held for him. His journey had been an interesting one. From growing up just after the end of the Troubles on a
single-identity estate, where he was constantly told of the dangers of going to certain areas, he had participated in a project that had given him the opportunity to meet with other young people his age from neighbourhoods of the “other” identity group. He had subsequently gone on to university to study to become a youth worker, and in so doing, been exposed to new ideas, peoples, and values. As I left, he himself was about to leave for Chicago for a few months to gain experience of community youth work in a very different context. His experiential worlds were thus expanding and enriching. But at the same time, he also continued to live in and envisage a future in the neighbourhood he had grown up in, where he worked, and where he had family and friends. Informed by his heritage and place of residence, he nonetheless was not bound to it and expressed frustration at narratives and identity constructions which he felt did not represent his and other young people’s hopes and imaginations – and which, he deemed, were not equipped to envision a new future within and between communities. Although John may or may not be a typical example, he and others of his generation are increasingly navigating and mediating a new plane where, while history, place, memory, are still significant, new spatial and cognitive resources and opportunities are available that were more restricted for their parent’s generation who grew up during the height of the Troubles. In so doing, through leading a youth graffiti project, arranging cross-community youth events, distilling and imparting ideas from other social worlds, he is part of the dynamic flux and immanent tension involved in reshaping spaces and borders within and across Belfast.
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Appendix I: Images

A “peace wall” on Cupar Way dividing the Shankill and the Falls

A paramilitary mural in North Belfast

All photos were taken by the author.
“They May Have Stole Our Banner But They Will Never Steal Our Culture” reads graffiti on a wall in a Unionist neighbourhood
Republican demonstration in Belfast City Centre

The Shankill Road Defenders Band march down the road
"The City is Yours": Desegregation and Sharing Space in Post-Conflict Belfast

A peace mural in East Belfast

A new shared space facility in North Belfast
Appendix II: Map

Map of Belfast

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