The Production of Shared Space in Northern Ireland. Part 1: Introduction

Beyond the divided city: policies and practices of shared space

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The papers in this special feature address the question of ‘shared space’—a concept that was introduced in urban policy discourse and practice of conflict transformation in Northern Ireland nearly a decade ago (e.g. OFMDFM 2005). Debates around the definition and use of this concept in the context of a ‘post-conflict’ society, though evolving over the years, have generally built upon an interest in the role of public space as a social resource that pervaded think tank, government and public agency reports in the UK during the first decade of this century (Lownsbrough and Beunderman 2007; JRF 2007). Those documents emphasised the importance of public spaces in successful regeneration policies, in the creation of sustainable and cohesive communities, and in fostering interaction and cohesion across lines of ethnic and cultural diversity. They discussed the conditions for the workability of public spaces (e.g. how well they can be made to resonate with everyday life routines and to accommodate wider definitions of community) and in doing so engaged with issues pertinent to, albeit not specifically focused upon, the practices of peace building in Northern Ireland. As the papers in this special feature suggest, however, understandings and policies for sharing space in Northern Ireland have remained rather vague, practised reductively and understood as broadly referring to the ability of people from different ethno-national communities to access and use the same physical spaces.

The A Shared Future document (OFMDFM 2005) defined ‘shared space’ in a somewhat vague and circular fashion as necessary for ‘developing and protecting town and city centres as safe and welcoming places’, ‘creating safe and shared space for meeting, sharing, playing, working and living’ and ‘freeing the public realm from threat, aggression and intimidation while allowing for legitimate expression of cultural celebration’ (21). The more concrete aspect of the above definition, for instance, that symbolic expressions of identity need to be managed and restricted to their ‘legitimate’ manifestations, is critiqued by Mary-Kathryn Rallings in her contribution to this issue. She points out that central government and Belfast City Council’s focus on the symbolic expressions and performative manifestations of identity through public events in the city centre attempt to ‘neutralise’ the political overtones of such expressions, yet miss the complexity contained in the relationship between people and place. They misconceive the nature of sharing as they fail to seriously address the impact of factors shaping access.
(such as connectivity, transport and mobility); and ignore the relationship between the city centre and other spaces in the city. Thus in Belfast, in an inversion of a ‘complex social discourse’ separating the quiet, secure life of suburbia from the crime and violence plaguing city centres in other, ‘ordinary’ cities, the centre is understood as being ‘above and beyond the sectarian conflict (Jarman 1993, 117)… whilst the surrounding inner-city areas are generally associated with ethnic conflict’ (Rallings, this issue).

While Belfast city centre may be held as an example of ‘safety and neutrality’ (Rallings, this issue) in the ‘post-conflict’ city, urban professionals have argued and demonstrated that in the surrounding inner city, deprived neighbourhoods have been adversely affected by fragmenting road infrastructure, blighting of space and residential decline (see an example of a fragment of pedestrian infrastructure in Figure 1). These factors have re-enforced a high degree of pedestrian disconnection/isolation, cutting such neighbourhoods off physically and psychologically from the centre, while ensuring good commuter car access from the more affluent south, east and suburbs of the city. Indeed, the Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan 2015 (DoI 2004, 22) recognised that ‘the Inner Ring Road which currently surrounds much of the city centre has left a scar on the urban fabric’.

Yet, the comments of the Minister for Social Development, interviewed by Rallings, seem to imply uncertainty about the benefits to the city centre as a ‘shared area’, should connections with inner-city neighbourhoods be improved, hinting at ‘potential implications’ and ‘unintended consequences’ (interview in Rallings’ paper). While this statement may be difficult to interpret unequivocally, it is reminiscent of the arguments employed by community leaders and political representatives against the building of a residential development within the Crumlin Road Gaol and Girdwood Barracks Regeneration Scheme in North Belfast, designated as a ‘shared space’ development (see O’Dowd and Komarova 2011). On that occasion, territorialism (perceived as inevitably accompanying deprived and segregated residential areas) was seen as having the capacity to contaminate adjacent (consumer or recreational) spaces, spreading the danger of exclusion and sectarianism. All this suggests a limited and rather difficult to digest understanding of sharing that does not simply eschew specific political and symbolic expressions of identity but reflects the normalisation of socio-economic divisions and inequalities as an aspect of ‘peace building’ or ‘conflict transformation’ in Northern Ireland.

Against such an understanding of sharing, Forum for Alternative Belfast (FAB 2011) (an organisation of urban designers and architects lobbying for a more equitable and inclusive urban environment) argue that the term ‘shared space’ should be ‘reclaimed and demonstrated’ around its ‘original definition’ (2) as an urban design and planning concept blurring the lines between different types of uses and thus encouraging all users (drivers, pedestrians, cyclists, etc.) to negotiate passage with each other. ‘Shared space’ is, in this way, intended to combine multi-purpose uses of public space in a manner open for a wider variety of groups, and is said to increase and promote liveability and sustainability, and to reduce social inequalities in access and mobility (Hamilton-Baillie 2008). These progressive aspects of the ‘shared space’ concept are seen as an urban ideal, increasingly emulated and practised by planners and designers in many European and US cities, while, arguably, neglected in Belfast.

In response to the above, Rosaleen Hickey’s paper in this issue turns on the question of the design and physical features of urban space necessary for it to be perceived as shared. Hickey contemplates the significance of the psychological dimensions of two ‘shared spaces’ in Belfast, exploring their correlation with the physical dimensions of space. The author finds these two
dimensions are not simply intertwined but mutually constitutive. She stresses that ‘the built environment wields great power in reinforcing the perceptions required to establish and promote shared space in Belfast’, and that built environment professionals need to be aware of this power. The case studies explored here demonstrate that what is understood as sharing (both psychologically and in terms of its expression through built form) differs depending on the relationship and situatedness of the respective space within the rest of the city. This suggests that ‘shared space’ needs to be understood relationally—as dependent on broader questions of land use and connectivity but also as a complex interplay between the physical and the psychological, neither of which can be understood in the absence of the other.

The psychological perceptions that Hickey discusses speak at once to the ‘ordinary city’ and the ‘conflict’ face of Belfast as feelings of fear and safety intertwine and resonate with issues around good design (‘lighting’, ‘human scale’, ‘street layout’, ‘general legibility’), the specific use or function of space (whether retail or residential), or the time of the day (corresponding to levels of animation or use). Her discussion of the ‘psychological imperatives’ of ease, pride and ownership (revealed in interviews with EU Peace III Programme officials) bring us to the importance of discourse and the constant inversion of meaning that characterises understandings of ‘shared space’, depending on whether one speaks of the city centre or segregated/interfacing residential areas. When discussed in relation to the Stewartstown Road Regeneration Project in West Belfast, ‘ownership’ becomes a code for territoriality; when discussed in relation to the city centre, a signifier of civic engagement.

While we may intuitively expect the concept of ‘shared space’ to have a complex and multi-layered character, eliding easy definitions (and therefore, are not surprised that different meanings may be attached to it in different parts of the city, by different users and at different times), it is slightly ironic perhaps that different understandings of ‘peace walls’ and of what they do (or not) for different communities are also less anticipated and addressed in present policies for desegregating the city. Yet, as the paper by Byrne and Gormley-Heenan demonstrates, people living at and near ‘peace walls’ interpret the impact and role of these divisive infrastructures in their own lives differently and have therefore different hopes, fears and expectations for their removal in the future. Protestant ‘interface’ communities, the authors show, are much more inclined to rely on ‘peace walls’ for securing the ‘free celebration’ of their culture, protecting ‘their sense of identity’ and the very preservation of their communities’ existence. Neither do ‘the two communities’ share the same views ‘as to what necessarily is required to build the conditions to remove the walls’. The paper articulates the significance of these differing views in the context of the ‘Together Building a United Community’ strategy (OFMDFM 2013), which heralds the establishment of a 10-year programme to reduce and remove all interface barriers in the city by the year 2023. It poses questions as to ‘whether a holistic approach to removing the peace walls may not be the most appropriate response’ and whether ‘a more nuanced and community-determined approach to engagement may be more suitable’? Furthermore, the authors ask, to what extent is the removal of ‘peace walls’ regarded as a central policy issue in Northern Ireland? Moreover, how well is it integrated into other policies pertaining to divisions within Belfast’s urban environment, such as regeneration, connectivity or access?

In engaging with long-standing debates around the extent to which planning in Belfast ‘has been controlled or manipulated by the security agencies’, Tim Cunningham’s paper indirectly responds to these latter questions. Based on research of recently declassified documents, Cunningham demonstrates that ‘security agencies in Northern Ireland [have] played a key role in shaping the redevelopment of the city’, successfully
harnessing the planning system ‘to achieve the military objective of spatially isolating major areas of [conflict in] the north and west of the city’. The author further suggests that recent redevelopments within the Belfast City Council area indicate that far from obsolete, this pattern of defensive planning is still being repeated and is manifested in the insertion of ‘buffer’ zones within new regeneration schemes, further entrenching the social and economic segregation of North and West Belfast, and re-enforcing the ‘cordon sanitaire’ function of the road infrastructure around these parts of the city.

A long-standing pattern of securitisation of the built environment is thus ‘being replicated in a post-conflict context’. Far from being ‘technocratic’ and ‘impervious to outside influence’, Cunningham concludes, the planning system in Northern Ireland has, in fact, been rather effective in exercising an approach of ‘reflexive regulation’ that ensured the successful delivery of ‘defensive planning’ over the years. What is needed for change now, the author suggests, is ‘to apply the same level of diligence to promoting equality and social inclusion as that which was applied to promoting segregation and separation’. The question, however, of whether the aim of having a ‘cohesive and integrated city’ is ‘accorded the same political priority as that which applied to security and segregation during the conflict’, remains mute.

Ultimately, all contributions strongly suggest the need for a much more nuanced understanding and approach to the development of shared spaces in Northern Ireland. Such spaces are shaped by the interaction between political will, the cultures of local governance and administration, urban planning and design, discourses and practices of everyday use—all complexly layered with emotional experiences and psychological perceptions. Yet, research on Belfast continues to demonstrate that urban regeneration efforts, largely sponsored by government intervention, have steadfastly ignored this relational nature of ‘shared space’ as decisions over individual locations and developments of new spaces are not being integrated into broader plans and considered in relation to broader urban development, structure and connectivity (Gaffikin et al. 2008; Murtagh 2011). The papers thus tease out a palpable tension between the desire of urban policymakers to achieve (and at the same time project) an image of normality and ordinariness of the city, and their inevitable encounter with the city’s multi-layered legacy of ethno-national divisions and conflict, bearing on its ‘post-conflict’ face. A narrow understanding of ‘shared space’ reduces and compartmentalises it to governing the symbolic expression of political identities. This, the contributors suggest, has in effect limited the approaches to re-connecting and re-stitching a city, the built environment of which suffers from a high degree of fragmentation, associated (among other things) with political conflict, and the attempts of urban planners, security forces, designers and road engineers to manage this fragmentation through defensive urban infrastructure. By contrast, it has been argued, while making places safe and devoid of sectarian paraphernalia and bringing down ‘peace walls’ in segregated working-class areas ‘may be laudable objectives’, these ‘do not fully address other serious divisions within the context of Belfast’s urban environment’ (FAB 2011, 2). A more open interpretation of ‘shared space’ in the city needs to take the question of access seriously; be inclusive of ‘fractured’ spaces, roads, Figure 1 A pedestrian link to the city centre near the ‘Westlink’ part of the Inner Ring Road (Photo: Milena Komarova).
streetscapes and services; and sensitive to the needs and mobility requirements of different users, above and beyond their ethno-national or political identities and affiliations.

Notes

1 The papers result from an academic workshop ('Borders and Boundaries: Construction and Transformation of Urban Space') conducted in June 2013 in Belfast. The contributors are members of the Interdisciplinary Research Group ‘Social Justice in the Divided City’, funded by The Institute for the Study of Conflict Transformation and Social Justice, Queen’s University Belfast.

2 See Forum for Alternative Belfast at: http://www.forumbelfast.org

3 See, for instance: http://www.pps.org/reference/shared-space; http://www.publicspace.org

References


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