1 **Belfast city centre, figure-ground illustrating studied public spaces.**

Evaluating social and experiential qualities of public space in the divided context of Belfast, showing spatial imprints of defensive architecture and the consequences of façade permeability.

Fear in disguise: defensive architecture and façade permeability in shaping the urban experience of Belfast's public spaces

Mohamed Gamal Abdelmonem

Northern Ireland has been extensively studied, in terms of its peace process, conflict transformation, and post-peace agreement reconciliation.[1] Parliamentary committees, physical and social surveys, policy documents, and planning reports have all pointed to ethnonational and political division as the underlying condition of Northern Ireland's modern urbanism.[2] Likewise, a busy calendar of events, venues for expressing identity, and a rivalry of parades, protests, and elections seem to act as a reminder of a divided society and confirm a spatial anxiety around Belfast [1].[3] Yet, those spatial practices of identity tend to overshadow a long history of shared urban development, spatial memory, and architecture.[4]

To control hostile altercations between rival communities during the Troubles in the 1960s,[5] state planning policies introduced industrial estates, infrastructure, and bridges as buffer zones and barriers, creating spatial gaps in the city and sectioning it into isolated territories and derelict in-between zones.[6] Prevailing narratives of change from an integrated city to one of divided enclaves were also reinforced by security-driven policies that led to undesirable patterns of social engineering.[7] The result today is a multilayered sociospatial politics in which issues of communication, self-representation, and the expression of identity are central to experiences of urban space and architecture, where a spatial dichotomy of division and shared living remain a regular feature of everyday life.[8]

In this context, spatial practices in public spaces become key indicators of postconflict spatial reconciliation and a measure of the progress of Northern Ireland's peace process.[9] Hailed as Belfast's 'Berlin Moment', bold and symbolic, the demolition of an eight-foot-high and thirty-year-old Peace Line wall on Crumlin Road on 25 February 2016, in one of the most contentious interface zones, was a landmark reversal in Belfast's long history of putting up barriers in public spaces.[10] This landmark demolition proved a false dawn, however, as it led neither to further demolitions, nor to major schemes of opening public spaces for cross-

community engagement. After all, '[d]efensive architecture, it turns out, is far easier to erect than tear down.'[11] This has been a reality check for a power-sharing government that has struggled with its overambitious vow to remove all Peace Line walls by 2023 and has taken eighteen years to remove just one.[12] While predominantly appearing in residential areas with different shapes or forms, Peace Line walls remain a powerful physical manifestation of deep urban division that is just as visible to the outside eye.[13] They are largely experienced by families and children walking along the high barrier every morning to reach schools or workplaces, or having to plan to return home before gates close at night.[14]

A plethora of studies have dissected the impact of urban planning, policy, and the politics of division in shaping urban experience in Belfast.[15] Neil Jarman has interrogated the changing nature of public spaces,[16] looking at visible and invisible territorial division as a reflection of social tensions of everyday life and of the struggle with the contentious issues of parades, boundaries, and territories. Similar patterns are present in other Northern Irish cities, like Derry.[17] Ciaran Mackel and Bree T. Hocking have offered a colourful picture of public spaces, architecture, and landscape through accounts of visual change, alongside the transformations of public spaces and the emergence of new civic images.[18] Tim Blackman, Neil Jarman, and Frank Gaffikin and Mike Morrissey[19] have offered multiple perspectives on ways through which art and intellectual discourse were evolving around stories of grievance, pain, and struggles with the changing identity of the city in its conflict and postconflict transitions.[20] In this sense, art, architecture, and public space serve as vital tools for understanding the wider politics of a transforming public sphere towards a more pluralist approach.[21]

The interplay of historic planning schemes with recent physical and psychological barriers makes for interesting hidden layers of memory, fear, and pragmatic sociospatial practices, over a two decade journey back to normality.[22] Normality here, however, is very peculiar, where contested ethnonational identities have been absorbed within a

2 1880–90 sketch of Custom House Square. Black and white engraving on Marcus Ward's letter paper, by Robert John Welch (1859–1936).

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system of troubled and peaceful cohabitation.[23] Tracing spatial practices, patterns, and attitudes in the city's public spaces – as overlaid on loaded layers of historical schemes, and social and political reform – would reveal how far public spaces reflect a position on the role of architecture and urban design in the transition between conflict and peace.[24] This article argues that everyday sociospatial experiences in public space cannot take account of physical characteristics and spatial settings in postconflict cities in isolation from hidden layers of memory, fear, and concerns about safety in sustainable cohabitation in a contested city.

This inquiry goes beyond the surface, image, and predominant sociopolitical narratives of division. It interrogates instances of intercommunity engagement in Belfast public spaces and architecture, where everyday life has brought about shared experiences of spaces, buildings, and urban myths. It steps outside politically infused discourses of urban division to look at the reality of everyday encounters with architecture and public space. It also traces the evolution of everyday spatial encounters across pre-, during-, and post-Troubles' Belfast. In this respect, conditions of division and conflict are ever temporary, while shared living and co-habitation remain permanent.

Architecture, public space, and the city of riots
Belfast has a long history of division and violence that crosses several interlinked divisions – religious, ethnic, social, or political – that culminated in the outbreak of violence during the Troubles.[25] Belfast grew progressively, since the early seventeenth century, as a settler town largely populated by Protestants of Scottish and English origin. Segregation during the colonial period existed on a macro scale, with Catholics forming a majority outside the town's walls in 'rural' Ulster.[26] Sharp changes in the

segregation between Protestants and Catholics were associated with the Home Rule campaign (1870–1921), and, for the first time segregation became evidenced in the form of rioting on the streets of Belfast. The influx of internal migration from Catholic communities to Belfast was influenced by the growth of industry and economy during the interwar period, openness towards mixed-ethnic neighbourhoods and residential developments.

However, the Troubles violence resulted in the largest reverse demographic change and population movement since the end of the Second World War. Protestants and Catholics who had previously lived in mixed areas retreated to religious, ethnic, and sectarian enclaves in search of safety and security, intensifying a state of polarisation.[27] The segregation was not only limited to residential areas but extended to educational institutions, recreational spaces, employment, and many other activities, creating a remarkable duplication of services and infrastructure.[28] Physical markers of that segregation started to appear during the period of rampant ethnonational rioting alongside the rise of paramilitary groups. At the centre of division/ integration are the Peace Lines that were introduced as temporary fences to relieve safety and security concerns amid violence in 1969. Threats then turned them into permanent barriers.[29] It is this urban architecture that has reinforced division and has stigmatised the city's life and experience as a warzone that is waiting to ignite, turning a temporary condition into permanent identity.[30]

Despite its three centuries of unstable and, at times, explosive politics, Belfast remains a regional economic and political powerhouse. Across two world wars, during the Brexit negotiations and the future of the union, Belfast seems to be a permanent fixture in British politics. From Britain's biggest shipyard, a steel and linen industry trade during the

nineteenth century, to being central to the UK's post-Brexit future, the conditions of Belfast have had a strong influence on the development of key architectural features, typologies, and a distinctive urban culture.[31] This position has prompted frequent growth and development plans comparable to several British and European counterparts.[32] In some respects, Belfast led the way when hosting the first large commercial centres, department stores, and growing district centres, even ahead of some British cities during the interwar years.[33]

On the other hand, Belfast struggled with its transition from being a Medieval Victorian town into a modern industrial and commercial hub.[34] While it maintained population growth (by 61,000 from 1901–37, reaching 444,000), its economy, following the 1914 recession, had to shift towards military and hospital equipment during the interwar years. In this context, public spaces became a central venue for working-class collective anger during the Great Depression. On 3 October 1932, over sixty thousand protesters converged at Custom
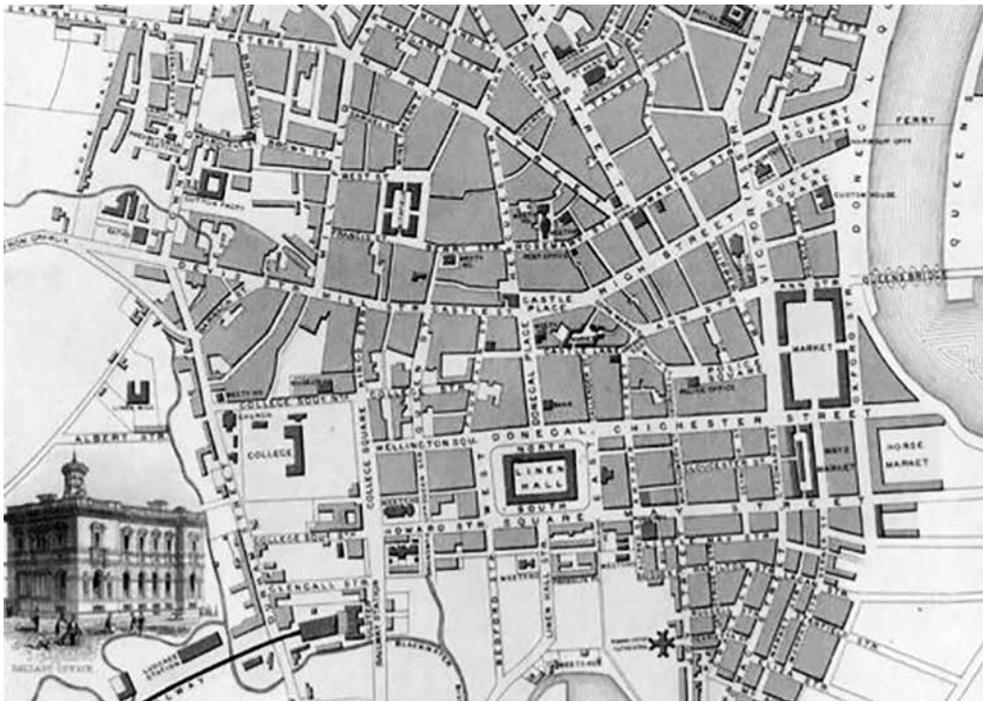
3a Belfast in 1851.

3b The Brumwell Plan 'Central Belfast, 1931' showing the transformation of the Plan in the city centre, right.

3a
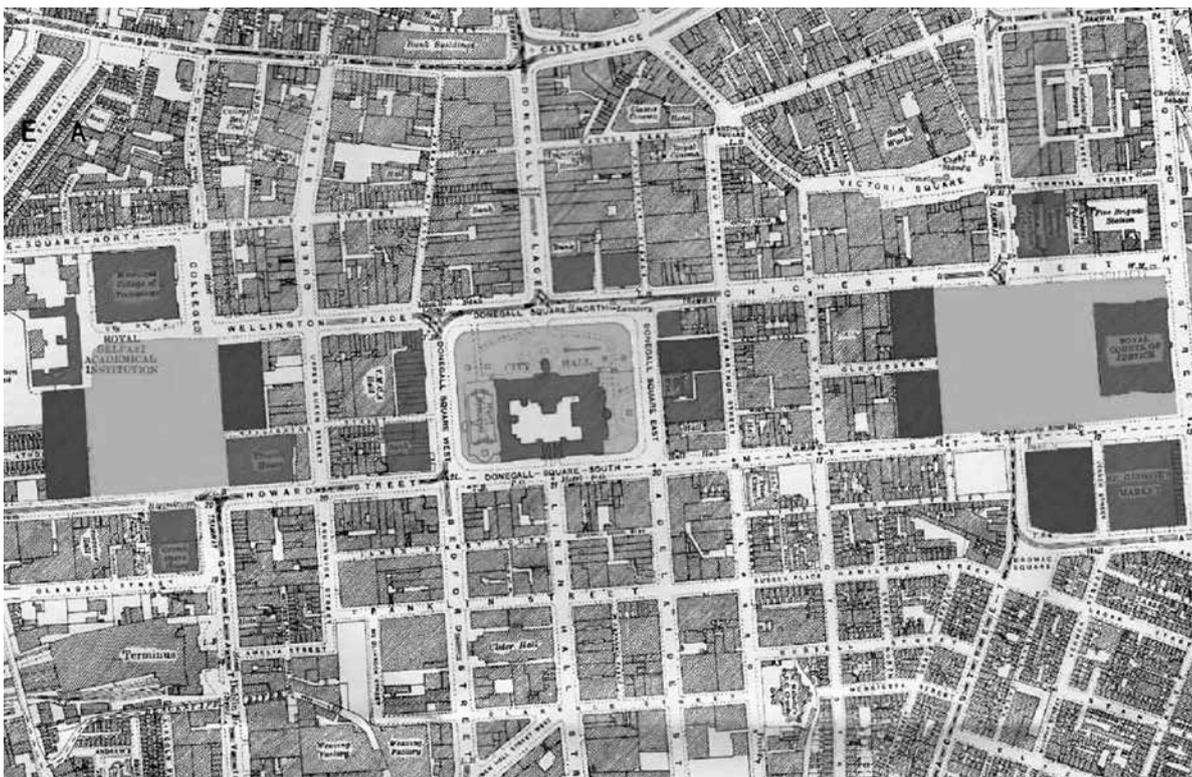
3b

House to voice their anger against unemployment benefits that were 'inadequate to provide the barest necessities of life' [2].[35] Whilst Stephen Brown highlighted in 1987 the similarity of commercial patterns of Belfast to British cities, Belfast shopping developments were quite different. Due to its urban division, the bulk of shopping centre developments in Belfast was in the suburbs. Commercial activity started to grow in the Centre again only in the wake of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, yet remained largely vulnerable to protests or political tension. Hence, the city centre was highly secured until the 2010s, when commercial activities started to flow into it again.

It is important not to inflate the role that public space can play in enhancing interaction across divides or cultures whose influences come from elsewhere. Public spaces are created, designed, developed, and regenerated according to a multitude of factors across time and space.[36] In Belfast, they are mostly 'places of transit', of momentary encounter between strangers: dynamic by nature, but reactive to any political, social, or cultural change. While Belfast had long been associated with adversity within its public spaces even before the Troubles, there were frequent positive accounts of community and neighbourhood life during the 1914–39 period.[37] In this sense, many twentieth-century urban plans and masterplans were designed to contribute to shared public spaces, enhance connectivity, and manage transitions to, and around, public spaces and venues for social and commercial activities.[38] However, the nature, purpose, and actual use of those public spaces dramatically changed throughout the course of the century, either in response to external conflicts, such as the world wars, or internal civil unrest, like the 1968 riots and the Troubles.

A city of multilayered history

Ciaran Carson's poems read the city through the moments, fields, and venues of every day. He writes in *Belfast Confetti*:

> *The map is pieced together bit by bit. I am this map which they examine, checking it for error, hesitation, accuracy: a map which is this moment, this interrogation, my replies.*[39]

Carson offers careful insight into the confusing duality of both the designed and the drawn map versus the image and the experience of its people in their everyday lives. Living through the Troubles, Carson was critical of the absence of discourse reflecting such understanding in a city that was otherwise defined on maps by barriers, barricades, and other spatial divisions such as the Peace Lines. Carson was the poetic voice of a generation who grew up not only walking through checkpoints and barricades, adjacent to boarded-up shop windows, but did so accompanied by stories of loss and grievance. It is through the implicit sublayers of segregation and the unity of hardship that Belfast can be traced, mapped, and written. This reading was equally shared by other art forms, including architects and urban designers, who played a role in implementing such a divisive landscape, while also embarking on countering its impact.[40]

In their influential 2008 report, *Public Space for a Shared Belfast*, Gaffikin and others highlighted the centrality of postconflict public spaces as a catalyst for change toward a shared city that is inclusive and accessible to all its communities. They stressed the distinction between 'civic space' and 'public space', in the context of politically charged environments, as spaces of transition from the intimate, ceremonial spaces of mediaeval towns to the modern era's focus on land use and urban voids as 'spaces of chance encounters' among people of diverse traditions.[41] In such accidental contacts rests opportunities for exchange that can help break barriers.[42] The relationship between the social and the architectural in public spaces has thus become central to the understanding of sociospatial practices and behavioural patterns as signifiers of what makes good and active public space.[43] While this perspective attributes much influence to the architecture of urban planning and public spaces exerted on the city, we have to be cautious not to overlook the fact they reflect existing socioeconomic and political dynamics.

It would be equally over-simplistic to suggest that conflict-infused defensive architecture over the past forty years is the pivotal contributor to shaping public space in Belfast, overlooking the complex evolution of the city's public spaces. Interestingly, critics attribute the genesis of the Troubles, and heightened anxiety over territorial gains, to some of the early urban plans of the newly formed planning commissions, especially the negative developments of Matthew and Wilson's plans in the 1960s. Some go as far as attributing the establishment of the town planning commission in Northern Ireland as key to instigating anxiety and insecurity, ushering in territorial contestation, and at times 'land wars' that eventually led to the Troubles.[44]

While Robert Matthew's 1963 plan was looked upon as a key reference to transform Belfast from a rundown Victorian industrial slum town into a modernist planned regional city, it affirmed previous plans. Giving the growing industrial town of Belfast its first City Hall and main Boulevard, the 1925 Brumwell Plan is the first large-scale plan done by a pioneer architect and urban planner during the interwar years [3].[45] The introduction of the Ring Road, and a motor-reliant street network, followed by the (Interim) 1945 and (Second) 1952 plans of the newly established Planning Commission – the Davidge Report – caused the rupture of the city's pedestrian and connected urban fabric.[46]

Common Belfast: significant buildings and spaces of interwar pluralist city

According to historical and social narratives of the interwar period, internal conflicts became secondary to world wars and the great depression, and Belfast became more concerned with joining the modern economy; things looked different. Public spaces and services witnessed substantial growth, with commercial centres and leisure leading the way.

Belfast Co-operative Society built its first store on York Street in 1910, with expansions in 1922 and 1930s to include the Orpheus building, becoming a prime family destination and a fixture in weekly activities for thousands of families.[47] By 1969, it had 200,000 members and was one of the country's largest stores. The Orpheus restaurant and ballroom were the focal points of 'the Co', where shoppers could enjoy afternoon tea or top bands playing at dances [4, 5]. Others followed in Sandy Row and the Shankill Road, and stores like Woolworth followed suit with their first purpose-built art deco building on the High Street.[48] Luxury cinemas like the Ritz Cinema and Dance Halls, like the Plaza or the Floral Hall, were iconic landmarks in the everyday lives of Belfast's young people during the 1930s–60s [6a, b].

The Flora Hall, for example, was a purpose-built hall from 1936 built for Belfast Corporation with a capacity of one thousand people. It became a mecca for dancers and young people. Yet, because of the Troubles, the Flora Hall became abandoned remaining closed since 1972. The Ritz Cinema, another massive yet elegant art deco building opened on Fisherwick Place with a 2,219-seat capacity on 9 November 1936, with Gracie Fields attending the opening in person to launch the cinema with her film *Queen of Hearts*.[49] A tramline across Grosvenor Street connected the cinema to the city centre. Both have long disappeared, with the cinema shutting down in the 1990s to be replaced by the Jury's Hotel. Belfast Electric tramcars, which were in operation between 1901 and 1954 (earlier steam-run trams ran from 1872), were key to mobility and connected the city centre with local districts and suburbs.

With Belfast's growth and golden era at its peak, Belfast Corporation had fifty cars, a series of stylish cinemas, dance halls, and department stores within a viable spatial network of destinations and connectivity. Public spaces were busy and vibrant, with scores of young people walking across the city to attend dance lessons during lunchtime or young couples attending new American movies in style.[50] Accounts of the period highlight intercommunity engagement and mixed experience. While there was still frequent unrest, and indeed arsenic attacks in mixed neighbourhoods, these were limited in scale and impact and quickly contained. During the Second World War and with the war economy, bombardments, and influx of American army personnel to the city reaching 100,000 in one estimate, women played an active role in public space.[51] Indeed, the social and cultural scene of Belfast's city centre and its public spaces, facilities, and everyday life from the 1930s to the early 1960s was active and vibrant of a regional capital that was comparable to main British cities.

The following three decades, however, showed a remarkable change of fortunes for those buildings and public spaces, shifting from openness and vibrancy to lockdown and checkpoints, from young

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4   Proposal for Traffic and Transport in Central Belfast Area, Map 02, 1952.

5   Belfast Co-Operative Society Building and Department Store at York Street in 1948, designed by Samuel Stevenson, 1922.

5

6 Interwar art deco 'dream palaces' in Belfast: (a) The Ritz Cinema, Fisherwick Place, 1935–6; (b) The Floral Hall, Hazelwood, 1935–7.

couples mingling or dancing during a lunch break training session to the sight of military personnel at every turn around barricaded streets, gates, and boarded showrooms. York Street Co-Op was hit by a massive bomb on 10 May 1972, destroying much of its structure. When rebuilt again five years later, it was targeted yet again by three bombs in one week before its opening. What was once the heart of the city centre life was left defunct, insecure, and was permanently demolished in 2013 to make way for the University of Ulster campus. As was the fate of those 1930s landmarks, many large-scale metropolitan-styled public buildings lost their users on the back of losing their security.[52]

The diverse perspectives of research in Belfast transcend two contrasting layers of unique urban and architectural conditions: one of a city that continues to grow with a particular identity, urban fabric, and spatial experience despite its political circus; and another of cultural and social rupture where physical

and psychological barriers either exist in space or the collective psyche of a community. While the politics of conflict cannot be ignored in shaping the urban experience of public spaces in Belfast, equally it is inaccurate to suggest that conflict has predominantly determined design and sociospatial practices within the city's public spaces.

Architecture and the embedded memory of division
Postconflict cities, like Belfast, feature spatial memories of division that range from physical, clear-cut segregation to sociocultural memories of violence embedded in certain spatial settings, events, or symbols. They can be seen neither by looking at maps nor by walking the streets. They are experienced only by talking to people who have lived painful experiences, or those influenced by them. The architecture of conflict in Belfast, in this sense, has had profound effects on the sensory engagement and historical

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memory of society.[53] This 'living memory' is defined as the recollection of events that people were involved in or witnessed firsthand, relying on intergenerational narratives transferred to younger generations by word of mouth.[54] Indeed, places connected to traumatic incidents are registered through situated memory reinforcing shared history and value systems. Public places where bombings or murders took place are remembered and commemorated by displaying murals, events, memorials, or stories of the victims. When tragedies occur, places seem to gain mysterious connotations and attached identities. In such events, perceptions of the past are preserved through active memory making and distinctive testimonials.

Various scholars have interrogated the integrity of architectural memory. Lewis Mumford in *The Culture of Cities*[55] questions the legitimacy of the idea of architectural memory suggesting that the city is a 'palimpsest of meaning' that could be revealed or concealed according to changing views of an evolving culture.[56] He claims that 'unchanging memory', by contrast, comprises history that preserves the identity of the city across time and generations. There is a danger of cities becoming 'packaged and imaged' for interpretation. Equally, the relationship between memory and forgetting is constantly being transformed under cultural pressures, building up what is called 'imagined memories' or 'prosthetic memories': memories that have circulated publicly but may not have actually happened, or are organically based.[57] By contrast, prosthetic memories often pose a threat to living memory, as they are quite often mass-mediated and subject to revision and alteration to promote one overall 'collective memory'.[58]

For buildings and public spaces to be understood to have memory, an established link to time and history is crucial. The visible link can be made through ageing or decay, or simply by being built in a particular style. As architecture creates events over time, it constructs a narrative of its age. David Harvey argues that the 'reorganisation of spaces is always considered a reorganisation of the framework, through which political and social powers are expressed'.[59] In contrast to the idea of architecture instilling memory in people, there exists in it a reflection of our present sensibilities and a direct reflection of the original state, thus making it monumental: the memory we seek is what makes the monument.[60] John Ruskin, however, supported the view that architecture is society's primary harbour of memory, instilled in people through built objects or experiences of its spaces.[61] Still, the danger is the influence that social and political control exerts over memory through programmes, projects, demolition, or conflicts, as we saw with the decline of key social buildings in Belfast. This, deliberately or not, resulted in the erasure of many of the pre-Troubles institutions of memory, unity, cohabitation, and a thriving economy at times of domestic peace, leaving only traces of 1970s conflict and their grievances to commemorate.

Belfast's embedded memory of division is evident in the complexities of its representational history: in its buildings, public spaces, monuments, and artefacts. Though these exist within the public domain, they are part of a history of multiple and overlapping claims to modernity. The artwork of the renowned Belfast-born wartime painter Colin Middleton, for example, shows how the perception of the city has changed over time. While the paintings reflect Middleton's own image of Belfast, they have had a profound influence on collective memory over time: from the paintings *Children at Play in Belfast Victorian terraces* (1939); *Off-Licence and Street Scene* (1940); to *The Markets Belfast* (1941); and in recomposing Belfast cityscape and Blitzed House. Middleton's paintings primarily depicted Belfast during wartime, each provoking a different memory among observers. They depict a sense of affiliation and affection towards Belfast as a primarily industrial city, with rows of Victorian housing and active streets. Architecture, here, evokes the memory of everyday normality at times of conflict.

To trace deep meaning and understanding of the culture of design in such a complex and multilayered city, one cannot reflect only on the immediate context of architecture, design, or even the economic power that directs planning and building programmes, or design agendas. In addition, we need to understand the influences and processes that have shaped the culture of the place, embedded memories, and perceptions of those groups who live them on a daily basis. In such experiences, movements, and behavioural patterns we can trace public confidence and feelings of being in space and place, not just in the alignment of design to good practice or professional standards. The experience of interface zones and urban parks in Belfast[62] asserts that good practice design that lacks understanding of territorial contestation or local geographies of division would only serve to reinforce division.[63]

Tracing an architecture of conciliation

Major developments and investment programmes followed the Good Friday Agreement, marking a significant shift towards a widely desired model of a pluralist and shared city. Led by the Laganside Development Corporation, and aided by a mid-2000s economic boom, regeneration, revitalisation, and redevelopment became the main driver of the economy. With capital transferred into assets, multiple fast-growing architecture and public buildings emerged. High-rise office buildings, large shopping malls, and residential developments supplemented conflict tourism and new attractions in Belfast, built using grants attached to the Good Friday agreement.[64] As part of the analysis of the post-Troubles' evolution of architecture and public spaces in Belfast, design statements and major commercial projects offer a good indicator of a journey back towards a vibrant urban landscape echoing that of pre-Troubles times.

The Odyssey sports arena, Waterfront concert hall, and the Victoria Square Shopping Centre illustrate this resurrection of active public space with new buildings in the city centred on art and culture. Complemented

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by the Lyric Theatre on the Lagan riverfront and the Metropolitan Art Centre in St Anne's Square, a diversity of new architecture has added to the sense of confidence, safety, and a measure of control in the city's public spaces. However, the key plan behind such developments is the City's Strategic plan based around five thematically identified quarters, of which the Titanic Quarter is the largest. A significant property development, on the site of the old Harland and Wolff shipyard, Belfast's £7 billion Titanic Quarter is characterised as its signature development. Named after the infamous steam ship *Titanic*, one of the city's proudest engineering achievements completed in 1912, the development has provided a major economic hub centred on public spaces and a mix of offices, hotels, restaurants, apartments, riverside walkways, and the Titanic Commemoration Centre [7].[65]

My point here is that architecture and urban experience can never be separated from everyday engagement with social memory, politics, and intrinsic socialcultural encounters. However, there is no single way to analyse the complexity and interconnectedness of diverse components of cities.

Thus, layering a city's narratives to render visible its inherent dynamics appears to be the most effective approach to achieving this target. A previous study has shown that the planned design of integrated urban landscapes did not usually result in effective mechanisms for cross-community engagement.[66] In fact, standard design principles and processes do not normally succeed in achieving change if not informed by local sociocultural structures and territorial interests. This study, on the other hand, will now build narratives of the architecture of public space in the city centre to indicate how those visual and architectural markers can reflect a culture of confidence in safe and equally accessible public spaces.

The architecture of fear in Belfast's city centre
During the period between 1969, when the British Army was first deployed on the streets of Belfast, up until the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 architects were faced with the dilemmas of severe social segregation and uninterrupted destruction. With the highest level of social destruction and bloodshed

in the early 1970s, there was an immediate requirement for temporary defensive design and protection around political buildings due to the sustained threat of attack. Yet, as noted by Paul Stollard, with the evolution of an IRA campaign to break the economic strength of the province and, in turn, confidence in a central authority, all buildings connected to Belfast's economic life became a potential target.[67] This produced a series of design principles based on of security and protection. The most devastating was the reduction of openings on ground-floor façades.[68] To make a particularly vulnerable building as secure as possible, design measures had an extremely adverse effect on adjacent public space. Long term, this has proved a counterproductive method, producing disengagement and inward-looking architectures, and deserted and hence more dangerous public spaces. As Stollard explains:

Every architect working in Northern Ireland became conscious that any of the buildings he [sic] *was designing might be attacked. So there was, developed of necessity, a whole new series of forms, ideas and techniques to cope with the problem* [...] *For the many buildings that were potential targets or in dangerous locations, anti-terrorist design became very important.*[69]

The architectural impact of the Troubles is most obvious in the design of the British Telecom building. As a symbol of British authority, it would naturally have been a prime target. Hence it was designed to be heavily protected, fortress-like, with a defensive outlook. On the ground floor for example, the main entrance is played down and almost hidden from the street, located within a separate single-storey structure to the side of the main building. Furthermore, the windowless ground-floor façade was separated from the pedestrian pavement by a set of chained, concrete bollards along the entire length of the façade. This sought to ensure that vehicles, and car bombs in particular, were kept at a clear distance from the building. Combined with the stark lack of openings on the ground floor and the line of bollards, the outcome was unsurprisingly an uninviting street façade. There was no apparent attempt to engage the building with pedestrian life, creating a threatening atmosphere along such a public route. This approach to safety-first design has left a clear impact on the surrounding public realm. As Stollard notes: 'Certainly this not the most attractive area of Belfast, but it is very close to the city centre and could have been designed more sympathetically [...] at the most one's only reaction to the building is to drive past it quickly.'[70]

8a

8b

8a **Grand Central Hotel, Royal Avenue, before it was demolished, 1929.**

8b **The Castlecourt Shopping & Office complex façade, Royal Avenue, designed by BDP Ostick & Williams Architects, Royal Avenue.**

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The construction of Belfast's Westlink Motorway and Inner Ring Road infrastructure projects can be seen from this perspective as a thick line drawn around the centre to contain political violence and isolate potential access to offenders. Similarly, we can understand the erection of a 'Ring of Steel' in 1971, designed to remove potential exposure to bombs and/or rioting from the commercial core of Belfast.[71] As noted by Ken Sterrett, Mark Hackett, and Declan Hill, a great amount of effort went into creating a more inward-facing city centre that turned its back on the newly constructed road infrastructure.[72] The result of such obscene buildings and infrastructure can be considered as doing more to remove people from the streets and replacing them with cars. Ronald Wiedenhoeft and William H. Whyte agreed that the barrenness generated by fortress-like inward-looking façades contributed to encouraging people to move by car, as opposed to on foot or bicycle, for safety purposes.[73] However, an enforced security zone also saw the total removal of cars from many urban spaces, coupled with the use of concrete-filled drums connected by scaffolding poles in a reminiscence of warzones and checkpoints.

Narratives and memories of fear are by no means distant to the current urban structure of Belfast's city centre as I see it today.[74] In order to reverse the damage of its history of security measures, local planning authorities were determined to counter the image of a 'city at war' by introducing 'retail-led regeneration and capital investments'.[75] A leading statement in the departure from this history of fear was the heavily subsidised development of Castlecourt Shopping Complex, built in the late 1980s. Sitting on the site of the demolished Grand Central Hotel, the Centre was seen as a progressive message about the departure from the past and confidence in the future [8]. During its prime, the previous structure was Ireland's finest hotel and it was highly regarded as a beautifully ornate piece of Victorian architecture, contributing too to Belfast's social history and providing essential pedestrian relationships along Royal Avenue, Belfast's major artery within the commercial core of the city. The political vision behind the 'internationally' designed Castlecourt Shopping Complex, with vast glass façades, was criticised because of the loss of the previous historic and city-invigorating façade and, consequently, character. However, local government took the decision to use its new architecture to send a message. The initial design by Building Design Partnership, a pastiche design with neo-Victorian inward-looking façade, was therefore flatly rejected: 'The aesthetic, it was argued, needed to communicate a confidence in the future, it needed to be bold and progressive, and it needed to signify that Belfast had a role to play in the modern international world.'[76] The new massive and long glass and steel building, by contrast, has three different entrances, each on one of its surrounding streets but yet it is largely inwardly focused with only one shop gateway other than the entrance. Because of its sheer scale, it disconnects passers-by from its activities. This stands in contrast with its predecessor and other successful preconflict structures like the Co-Op. While intended as a symbol, it remains protective and defensive rather than open and engaging. Jan Gehl sheds light on such isolations. He stresses that:

Big buildings with long facades, few entrances and few visitors mean an effective dispersal of events. The principle, in contrast, should be narrow units and many doors.[77]

Gehl defines the relationship between a ground-floor façade and the pedestrian use of adjoining public space as a pivotal moment of eventuality and opportunity. Numerous small shop fronts and individual units offer the impression of a shorter distance to travel and, therefore, can make a journey less taxing and more appealing. With no visual barriers, the sense of continuity of lively engagement is paramount. The threshold between the street and the in-building spaces diminishes, merging two spatial and social spheres into a conjoined landscape. In this sense, shop fronts create a series of interesting stimulations, varied vistas, ledges/seating, human interactions, and, in general, a far more rewarding experience than, say, that of approaching a large shopping centre or building block. This offers a significantly more attractive social experience, attracting more pedestrians and therefore creating a higher level of pedestrian life. The extent of the impact on pedestrian activity caused by the surrounding ground-floor façades will be crucial to further develop my argument here.

Tracing defensive architecture and spatial practices

According to Peter Shirlow and Brendan Murtagh, divided cities are places where policymakers and politicians project an image of normality despite the facts of social injustice, victimhood, and harm. Interested in the sociopolitical focus on territoriality and ethnic sectarianism, they argue against the commonly held view that the city of Belfast is emerging out of conflict and into a new era of tolerance and transformation.[78] They assert that segregation, lived experience, and fear remain key issues that undermine democratic accountability and emphasise the politics of territoriality, policy, and decision-making, and community participation as a defence mechanism for communities.[79] Such attitudes inevitably lead to the reproduction of segregation, sectarianism, and further division in Belfast's divided landscape. In this context, demolishing a highly iconic historic building in Belfast – such as York Street Co-Op or Grand Central Hotel – is much easier than demolishing a small Peace Line separation wall. While the former is an economic and business decision, the latter requires years of intercommunity resolution and agreement.

Imprints of the successive loss of key venues left a deep scar in the public psyche, coinciding with the evolution of defensive architecture and its profound impact on everyday public spaces, creating isolated enclaves and, at times, putting communities under siege. Richard Kirkland reflects on ruptured urban

9   Peaceline Walls in
    Belfast: (a) Royal
    Avenue security
    gates, 1979;
    (b) Northumberland
    Street Gate and
    Interface Zone, 2018.

9a

9b

fabric pulled between its contrasting past and present, stressing that '[t]o write the city, to make it visible, is to stress its place in spatial territory yet also to perceive its contemporaneity through narrative within the process of a fragmented history.'[80] Partitioning urban fabric and neighbourhoods with walls is not the only feature of this defensive architecture, which took multiple forms, shapes, and sizes.[81] Hostile bonfire structures, timed gates in the Peace Lines, and murals are among a few features *[9]*. New public buildings, with art and culture programmes like the Lyric Theatre and the inward-looking Metropolitan Arts Centre (MAC), display disguised instances of secure solid perimeter walls. They maintain limited and controlled entry points that offer only glimpses of defensive mechanisms in the city's public sphere.

Indeed, the implementation of defensive architecture and urban design during and after the Troubles altered the entire fabric of the city: its urban character, routes of movement, public infrastructure, and services. Colin Coulter and Michael Murray capture the shifting realities of a troubled society in the throes of change and transition from war to normal urban life, examining the shifting cultural identities and practices of an increasingly polarised public sphere. Scott A. Bollens examines how nationalistic, ethnic conflict penetrated cities, highlighting the influence of independent urban policy on the longevity of the non-violent conflict,[82] while Murray questions the relationship between the intentions and outcomes of urban containment policy in and around Belfast during the Troubles.[83] Looking at the institutional frameworks of governance, operations, and centralised planning by civil servants, he reports that the politics of division was a key factor in shaping town and country planning policy of what to become a sectarian state. In a sense, design and planning practice and governance have emboldened and embodied the state of sectarian division.

The appraisal of public spaces in Belfast's city centre would, therefore, offer an insight into the impact of architecture and spatial design on public confidence and pedestrian activity in the public space. As residents and visitors experience the city as a labyrinth on the ground, they cannot grasp it as a whole unless seeing it from above in the form of a map. The impression at street level at any given moment is, therefore, fragmentary and limited: spaces, buildings, streets. For Burton Pike, these impressions are primarily visual but involve a crowd of memories and associations.[84] Using objective measures of the flow and frequency of movement as indicators of safe and social engagement in Belfast public spaces is seen as a practical reflection of how different communities and groups have confidence in and are comfortable being in shared public spaces. Here, I emphasise the notion of cohabitation, living, and conscious socialisation within a framework of *shareness* that is different from the mere tag of shared space.[85] Public spaces, in this sense, can show how successful planning initiatives and design strategies have been in transforming the once most vicious and insecure urban spaces in Europe. Design methods, strategy, and decision-making behind façade attributes can be successful in such transformation to produce a well-populated and socially active public space.

Public squares in the city centre are designed to act as civic spaces, while an ever-increasing number of pedestrian streets limit vehicle traffic and increase the footprint of trading and recreation outlets on the streetscape in the zones in-between both the Catholic and Protestant Communities. Public spaces have an influential impact on pedestrian activity and enable measurable findings that inform our understanding of shared spaces in the city. Due to the number of users and the scale of spaces, the research team identified Belfast city centre with its heavy capital investment to examine the notion of *shareness* in public space through modes of spatial design that encourage and discourage public engagement with buildings. In this respect, commercial, touristic, and retail aspects of Belfast city centre, including the adjoining Cathedral Quarter – the cultural district of the city – have been a diverse and safe zone for the good part of the past two decades. Such prescriptive geographical limitation enabled a greater understanding of Belfast's shared public spaces, as an active domain of engagement and interaction between both communities.

The following study was conducted in two phases: fieldwork and data gathering conducted between 2012 and 2015; followed by a series of historical and theoretical analyses between 2018–20 where initial research findings were revisited to enable a better and deeper understanding of the impact of memories of conflict and its events. The work thus navigates the impact of Belfast's changing demographics and development deep into the stable period of 'spatial reconciliation'.[86] The investigation of three public squares and one pedestrian street were been selected to be of similar scale and pedestrian capacity, have similar functions, have similar amenities, ground coverings, and equal proximity to attractions and transportation links [1 refers]. The chosen spaces are: Custom House Square; Writer's Square; St Anne's Square; and Fountain Street.[87] All are located within the city centre with similar proximities and attributes to the busy day and nightlife in the city as well as in-between both communities zones. This level of comparability allows the study of differences in activities, façade design, and building functions, to give a clearer indication about the impact of façade attributes such as: permeability; variety; number of openings; materiality; detailing; and visual contact.

Careful observation of each of these public spaces illustrates the pedestrian use of the space, at what times, and for what purpose it is used. These observations indicate overall patterns and flows of either community activity within public spaces in or around squares and adjacent building façades. For the results of the observations to be as representational as possible, they were carried out at various stages of the week, during a typical working week at three time periods: morning, lunch, and afternoon. This takes into consideration the potentially high level of pedestrian activity possibly caused by the influx of pedestrians that travel into Belfast and infrequence of community presence and engagement. It was equally essential to carry out observations during the evening, post-6pm and during the weekend to explore different aspects of the city with its active nightlife, but also reactions to lower occupancy and the consequent vacancy of public space. To understand the behavioural patterns of users and passers-by, the research team undertook a series of street interviews at each of the four public spaces with pedestrian users of the space, in the form of short, multiple-choice questionnaires designed to gain a detailed personal account of the public space. A total of 174 street interviews were completed, at intervals within a typical working week as discussed. We also set up a video camera in each of the spaces. Data collected provided a real-time pedestrian map of the public space, outlining routes within the space and, in turn, any trends corresponding with the condition of building façades lining the public space.

Mapping sociospatial practices
Custom House Square
Designed by Samuel Ferris Lynn in 1856, Custom House is one of the oldest public institutions in Belfast and was designed in the neoclassical style of the High Italian Renaissance. It has four distinctively different façades. The elegant building conveys the power of the British Empire under Queen Victoria and the commercial success of Belfast as it expanded rapidly in the nineteenth century. The steps of the Customs House formerly distinguished themselves as a forum for public debate, and for many years religious, political, and social speakers addressed audiences here, up to the 1950s. The Square was restored back into the public realm in 2005, removing car traffic and reverting the space back to its original use of 'Speakers' Corner'.

The formality of the institution here resulted in a disconnection with surrounding buildings on the ground floor level, leaving the space vacant and deserted most of the year, although called-upon for civic protests and action [10]. Most recently, the square was the venue for Black Lives Matter protests and the accompanying solidarity campaign on 26 Sep 2020 [11]. Bordered by formal establishments such as the Customs House, with its defensive impermeable façade, the main view at eye level is of small windows covered with iron bars, offering very little interaction. As a result, this public space is largely unused throughout a typical week, with most users simply passing through, accessing surrounding buildings. With significant commercial and office space located around the square, the number of users largely declines after 5pm. However, with associated nightlife in the form of bars, restaurants, large concerts events, and clubs within proximity and the added security provided by adequate lighting, the average number of users remains relatively unchanged at night and/or during the weekend.

Writer's Square
Central to Cathedral Quarter's cultural, literary tradition, and art life, Writers' Square has received much design attention to restore and increase overall pedestrian life, eliminating antisocial

behaviour. The space is entirely pedestrianised, close to Royal Avenue and with clear public access off North Street and Donegal Street. Its proximity to a range of bars, restaurants, and cafés as well as public buildings such as Belfast Central Library, the University of Ulster and Metropolitan Art Centre ensure active public life and fluid pedestrian flows throughout the day. During the square's redevelopment, Laganside Corporation emphasised the materiality of the ground covering, incorporating a series of literary inscriptions from Irish writers. Mike Smith, Laganside Corporation's Chief Executive, stated in 2002 that: 'Literary Inscriptions will ensure that Writer's Square is welcomed as somewhere to enjoy, and a place to gather inspiration rather than pass through.'

Shops located on William Street and Church Street had a peripheral connection and eventually failed to capitalise on the civic nature of the area. Many closed, leaving graffiti-covered shutters as the predominant street façades. The ground-floor façade, including the main entrance, consists of large sections of opaque glass, providing no public interaction, providing a sense of negligibility that drives users into simply passing as quickly as possible. Instead, being a hub for socialising, pausing, and relaxing, the space deters pedestrian

activity, giving pedestrians little reason to stop. This results in a large decline in the average number of pedestrian users after 5pm, and the stretches of shuttered, black façades make for intimidating and unsafe viewing [12].

St Anne's Square
Conceived within a brownfield redevelopment completed in 2009, St Anne's Square in Belfast's Cathedral Quarter is a main public space and is one of Belfast's youngest. It is located within walking distance of the commercial core, Royal Avenue, and is positioned directly behind the historic St Anne's Cathedral [13]. This ensures that the public space is substantially related to Belfast's historical culture as well as being an element of its developing urban fabric. The inward nature of the open courtyard form enforces a sense of both isolation and exclusivity that offer very little integration or connection to the pedestrian life surrounding it. The square becomes a destination itself, as it is the most remote and distant from rival community residential areas.

Although it could be argued that this pastiche neoclassical form, inspired by the Italian Piazza, granted the square controlled entry points marked by colonnaded entrances, it remains an inward-oriented space with the outward facing, external façades largely impenetrable. The colonnades can be seen particularly along the ground-floor façade with double-height, oversized columns and decorative features. Overlooking the space are restaurants and cafés, an apartment building, and the Metropolitan Arts Centre designed by Hackett Hall McKnight Architects, all providing public interaction directly within the space. Yet a largely solid outward façade is presented to surrounding streets. The combination of materials, offset openings, changing levels and
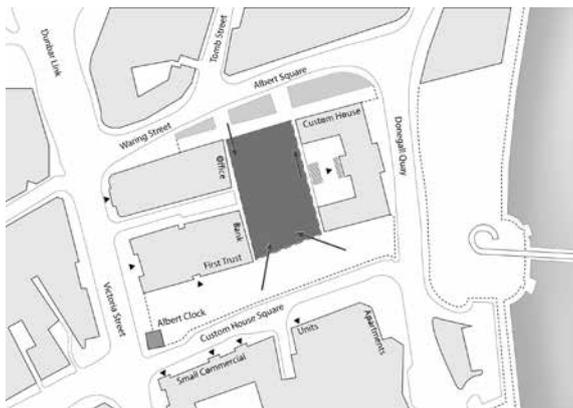
10a

10 Custom House Square: area: 5,500 sq m; average no. of users: 5–10 per min.

10b

heights in the MAC creates a greater inward interactive façade. Due to the nature of the associated restaurants, cafes, and apartment buildings, along with the surrounding nightlife of the Cathedral Quarter, the average number of users is largely unaffected during the evening and weekend. This is arguably heightened by a sense of passive security provided by the surrounding buildings, all of which admit much-needed light into the space.

Fountain Street
In contrast with the other three studies, this pedestrian street has become one of central Belfast's busiest commercial routes. The street runs parallel to Donegall Place and Royal Avenue with direct access off Donegall Square [14]. In addition, its relationship with Belfast City Hall, as well as Linen Hall Library, located on the street, cements this public space in Belfast's heritage. Its location ensures its position as Belfast's commercial hub close to public transport, retail centres, and large office buildings, potentially accompanied by significant pedestrian life. Located so close to Belfast City Hall, it has the benefit of a continuous flow of tourists and weekly shoppers, as well as city centre-based workers.

Taking advantage of this location, Fountain Street benefits from highly permeable shop fronts and active social frontages within a pedestrian and vehicle-free environment. Buildings lining both sides of this street encourage public users through engaging ground-floor façade treatments, either as a retail stores, cafés, or restaurants. Various ground-floor retail units offer a range of short, varied façade treatments and functions, running the full length of the public space. This, in turn, results in greater permeability and social interaction between the interiors and the public space outside. The number of eateries along this street, providing ample outdoor seating, encourages a 'stop-and-stay' culture to be adopted, considering different intervals of the public space. Due to predominantly retail and office

facilities nearby, the street becomes under-used after 5pm. This is due to the lack of available nightlife along the street, in the form of bars, restaurants, and nightclubs. The number of retail units closed off and protected at night with shutters results in a defensive and somewhat threatening street, with little light omitted from the ground-floor façades into the public space.

Fear in disguise
From the outlook of typology, spatial organisation, and accessibility, the four public spaces studied here are typical of any medium-sized British cities. Their distinctive quality in revealing Belfast's transition to the normality of a pluralist city does not come through the mere reading of their spatial or architectural characteristics. Looking in-depth, however, can offer more about the nature of design, user attitudes, and the impact of ground-floor permeability, as follows:

Design decisions and compromises
In analysing key design attitudes to recent development, such as St Anne's Square, one cannot escape linking the inward courtyard-centred space, with narrow and controlled entry points, to the defensive mechanism used to cordon public spaces during the Troubles, but done in a subtle manner. The design of St Anne's Square divides outdoor public space into two categories: the controlled and safe courtyard space with permeable perimeters and soft thresholds; and the uncontrolled and unpredictable streets beyond to which solid walls and limited entry points are presented.

When the outdoor space is of this second modality, as is the case for the Custom House Square and Writer's Square, little room is granted to openings and direct access between public space and interior space. Those, if they exist, will be more controlled, opening to small-scale retail units or highlighting secure building entrances. In this instance, the

secure entry point retreats from the public space to inside the building. This makes the space hard to inhabit after dark with the absence of workers and shoppers. Some antisocial behaviour does occur, therefore, and the space could be taken over easily in the evenings by different groups. While antisocial behaviour or antagonistic attitudes are normal in public space and could easily be dealt with by police, those instances are more sensitive in Belfast due to community affiliations and antagonistic politics. Hence, such a range of spaces and design strategies do translate to a series of decisions for the architect

12a

and urban designer. They need to consider the compromises they have to make to provide a safe environment and ensure the flow of people and users, yet within a defensive and controlled environment that potentially anticipates the worst.

Open space should thus not be hidden or sunken into inaccessible space because it then increases its isolation and, as a consequence, reduces frequent occupation and a sense of public engagement. According to Whyte:

> *Unless there is a very compelling reason, open space should never be sunk. With two or three notable exceptions, sunken plazas are dead spaces.*[88]

This argument regarding the significance of sight, and how public space is perceived by its users, is backed up by Gehl and others, who agree:

> *While sight and hearing are our remote senses, smell, touch and taste are activated at a closer distance […] Ground-floor facades have a far greater emotional impact on us than our perceptions of the rest of the building and the street.*[89]

In considering design in this context, arcades and mid-block passages should not prevent people's diversion from pedestrian streets and public squares. The human sensory apparatus is designed to perceive and process sensory impressions at a speed of 5 km/h. Taking this into consideration, the need for city
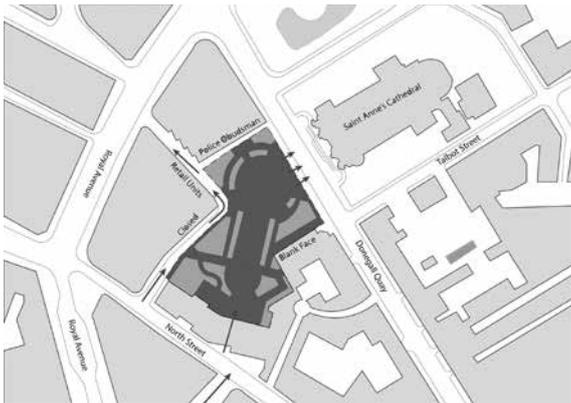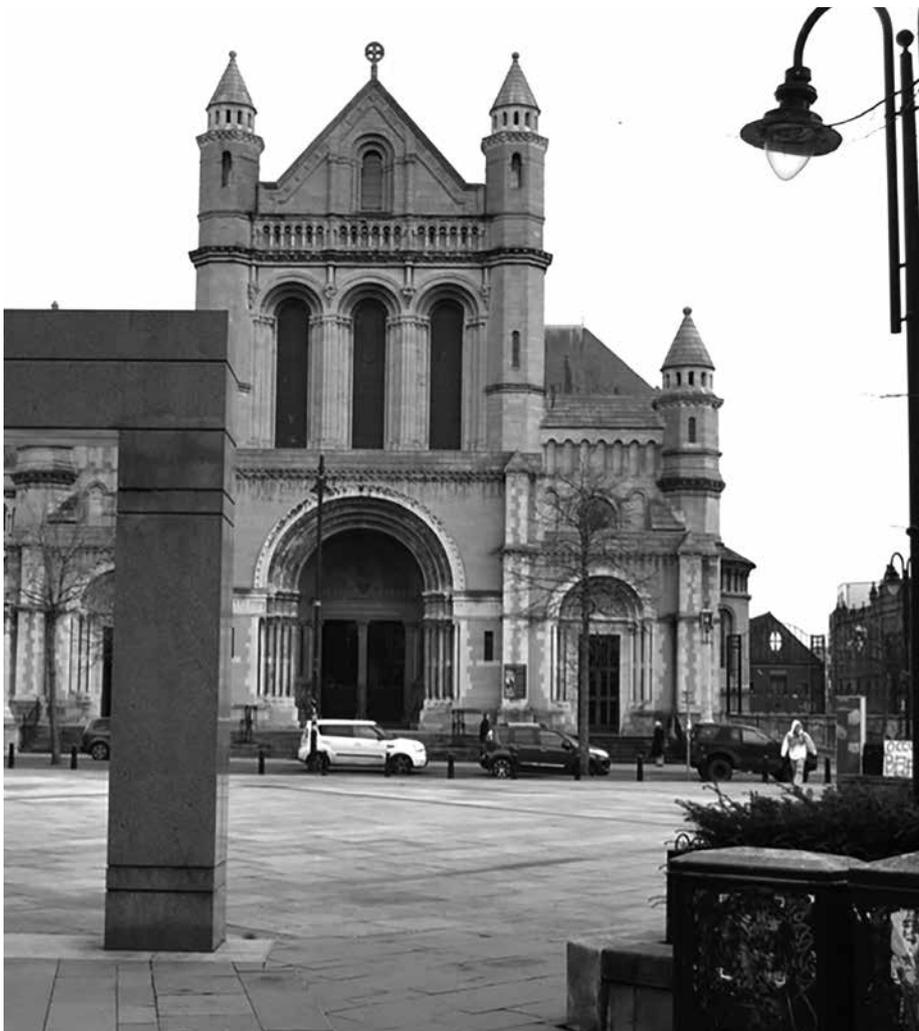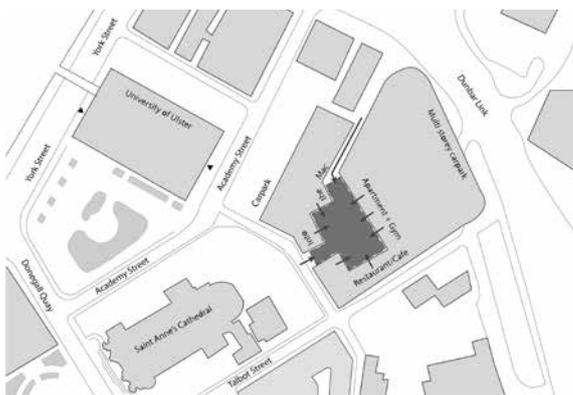
12b

12 Writer's Square: area: 3,400 sq m; average no. of users: 5 per min. View from North Street into Writer's Square. St Anne's Cathedral is in the background.

13a

13b

centre architecture that works at such speed can be supported by ground-floor façade treatments that deliberately slow movement.

Interesting and provocative ground-floor façades can have a positive impact reciprocally enriching activities inside buildings and those on the street. Gehl and others reiterate this argument:

> *Modern cities have much confusion between these two scales. Pedestrians are often forced to walk in 60 km/h urban landscapes, while new urban buildings are designed as boring and sterile 60 km/h buildings on traditional 5 km/h streets* [...] *The need for good 5 km/h architecture along pedestrian routes remains unchanged.*[90]

Jan Gehl and Lars Gemzoe argue most people assert that unattractive façades are 'large units with few or no doors, no visible variation in function, closed or passive façades [and/or] monotonous façades with lack of detail; nothing interesting to look at'.[91] Furthermore, according to the same analysis, 'new buildings and poor design' are number three in the list of things that users dislike about the city centre. This seems to indicate a strong, positive relationship between older, more ornate buildings and pedestrian activity within the public spaces they border. Wiedenhoeft asserted that older buildings seem more engaging to pedestrians, possibly due to the amount of detail, craftsmanship, colour, and texture that is required to satisfy a basic level of psychological needs.[92] But they also invoke memories, mystery, and questions about their histories. In this sense, the ambitious politically driven message beyond the replacement of the ornate Grand Central Hotel with the glass façade of the Castlecourt Development might have been counterproductive in how visitors feel safe and engage with the building.

User and visitor flow, spatial pattern, and demography
When we verify this analysis with information about the users of the spaces studied and the frequency of their journeys, the picture becomes clearer. Based on

13 St Anne's Square: area: 1,300 sq m; average no. of users: 5–10 per min. Colonnaded entrance towards St Anne's Cathedral.

13c

sample interviews, four-fifths of the pedestrians in Fountain Street lived within the borough of Belfast, with 20% being from outside the city. This is quite low compared to Writer's Square, where 35% of all pedestrians were visiting from outside Belfast, two-thirds of whom were foreign tourists, highlighting the relative importance of adjacent St Anne Cathedral as a factor. The figure compares to those interviewed within St Anne's Square and Custom House Square – touristic and less commercial destinations – which experienced a similar percentage of pedestrian users residing outside of Belfast.

Numerous pedestrians interviewed across the four public spaces are residents from nearby and surrounding areas that experience a high level of ethnoreligious segregation. As a result, when classified by area of residence and ethnoreligious

background, the four sites reported high numbers of users living within areas considered to be completely or almost completely segregated. Among the four public spaces, Custom House Square experienced the highest amount (84%) of pedestrian users reported to be living within an area of such levels of segregation and with only 4% of those interviewed to be living within areas considered as 'neutral'; that is, an area not considered to be predominantly Protestant or Catholic. Although the remaining results can be considered less extreme, the percentage of pedestrian users classified as living within completely or almost completely segregated areas was relatively high, with an average of 64%. Driven by middle-class professionals, St Anne's Square expectedly reported the highest number (24%) classified as living within a 'neutral' area [Table 1 refers].

Across the four public spaces studied, a minimum of two-thirds of pedestrians live in predominantly Protestant segregated areas, reflecting more confidence in socialising in the city centre – the centre of power in the city with good policing presence. Custom House Square, along with Writer's Square, reported the highest level of segregation, with 80% and 81%, respectively, of all those interviewed living within a predominantly Protestant area. However, all segregated public spaces reported a majority of pedestrian users living within a predominantly Protestant including Fountain Street, with one-third classified as living within a predominantly Catholic area.
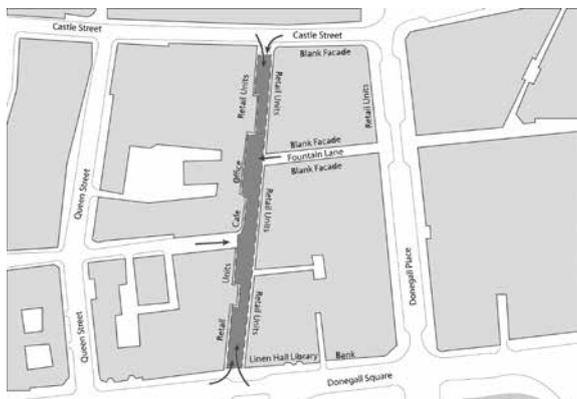
14a

14b

14 Fountain Street: area: 2,100 sq m; heavily used pedestrian route. Ground-floor façade from Donegall Square.

The purpose of visiting a space has a direct relationship to the frequency of visits. Both Custom House Square and St Anne's Square, dominated by office and bank buildings, public services and leisure places, experience a significantly higher proportion of regular visiting pedestrians coming for work (the former) or living (the latter) and therefore two-thirds of all those interviewed within Custom House Square visit the space more than three times a week. Compared to the three remaining public spaces under observation, Writer's Square experienced the least frequent visits, with 27% of all those interviewed visiting the space less than once a month. The deterioration of shopping and retail in the square is related to its location adjacent to segregated areas with a history of violence, resulting in a lack of motive or interest [Tables 2 and 3 refer].

Impact of ground floor façade permeability
The permeability of an urban space's boundaries, and the frequency and permeability of surrounding façades, have a positive impact on the number of pedestrian journeys and length of stay in the public space. This could arguably be relevant to many other city centres. However, in Belfast, those spaces and designs had for long carried the memories of fear of intimidation from antagonist groups, including groups of drunk and antisocial young people.

In the case of St Anne's Square, a high percentage (67%) of pedestrian users interviewed visit the space for leisure, determined by two factors: the restaurants and cafés on ground floor; and the presence of the MAC and a large gym. Subsequently, the same percentage suggested those ground floor outlets were the most likely to encourage them to stay longer

Interviewees		St. Anne's Square (%)	Writers Square (%)	Custom House (%)	Fountain Street (%)
Gender	Male	60	47	55	54
	Female	40	53	45	46
Age groups	15–24	18	29	38	21
	25–34	42	32	29	40
	35–50	38	18	26	28
	51–65	0	0	0	2
	>66	2	21	7	9

Table 1: demographic analysis of users and interviewees.

Respondents Demography		St. Anne's Square (%)	Writers Square (%)	Custom House (%)	Fountain Street (%)
Place of residence	City Centre	16	12	12	5
	Surrounding Areas	56	53	57	75
	North Belfast	28	22	38	6
	South Belfast	24	22	8	22
	East Belfast	0	78	46	47
	West Belfast	48	3	8	25
	Outside Belfast	28	35	31	20
Ethno-religious segregation areas (% of Catholics in Area)	0-20% (Less Cath)	45	53	67	46
	20-40%	0	12	0	12
	40-60%	27	17	5	19
	60-80%	14	6	11	0
	80-100% (Less Pro)	14	12	17	23

Table 2: place of residence of the respondents and ethno-religious orientation of those residing within segregated areas surrounding Belfast's city centre.

Respondents' type of activities		St. Anne's Square (%)	Writers Square (%)	Custom House (%)	Fountain Street (%)
Purpose	Work	4	6	31	14
	Leisure	67	50	38	30
	Passers-by	18	44	31	19
	Shopping	0	0	0	37
	Living	11	0	0	0
Frequency	>3 times/ week	36	38	67	30
	1-2 times/ week	31	15	4	40
	1-3 times/month	22	20	14	28
	>1 time/ month	11	27	14	2

Table 3: main purpose for visiting the public space and frequency.

Mohamed Gamal Abdelmonem | **Fear in disguise**

15 (a) Façades of the MAC
Building on the inner
courtyard of St Anne's
Square, designed by
Hackett Hall McKnight
Architects
(b) The Lyric Theatre on
the Lagan Waterfront,
designed by
O'Donnell+Tuomey
Architects . Both similarly
show long high solid
façades with only one
entry point.

15a

reading 'outdoor menus', chatting, or taking shelter.
The MAC was clearly the most visited. However, the
image of accessibility is only from inside the square.
The image is entirely opposite from the other three
sides which are completely solid. The architecture of
MAC, as clever as it is, breaks the stagnant, disengaging
design of the surrounding street and generates a
higher level of pedestrian user satisfaction despite its
singly and disproportionately small entrance from St
Anne's Square.

Writer's Square, on the other hand, has become
relatively underused, even neglected, with several
retail units lying vacant for long periods. This has
had a substantial adverse effect on users (half of
those interviewed) who have a lack of interest in
spending more time in the space or any feature that
encourages them to stop-and-stay. The proximity of
St Anne's Cathedral opposite encourages large
groups as a substantial landmark, mainly among
tourists and visitors, but only during busy daytime
tours. Morning popularity was eventually countered
by evening hostility that emerged from some of the
existence of minority of anti-social behaviour such as
drinking from the housing block on its edge.

15b

Similarly, most of Custom House Square's journeys
were connected to leisure, influenced by two of
Belfast's most iconic and highly regarded landmarks
within the space, and infrequent evening events,
concerts, or protests. It became clear that, due to its
size and form, the space became attractive to young
people for recreational purposes, notably
skateboarding.

Fountain Street remains the most active public
space in our sample due to its busy flow of frequent

users and shoppers with a large amount of commercial and retail footfall, as well as direct proximity to the well-protected City Hall and main transportation links. Busy shopping environments increased the number of workers who equally activate many services and journeys throughout the day, early morning arrivals, lunch and mealtimes, and after-work drinks. The combination with evening restaurants and bars ensured a high level of interaction at night and increased the level of user satisfaction with available services.

Reciprocal reproduction of memory

The continuing existence of the physical fabric of separation in Belfast, and its associations with dreadful past experiences, influences actions in the present and determines future attitudes. In this sense, the built fabric becomes an object of remembrance that is paradoxical and contested, with different meanings and connotations. At times, political struggle and myths about 'the other' are inherent in the way that individuals use private or public, protective, or defensive space. At other times, architecture and urban space seem to bring society towards a condition where differences are overshadowed by temporal and spatial shared memory.

Active civic spaces once thrived on a sense of congestion, through a combination of active movement between urban spaces and the permeable thresholds of active façades. The flow of people and users in-and-out of buildings provides a sense of security that eradicates the hostile atmosphere of emptiness.[93] According to Gehl, a key measure of a successful public space is the length of time a person remains in that space. Lengthy stays such as standing, sitting, chatting correspond to active characteristics of liveability.[94] In this respect, one must underline Jane Jacobs' ideals of busy, active residential streets as prime components of active communities and safe public spaces.[95] This differentiates between 'spaces for walking' and 'spaces for staying' as a catalyst to investigate factors that could be adopted to create attractive 'space for staying'.[96] The latter relies on several factors, including visual stimulation and aesthetics that stimulate the senses at eye level and ground floor level. The closer someone moves towards a building façade, the upper floors gradually disappear, and only the ground floor remains in comfortable view.

Belfast's public spaces were, and still are, informed by multiple forces, contrasting narratives and positions. To gain an in-depth understanding of how architecture, urban space, and spatial memory are shaped by conflict in Belfast, we should dig deeper into the psyche of spatial practices, patterns, and

attitudes that draw the invisible territorial barriers that remain active two decades following the Good Friday Agreement. Even if violence had come to a visible end, its memories, experiences, and professional implications would have remained powerful in contemporary Belfast. This article offers insights into counternarratives of division and how the urban landscape of shared living can be traced in the spatial practices of ordinary people's everyday lives. Concentrating on the production and consumption of space, this research has drawn on the reality of sociospatial spheres of engagement transcending space, time, and memory.[97] The study examined how architecture and urban design could steer the spatial structure of a divided city like Belfast while downplaying ideas of territorial gain and physical segregation.[98]

The judgement of success or failure in the design and development of such public spaces is, however, multifaceted. It would be misleading to indicate only design issues impacting their frequency of use, or their roles as active social venues in a city like Belfast. The planning and design of public space, including its building façades, directly influence pedestrian activity. For a public space to be lively, be it a public square or a pedestrian street, it must be lined with lively edges – people attract people. Specifically in Belfast however, it is important to pose the question of which people engage with a particular space. As we learned earlier, some groups with antisocial behaviour or antagonistic attitudes to the authority could drive more peaceful, ordinary users away. The proximity of the spaces studied to one community or another, furthermore, limits potential interventions and the capacity of prospective developers to introduce change.

There is clear evidence of the enduring impact of the Troubles on public space in the city. That era leaves a visible scar on Belfast's urban design attitudes and architecture. With increasing concern for safety within the city centre, the architectural response comprised security-led design that nevertheless, in some cases, achieved the exact opposite. The fortress-like nature of some building designs creates quite a threatening public space. It is perhaps better stated by Gehl: 'First life, then spaces, then buildings – the other way around never works.'[99] So, for architects and urban designers, the key to successful engagement with such a specific context and its peculiar demands lies not only in professional standards, and best practices in studying exemplars, but more critically in understanding local memories, grievances, and stories, and the proximity of spaces to psychological, physical, or spatial lines of division.

Notes

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2. Neil Jarman, *Demography, Development and Disorder: Changing Patterns of Interface Areas Report* (Belfast: Institute for Conflict Research, 2004).

3. Dominic Bryan, 'Parades, Flags, Carnivals and Riots: Public Space, Contestation and Transformation in Northern Ireland', in *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, 21:4 (2015), 565–73; Brendan Murtagh, *The Politics of Territory:*

Policy and Segregation in Northern Ireland (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave, 2002).

4. Dominic Bryan, 'Negotiating Civic Space in Belfast or The Tricolour: Here Today, Gone Tomorrow' (2009), working paper online at: <https://www.urbanconflicts.arct.cam.ac.uk/publications/working-papers> [accessed 6 June 22].

5. 'The Troubles', also called the Northern Ireland conflict, was a violent sectarian conflict from about 1968 to 1998 between Protestant unionists (loyalists), who desired the province to remain part of the United Kingdom, and the overwhelmingly Roman Catholic nationalists (republicans), who wanted Northern Ireland to become part of the republic of Ireland.

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Illustration credits

Competing interests

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