A place for play...in post-conflict reconstruction

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abstract

Division within a city is commonplace, if not inevitable, whether geographically, politically, or by income, race or ethnicity. The extreme environment of polarized cities therefore has a significant relevance within urbanism and the study of the built environment of cities in general.

The physical markers of dichotomization imposed on the urban landscape, whether in the form of walls, roads, fences or zones of vacant or patrolled land, become a significant presence and extremely meaningful element within the segregated city, and very much so in any future transformation or redevelopment of the city. The question of how to deal with these physical manifestations of conflict and segregation is a key issue within any post-conflict reconstruction and development within these cities, and is the main concern of this thesis proposal. Belfast, in the province of Northern Ireland, is one such polarized city, with the Peacelines manifesting the sectarian tensions between neighbouring communities and the conflict at large. These Peacelines, and surrounding interface areas are the site of this thesis, which attempts to deal with many of the issues associated with architectural intervention in, and the future possible urban morphology of the polarized city, in a specific and complex urban situation.

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background

The broader area of concern that led to the initiation of this thesis is that of the reconstruction of urban areas following a period of destructive conflict. Within this very wide and unfortunately all too common phenomenon, there arises a distinct delineation, both in cause and effect, of the situations arising from a conflict due to external invasion from a party outwith the country or state’s borders, and those situations caused by an internal or civil conflict. The latter case is of particular interest with regard to a prolonged pattern of the morphology, form and functioning, or malfunctioning, of the city concerned due to the causes of the initial outbreak of violence remaining to exist and effect the city on many levels beyond the perhaps more confined timescale of the period of violent conflict and destruction.

In this specific subset of urban areas, or “contested cities” (Scott A Bollens), where “ethnic and nationalist claims combine and impinge significantly and consistently at a municipal level” (Bollens), the urban area, and public actions within it become saturated with ideological, ethnic and nationalist meaning. There are in excess of forty protracted communal conflicts in the world today (Gurr and Harff ’94), and yet the architectural profession’s involvement in this area of research, in contrast with sociologists, political scientists, economists, geographers, journalists...... has been very limited, and has in general confined itself to a very late stage of invited involvement at a time when all conflict has at least superficially subsided and it is deemed necessary to rebuild or reconstruct what has been lost due to destruction. It is my concern that the late involvement of architects, urban designers, and the design profession in general reduces not only the scope of possible projects and approaches that may be applicable to the city in this condition, but also the broader successes that may be achieved in the long-term resolution of the conflict within the city.

It is from this standpoint that my interest in contested, or polarized, cities emerged.
Division within a city is commonplace, if not inevitable, whether geographically, politically, or by income, race or ethnicity. I therefore see an attempt to work within the extreme environment of polarized cities as having a significant relevance within urbanism and the study of the built environment of cities in general.

There are many existing comparisons and attempts to define the many contested cities that exist globally, such as the scale defining a city’s dichotomization devised by Benvenisti, which ranges cities from mild and normal micro-level conflict over allocation of public resources, through those which show macro-level dichotomy, to those in which polarization has resulted in complete physical partition. In such cities as Berlin pre-1989, present day Nicosia, pre-1967 Jerusalem, there has been examples of this complete partitioning, resulting in significant changes in the physical form and functioning of the city. Today, Jerusalem, and Belfast in the province of Northern Ireland, represent extreme examples of dichotomization, or segregation, while not completely spatially partitioned, combining many of the problems experienced by cities ranged on the scale of dichotomization (Christofidou- 1986 MCP thesis).

The physical markers of this dichotomization imposed on the urban landscape, whether in the form of walls, roads, fences or zones of vacant or patrolled land, become a significant presence and extremely meaningful element within the city, and very much so in any future transformation or redevelopment of the city. The question of how to deal with these physical manifestations of conflict and segregation is a key issue within any post-conflict reconstruction and development within these cities, and is the main concern of this thesis proposal, focusing on the “border”, located geographically, temporally and politically, a place that Lebbeus Woods describes as “the natural place for transformation……, where all kinds of systems collide and abrade”, as an approach to working within this environment.
research

the city

My choice of the city of Belfast as a site for my thesis arises for several reasons, such as accessibility and a certain amount of previous knowledge regarding the situation and place, but perhaps more importantly due to it's status as a very under-studied environment with regards to it's present architectural and urban landscape.

Today, Belfast has left the most violent times of the troubles behind, and there has been significant improvement in the political, economic and environmental situation in the past decade in comparison with the long period of civil unrest following the outbreak of city-wide rioting during the summer 1969, which resulted in the instigation of direct rule by the British House of Commons in 1972. The peace process in Northern Ireland has been far from an easy path, however, with the devolved Northern Ireland parliament at Stormont, established in 1998, being suspended again only last October, a situation which is at present still awaiting resolution.

The city, in terms of it's demographics, economic situation, planning and built environment, can be analysed and understood somewhat removed from the more immediately unstable political status. This is due to Belfast's inclusion within that category of cities experiencing ongoing inter-communal hostilities, the underlying causes of which are unlikely to be fully resolved by any foreseeable political action. Through studying the city as a whole, I have identified several characteristics and issues present in it's nature that I believe have particular relevance with regard to any architectural proposal that might be offered in relation to Belfast's border, or interface areas; segregation and the type, extent and location of the divisions; density and the outward expansion of the city; the changing character of the peripheral residential areas of the city due to ongoing social housing stock renewal; the dislocation of the peripheral residential areas from the character and functioning of the city centre; the restricted activities within the city due to the sectarian tensions; the city's international image.
The current demographics of the population of Belfast show a highly segregated situation particularly in the peripheral areas of the city to the North, East and West. This segregation has a long history in the city and can be considered in a very simplified way as a division on religious and nationalist grounds, between Catholic nationalists and Protestant unionists (the more extreme forms of each side being referred to consecutively as Republicans and Loyalists). Even before the riots of '69, 64% of Belfast households lived on streets with less than 10% of the other ethnicity. Between '69 and '73, the conflict led to 60,000 residents being forced to leave their homes, with 78% of households living on segregated streets by 1977.

City-wide segregation and house to house fighting led to the erection of the 'Peacelines'. These walls of varying construction, height and length, were initially built by the residents of the interface areas as make-shift barriers between the communities during the rioting and were later built in more permanent forms by the army. There are some 35 such peacelines in Northern Ireland, the majority of which lie within Belfast, making the city an example of multi-sector segregation rather than 2-sided partition.
The interface areas surrounding the peacelines have decreased in built density significantly since the 1970's. While large areas of the city centre and docklands areas are undergoing redevelopment, with brownfield sites being utilized for dense mixed use developments and many disused industrial buildings and sites undergoing adaptive reuse strategies for both commercial and residential purposes, the main arterial routes out of the city centre and the surrounding peripheral residential areas remain heavily underdeveloped and sparsely built.

"as a consequence of community division, significant areas of vacant land with potential for development exist along the Peacelines in Belfast and in other areas."

(4.15: BMAP 2015 Issues Paper; DOE)

The nature and timing of this potential development of the interface areas has been a key concern of this thesis proposal.
The ongoing renewal of the social housing stock within these areas has also contributed to the decreasing density of the city. The population of the Belfast Metropolitan Area is currently 660,000 approx., around 20% of which live in the most deprived areas according to the ward ‘multiple deprivation measure’. These areas mainly consist of government owned social housing, with a concentration in the North and West of the city.

The current projections by the Department of the Environment for Northern Ireland state that 51,000 new houses are required in the BMA by 2015, with a regional target of 60% to be accommodated within the existing urban area. Although this brown field use strategy is being employed in part, an article in Fortnight Magazine (Alan Jones, January 2003) titled ‘Making a Mess of the City’ states numerous examples of the nature of the enforcement of this policy. In Donegall Pass in the centre of Belfast, 2400 houses were knocked down and replaced by 650 social and 200 private dwelling units, and similarly in the Willowfield area of the city where 515 perfectly serviceable terraced houses were cleared with only 275 to be put back, with the original residents being relocated to more remote peripheral centres of the metropolitan area.

This de-densification can in part be attributed to central mismanagement of the urban housing situation, but is also heavily effected by the preferred housing types and estate layouts, a choice very much influenced by the segregated nature of the city. While the Peacelines constructed of iron fences, brick or concrete walls, etc., can be demolished in a day, the defensive nature and security forces access requirements designed into the newly constructed estate layouts are less easily manipulated, built very much with sectarianism in mind. Belfast now is therefore at a threshold, where not only is it in danger of spreading outwards to the surrounding green field environment, thus destroying one of the cities major resources, but is also headed towards an urban landscape of homogeneous and long-term defensively planned housing estates.
There has been much criticism of the Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan with regard to the deprived residential areas to the North, East and West of the city, with its "top-down approach" not recognising the urgency in these areas. "It is essential that people in both areas should begin to see meaningful action as quickly as possible" (West Belfast and Greater Shankill Task Force Report Feb 2002). This organization is also intent on enhancing the mobility of the residents in the concerned areas, facilitating job seeking outside the immediate area, which is at present limited due to the extreme nature of the segregation and sectarian tensions. This lack of dynamic interaction of the city's poorer areas with the city centre and each other, not only disrupts the city's overall natural morphology in terms of demographic flows and its economy, but adds significantly to the lack of communication and understanding between the two conflicting sides. "Any ethnic group, and that is particularly true in the working class areas of Belfast, usually succeeds in creating and maintaining a comprehensive set of ethnic institutions; religious, educational, political, recreational, etc...preventing them (its members) braving contact with the rest of the community, or at least making such contact unnecessary" (Civil Unrest, PRDU '93).

In such situations where this organizational and institutional completeness is quite high, and particularly in the case of Belfast where communities have always been self-segregated, any strategy that might seek to integrate or homogenize the city's population and identity is brought into question. The project then becomes a question of how to begin to instigate a dynamic relationship between the segregated areas of the city, and with the city centre, while recognizing and not opposing the existing divisions, and the often extreme importance placed by the population on these divisions and ethnic differences. The viewpoint that the population's segregation and the division of the city might not be regarded a problem to solve, but rather a starting point and guide for a future development and morphology of the city in a positive light, is key aspect of the understanding of this proposed project.
In a city so effected by sectarian tensions as Belfast, the behaviour of its population within the public realm obviously is coloured to a greater or lesser degree by these tensions. In the city centre of Belfast, it extremely difficult for the majority of the time any sign of such an occurrence. It is only when looking at the population's behaviour with regard to certain public activity that we realise the great difference here.

When looking at aspects of a population's public activity that require a declaration of any strong sentiment that may be construed as an endorsement of either side of the conflicting parties, we see that here some behaviour inherent and natural in many other populations has taken on a significance beyond it's literal meaning. Examples of this range in the city from the display of colour, the supporting of a sports team, or even a sport itself, to more verbal issues, such as declaring ones attachment to their home, their street, their community, or even their country, in a place where the very legitimacy of the country they are in fact a part of is in question.

These issues are all related to the nature and public display of a personal aswell as a more collective identity.
'If you believed what you read in the papers,' he said 'you'd think civil war was raging everywhere in Northern Ireland. But if you live here, and you think of the troubles, you think of it as happening in certain towns. And if you live in those certain towns, you think of it as happening in certain districts. And if you live in those certain districts, you think of it as happening on certain housing estates.

And if you live in those certain housing estates, you think of it as happening in certain streets. And if you live in those certain streets, you know that the trouble is being caused by the man at the end of the road in the house with the blue door. We are all in the house with the blue door.'

Carlo Gobier
(Extract from OneBelfast 2008 bid)

In January of this year, it was announced that Belfast had failed to reach the final short-list for nomination as European City of Culture 2008. In competition with other UK cities such as Birmingham, Cardiff, Liverpool, Newcastle, Bristol and Inverness, Belfast had probably the least recent investment in projects that would be likely to convince the jury of their case, but also had by far the most to gain from the potential large economic investment and increase in tourism that is associated with this title.

"Further potential exists, however, to improve the international image of the city and improve it’s attractiveness to visitors."

(BMAP 2015; DOE)

This massive understatement from the BMAP issues paper alludes to a major concern and focus of resources at present in Belfast- that of tourism, and the yet to be achieved potential of the city to be ranked as a major tourist destination amongst the “league of European cities.” The past decade of development in the city centre and the docklands area, such as the Odyssey centre (with arena, multiplex cinema, interactive science museum, shops), are certainly steps taken towards a tried and tested strategy of the redevelopment of many post-industrial cities, particularly within the UK. What such a strategy does not address beyond the potential benefit to the city as a whole in economic terms, is the nature of that city and its population from a viewpoint of what is unique rather than what has the potential to be like and function like other cities. In this light, it seems that if Belfast had managed to gain the title of European City of Culture and the initiation of projects in relation to this, it would have been largely a leap in a direction I believe not to have been fully considered, and which would have missed many opportunities inherent in the city at present.

The present condition of the social housing estates of the city have little effect on this area of discourse at present, and yet their ‘image’ both within the city and externally surely have to be included within the city’s overall perceived image. Within this thesis project, it has been my concern to add this unheard voice to this larger discourse, within the theme of communication in general within the interface areas.
In ‘Collage City’, Colin Rowe speaks of the elements and patterns, and their morphologies, that constitute ‘the city’ through an investigation of many examples. One aspect of this work that particularly resonated with the theme of ‘border’ and urban thresholds is his identification of composite or ‘hybrid’ buildings. Although all are historical examples, they within their form and siting encompass a building typology that reacts to and mediates the two very different urban patterns and scales that lie either side of them.

In Belfast, as mentioned, the peripheral housing estates are at present in a state of flux due to ongoing housing renewal. There exists, for now, a detectable difference between the housing of the two different communities in many interface areas, beyond the existence of the wall, or peaceline, largely due to the fact that in most cases housing renewal has proceeded faster within the majority Catholic housing estates, no doubt for political reasons. This has, however, brought about a physical, recognisable difference between the built form within the territory of each community. Within this coincidental occurrence lies a potential guide for a possible alternative future morphology of these areas, in opposition to the seemingly inevitable progress of the renewal project in a indiscriminating and homogenous way.

The idea of the introduction of a two-sided or hybrid building into a landscape to encourage future diversification of building form either of it's sides, is in some ways the reverse in terms of sequence and timescale of what Rowe identified in his writing. Such a strategy may, however, result in a similar identification of change, border and threshold that these historical examples represent. This two-sidedness or duality became a function of this project for the interface areas.
district cities

In continuing the line of investigation into the nature of thresholds within existing cities, rather than continuing to react to comparable precedents of divided and segregated cities, with their various projects focused around the nature of the division very much with the immediate reconciliation of two opposing sides as primary motives, to look at cities unrelated to this specific phenomenon gives us a broader range of typologies of the urban threshold.

The idea of ‘district cities’, where there are clearly identifiable separations within the city’s fabric, function, population, economy and at times politics, represents a more varied model for a possible future transformation of the city of Belfast.

The city of Paris constitutes many areas varied in historical indigenous resident population, trade and interrelationships with other areas, that while changing in nature to this day, are still identifiably different, without necessarily relying on historicism or conservation to retain these distinguishable characters. One distinctive type of threshold within this city are it’s boulevards. Although a constructed, very controlled intervention into the cities fabric, they today function as not only identifiable elements themselves, but aid the recognition of the crossing of a threshold from one district to another that lie behind the ordered facades of the boulevard.
Through identifying twelve sites throughout the city of Belfast that exhibit the major elements transcribed onto the urban fabric of the effects of the nature and history of the segregation and general situation in the city, such as a reduction in the density of built form, a physical presence of separation, i.e., in the form of a peaceline of some type, amidst the ongoing progress of the housing renewal strategy, I have formed a potential network of projects that can act in conjunction with each other to form a simultaneous, city-wide proposal.

This network has taken on different meanings and phases through its application to the various elements of the developing project. Foremost, it represents a linking of, and dynamic relationship between, the areas of the city currently existing in a state of stagnant isolation from each other and the rest of the city. The instigation of a programmatic element, in this case the actual construction of the architectural intervention itself at the border/interface areas, that has a recognisable, visible presence on each of these nodes along the network, is intended to begin one form of linkage and interaction.
site analysis

The three sample sites, one to the north, one to the east and one to the west of the city show a variety of forms of the division between communities and related physical consequences of the segregation.

The existence of vacant land at the interface between the two communities in each case provides a site for possible intervention, but also the opportunity for the introduction of a building form and construction type that could influence, in form, materials, and density, the possible, and mostly probable near future development of the areas either side of this zone.

Where the line of division is at present in each case occupied already by a built form (that of a peace line), it is the area either side that becomes the site if we are to presume that the current situation does not allow for the removal of the peace line at present.

With the model of the 'boulevard' in mind as a two-sided element constructed by the built form either side of it, as it acts as the marker of a threshold and container for districts behind it's walls, the siting of element in these situation, that attempt to act in a similar way, can be projected through stages of possible development.
programming

The project is intended to enable the three network diagrams adjacent to function at the level of the three main elements of the design: the support/structural spine that forms the permanent delineation of the side edges of the peaceline zone, as the initiation of the future boulevard. the playroom that forms the head condition of this spine, reacting to the specific conditions in each case of where the boulevard ends and addresses the surrounding existing street patterns. the accumulative units that become the inhabitation of the spine and initiate the functioning of the boulevard as a public commercial street.

network_1 represents the rotation around the sites of the equipment/machinery required for the construction of the buildings, both initially and then through the continuing requirement for their services for the successive units built. network_2 represents the importing to the sites in the form of labour and machinery for this construction, and also in the form of specialist in the various fields of 'play' to be accommodated within the playroom. network_3 represents the exporting from the site, both of goods, and of information in both audio and visual forms.
the building systems and components that constitute the interior of the spine, its enclosure, and the accumulative units are manufactured and constructed on-site, using the activity, commerce and possibility for skills training as part of the programming within the project.

the activities within the playroom would be initiated through a program organizing a collaboration between each playroom, and the surrounding community, and existing institution in Belfast's city centre. the range of activities shown are examples of programmes that combine the possibility for a competitive atmosphere to be encouraged, while being of a nature where it is able to achieve a certain degree of recognition and broader respect for achievement within that activity. this element of the program is partially in reaction to the identification of that characteristic of the city where, certain activities being restricted in the public realm, results in a current lack of display of competitive activity and passionate involvement in an a place, activity, or people.

using the existing surveillance infrastructure as part of the unique nature of these interface sites, I propose that the initial construction, progressive development, and programmatic events could be broadcast to a larger audience.
At one of the major crossing points of the longest peaceline that runs west of the city centre for approx. three kilometres, there exists a security gate at present. The surrounding vacant land is at present unusable due to its proximity to this border.

Taking the line of a previously existing road, the boulevard is formed by the buildings on alternate sides of the peaceline, creating a crossroads, with the playroom/head elements marking this point of threshold.
In the predominantly Protestant East Belfast, there is an estate of isolated predominantly Catholic housing, Short Strand, contained by a high brick wall almost entirely encircling the estate.

Adjacent to the entry to this estate, there is a large vacant area of land, and opposite, on the estate side of the road is a large area currently occupied by a bus depot. Taking these two sites that straddle a through road currently not used by pedestrians due to this nature of its location, part of this existing road is adopted and characterized by the placing of the buildings either side, creating a slow zone on the road marking the different territory either side of the road, while creating a possible future pedestrian link between the entrance of the estate and the busy commercial area further along the road.
Cliftonpark area location plan
The site is located to the north of the city, and runs between two link roads from the Crumlin Road to the south to Cliftonville Road to the north along the line of the peaceline.

The proposed pedestrian street would run between these two link roads, between two areas of housing that lie beyond vacant land, secured by a fence, either side of the peaceline.

The head containing the playroom and the radio station forms the start of the street at either end.
first floor plan

ground floor plan

first floor plan
unit types

housing

manufacturing

office unit

north street elevation

shop

workshop/retail
playroom cross section

playroom long section
support/structural spine and playrooms constructed

unit 1 constructed and fabric wall manufactured

the above constitutes phase 1: funded jointly by the British government (DOENI), the local council, national lottery heritage fund, and up to 50% by the EU Peace and Reconciliation fund. Ownership and organization of this structure would be held by each adjacent community under the administration of the Belfast Interface Organization, but with the land remaining under the ownership of the relevant public/governmental body.
eventual removal of peacewall

the spine of the building functions as a small business incubator, with relevant support space and advice centre, and the units are built as required. While businesses own their own unit, their space/services rental from the spine in part funds the programming of the playroom. The mixed use and ownership is intended as an initiator for an naturally evolved streetscape, instigated in preparation for the future use of the interface zone.
construction

The regular bay system of the spine relates in scale and fabric to the surrounding area, while being more dense and continuous, resembling the former row houses and terraces, rather than the newer semi-detached cul de sacs. The variation in the heights and possible circulation schemes allow usage by a variety of future inhabitants and trades.

The choice of a fabric wall system for the enclosure is relevant on several levels. As an easily manipulated fabric and having a translucency and lightweight nature, the perception of this linear element is intended to be different than that of the existing peacewall, while essentially clarifying the territory either side as is the function of the peacewall. Its ability to change easily, revealing the nature and variety of occupation behind, while still being economically comparative with other cladding options, has several advantages.

The structural role of the fabric, which acts not only as an enclosure, but as part of the superstructure in the building's initial phases of usage, is that of cross-bracing for each bay and provides lateral stability for the whole length of the spine.
1. Fin walls constructed in initial phase of building with playroom/radio station.

2. Fin frames structure for floors and ceilings constructed in phase 1.


4. Unit 1: Manufacturing of brace fabric and internal finishes and fittings.

5. Unit brace walls successive units built, each providing lateral bracing for wall structure.

6. Multiple units bracing provided by units renders fabric skin redundant/ removable/changeable.
partial elevation of batten guides for openings

detail of fabric/steel joint

detail section closed
detail section_open

plan detail of wall

construction
steel fibre fabric reinforcement
layout options
two layer option
inner ETFE transparent skin
insulation pockets
removed panels after unit construction
2-layer laminate fabric skin
moment frame brace wall
self-supporting unit construction
construction
There is an ongoing need for the architectural profession to identify and engage themselves in new areas where it may have had little or no participation in the past. The discipline of architecture, if it is to be sustained as a viable profession must seek those contemporary situations where it can make a relevant and valuable contribution. I believe civil conflict is one such area, and that it should be the profession that sets its agenda for involvement, not a competition committee or NGO.

Within this thesis I have attempted to address some of the pressing issues with regards to this area of study where architecture and urban design are very much relevant, such as the question of how architecturally we can define territory and thresholds in a contested environment, what the appropriate timescale and duration of such an intervention might be, and how to make a meaningful architectural proposal without relying on historicism or modes of memorialization for impetus or justification.

I hope my small contribution to and thoughts on this issue have some relevance to a broader picture of an unfortunately widespread situation.
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