BELFAST 400 PEOPLE, PLACE AND HISTORY
EDITED BY S.J. CONNOLLY
We raised a monument of fame
Upon these banks; and thus unfurled
An honoured scroll to Ulster's name,
Neualled yet around the world.

Reflections of a Shipyardman
Thomas Carnduff
Titanic Town: Living in a Landscape of Conflict

Dominic Bryan

The stopped clock of the Belfast Telegraph seems to indicate the time
Of the explosion – or was that last week’s? Difficult to keep track:
Everything’s a bit askew, like the twisted pickets of the security gate, the wreaths
That approximate the spot where I’m told the night patrol went through.
Ciarán Carson, ‘Gate’, from Belfast Confetti

The forces of conflict that have shaped Belfast since the late twentieth century
have been, in many ways, shared with cities all over the world, particularly
those of western industrial countries. The city struggles with modernity as
global capital flows mean that the old manufacturing industries no longer
thrive in the ageing Victorian urban landscape. Labour costs too much, so
that the ships can be built and the textiles woven more cheaply in the Far East.
The local businesses either disappear or become part of bigger multinational
conglomerates. Working-class people start to move out of the central areas
of the city due to the decline in work. The unique stores of the high street
give way to international brands and in turn the out-of-town shopping centre
competes with the high street. Road, rail and air networks struggle to provide
the desired connectivity. Planners attempt to reinvent the city, while local
councils re-brand it. The city that built the Titanic no longer builds ships but, in
the strangest of twists, it sells itself as ‘the Titanic town’.

1968 was a year of global political unrest. Protests took place as far
apart as Yugoslavia, Poland, Spain, Brazil, Germany, Britain, France and
Czechoslovakia. The Civil Rights movement in the United States had
developed into the Black Power movement in the northern cities and there
were numerous protests over the Vietnam War. In London one anti-Vietnam
War demonstration in Grosvenor Square on 17 March erupted in serious
violence. The Civil Rights protests in Northern Ireland, originating a year
earlier, thus developed in a global context. In many ways Belfast in 1968 was
just another urban area of Europe struggling to come to terms with poorly
performing industries and significant political change. Yet it had local
dynamics that were to mean that civil unrest developed in more specific forms. Unsettled by protests, Northern Ireland erupted into violence in the late 1960s, resulting in bouts of what could, in retrospect, be called ethnic cleansing. Parts of Belfast became no-go areas for the forces of the state. On 15 August 1969 British soldiers were introduced into west Belfast to restore order as Unionist and nationalist groups clashed at the boundaries of highly segregated districts. Catholic residents and businesses were burnt and threatened out of Protestant areas and some Protestants in Catholic areas suffered the same fate. The residential demarcation between Catholic and Protestant areas that had always been present became much more severe with violent policing of the boundaries. In working-class Catholic areas the Provisional IRA organized into an efficient non-state paramilitary organization in order to oppose the British presence in Ireland. The legitimacy of the state, particularly in the form of the police, the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), withered in Catholic areas of the city. Loyalist paramilitary groups, the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) and the Ulster Defence Association (UDA), gained significant control of working-class Protestant areas, leading ironically to a further loss in legitimacy for the state that they claimed to support. Modern
Belfast became divided through the widespread use of organized political violence, involving state and non-state actors.

Any discussion of the changing identity of Belfast must begin with the concept of space. This involves more than just the geography of a city divided along sectarian lines. Space is not simply a dimension in the physical world. It is a cultural artefact, which imposes meanings on the people who inhabit it, at the same time that they give it meaning by the way in which they live there. On the one hand there is a direct relationship between the spatial structure of the city and the nature of identity divisions within the city. Planners seek to design or modify the spaces of Belfast to provide more security, or to improve living facilities, or to boost the commercial viability of the city. On the other hand, meaning in everyday life is reproduced through the lived experiences in the landscape in which people reside and move. In the case of Belfast, the dominant experience of many parts of the city in the last three decades of the twentieth century was high levels of organized political violence. Sandy Row, the Shankill, the Falls, the New Lodge were not just residential areas in Belfast, they were stages for that violence. For some they were a safe refuge, while to others they were places of fear. The Europa Hotel was not simply a hotel but was reputed to be the most-bombed hotel in western Europe since the Second World War. The Rex bar in west Belfast, the Avenue bar in east Belfast, the Felons club on the Falls are more than just bars, as they carry with them important political meanings. The fatal bombs at McGurk’s bar and the Abercorn restaurant mean these places no longer exist; but they reside in people’s memories of the city. And beyond the everyday, the city is re-imagined by artists, writers, poets and singers in murals, poems, books and songs. The city is narrated through the poems of Ciaran Carson and the murals that cover many gable wall ends.
The distinctive nature of territorial division in Belfast at the start of the twenty-first century is dominated by class, ethnicity, gender and age. This is true of both the residential areas and the ‘civic’ centre of the city. A host of archives, recordings and memories reveal what it was to be a young unemployed man in west Belfast in 1969 compared to being a middle-aged mother living in the same place. Growing up in the middle-class Malone Road area and drawing a pension on the Newtownards Road in east Belfast offered very different social spaces within the same city. Belfast is both ranked by the same differentials of class and status that exist in other urban centres, and polarized by its more distinctive ethnic and religious conflicts. And the nature of its spaces changed dramatically through the 1980s and 1990s. The forces of capitalism and ethno-national violence combined to make Belfast in the early twenty-first century almost unrecognizable from the city convulsed in 1969.

**Belfast 1969**

Belfast in 1969 was mostly industrial on the outside and mostly Unionist on the inside. Tall red chimney stacks emanating from mills and factories stood in contrast to the small chimney stacks of the two-up two-down working-class houses that accommodated much of the population of the city. In many areas the housing stock was poor, often lacking basic amenities. Like Glasgow, Liverpool and Bristol it had a civic pride built on modernity and Britishness. The ostentatious City Hall was surrounded by statues of the industrialists who built the city and stood next to the Cenotaph that recalled the sacrifice of so many of its citizens in the defence of Empire. As the capital of Northern Ireland, Belfast had a status greater than those other British cities of shipbuilding and trade. The grand Parliament Buildings at Stormont in the east of the city stood testament to this. Yet unlike those comparator cities, Belfast was on the island of Ireland and its politics reflected the ethno-national politics of the island. Ulster Unionists controlled the Northern Ireland parliament and Ulster Unionists controlled Belfast City Council.

Industrial Belfast was going into decline. The last liner built by Harland and Wolff had been the *Canberra* in 1960. Like other shipbuilding centres across the UK the yard could no longer compete with low-cost producers in the developing world. From 1964 onwards Harland and Wolff made a loss and its workforce fell from 20,000 in 1960 to 9,000 in 1968. Other manufacturing jobs in Belfast had sustained at a reasonable level up to the 1960s, in part due to outside investment by multinational companies. But between 1973 and 1979, while GDP in Northern Ireland grew due to heavy public expenditure, manufacturing industry showed a steep decline. Industrial output in 1988 was...
lower than that of 1973. Between 1973 and 1979 manufacturing jobs were lost at a rate of 3 per cent per year and from 1979 to 1982 at 8 per cent a year. By 1987 the labour force in manufacturing was around 100,000, less than two-thirds of that in 1973. Northern Ireland, with Belfast at its heart, was rapidly becoming a post-industrial society. In 1986 the Belfast urban area had an unemployment rate of 20 per cent and in some areas of the city male unemployment was thought to be as high as 30 per cent."

Unionism dominated the City Hall and the streets. The largest event of the year was the Twelfth of July parade, with thousands of Orangemen marching through the city centre. The Orangemen and their bands took routes from the various Protestant parts of Belfast, meeting at the city centre and heading south along the Lisburn Road towards 'the field' at Finaghy where a religious and political assembly was held. In an early paper on the sectarian divide, Fred Boal describes the symbolic manifestation that accompanied the celebrations. He noted 'the pattern of street decorations in the area running west from the city centre, erected for the Orange (Protestant) July the Twelfth celebrations. The complete absence of decorations in the Falls Road area and their concentration in the Shankill Road area are notable features. By contrast the Irish Tricolour was never allowed into the centre of Belfast and was problematic even when flown in Catholic districts. The Flags and Emblems (Display) Act (NI) 1954 forbade the display of 'provocative emblems'. In 1964 the Revd Ian Paisley famously threatened to march up the Falls Road to remove a Tricolour from the office window of the Republican Party. This forced the RUC to remove the flag, provoking serious rioting in the Falls Road area.
From 1967 the Civil Rights movement offered a serious threat to this Unionist, Orange hegemony. Its main demand was for basic rights for all citizens, particularly focusing on issues of fair housing, jobs and votes, but it also called for ‘guarantees for freedom of speech, assembly and association’ and organized very public events. The Civil Rights movement really had only one success in gaining access to the centre of the city, on 9 October 1968, when the People’s Democracy marched from Queen’s University before being stopped by the RUC and a counter-protest organized by Ian Paisley. They sat down in Linenhall Street. Other than that the police effectively excluded the different elements of the Civil Rights movement from the city.

In May 1969 serious clashes took place between the RUC and Catholics in the area around the Edenderry Inn, also known as Kilpatrick’s, a pub located at the junction of Crumlin Road and Hooker Street. The violence further undermined confidence in the police, and at the same time served as the genesis of one of the most significant boundaries in Belfast. The pub and even Hooker Street itself were soon gone as an interface was created. In July and August further clashes took place around the newly built Unity Flats, a predominantly Catholic area on Peter’s Hill at the bottom of the predominantly Protestant Shankill Road. Riots on the Twelfth of July and again on 2 and 3 August centred on Orange parades. The events on 3 August, which became known as the Battle of the Shankill Road, were largely clashes between the RUC and Protestant groups and prefigured increasing tensions between the police and residents in working-class Protestant areas.
On the afternoon of 14 August the area around the lower part of the Falls Road exploded into rioting, house burning and gunfire. On 15 August, after successive nights of disturbances, the RUC decided to concentrate their resources on defending their police stations in west Belfast. They were thus absent from the streets as serious rioting developed in the Clonard area of the city. This small run of predominantly Catholic streets abuts the Protestant Shankill Road district. Rumours of a possible attack on the Clonard monastery building gripped Catholics in the area. In Protestant areas rumours persisted of gunmen in the monastery. With the police failing to act on information, anxiety and tension eventually broke in the area between Cупar Street and Bombay Street. Barricades were built by the afternoon of 15 August. Stones, petrol bombs and guns were used without any intervention from the RUC. Later in the afternoon a young Catholic man, a Republican, Gerald McAuley, was shot dead. Bombay Street burned andler the end of the evening the British army, having been deployed in Derry earlier, was deployed on the streets of Belfast.

At the end of a day of violence, the Belfast Telegraph described the scene in Catholic west Belfast:

Every street running off the Falls Road is barricaded. Groups of people, many of them wearing crash helmets and carrying dustbin lid shields, were stopping traffic and diverting it away from the Falls Road area. At Howard Street a six-wheel lorry had been turned on its side and set on fire. Other streets in the area had been cordoned off with telegraph poles, lamp posts and paving stones.
The key thing here is to look at the control of space. While the area in which fighting took place was limited, and most areas of Belfast were peaceful, this was not a small-scale civil disturbance. Instead it represented the start of an attempt by groups to control working-class residential space. It was that attempt that was to define Belfast in the years that followed. Civil Rights activists set up Radio Free Belfast while Radio Orange and the Voice of Ulster broadcast to Loyalist areas. In September the army erected barriers on roads between the Shankill and the Falls. These were the first of the physical 'interfaces', boundaries that would endure for decades to come.

The introduction of soldiers clearly marked the crossing of a Rubicon in terms of policing. The legitimacy of the RUC had certainly been problematic but the presence of British soldiers policing British citizens on the streets of a British city was redolent with symbolism. Within this highly contested space, meanwhile, paramilitary groups now began to organize. The perceived lack of defence of Catholic areas in the north led to a split in the IRA, with Provisional IRA becoming the dominant Republican force in Belfast. In Protestant areas, by 1971, the local vigilante defence associations and tartan gangs became the Ulster Defence Association. Some estimates have put its numbers by 1974 as high as 50,000. In 1973 the UDA formed a more overtly paramilitary wing, the Ulster Freedom Fighters (UFF). The UVF, which had murdered three people and been declared illegal in 1966, remained active. Different streets of Belfast were patrolled by the RUC, the British army, UDA, UVF, Provisional IRA and Official IRA, as well as by numerous community groups and similar associations, all trying to establish forms of control.
Acts of violence gave new meaning to the streets. For example, on 1 March 1971 three Scottish soldiers, two of them brothers, were shot at point blank range in the Ligoniel area of Belfast. Two schoolchildren discovered the bodies. Between 9 and 11 August 1971 the army shot 11 men in the Ballymurphy area of Belfast. On 4 December 1971 the UVF planted a bomb in McGurk’s bar in the New Lodge, killing 15 people. ‘When the explosion came, little Marie McGurk and a young friend killed with her were playing cards in the flat above the bar.’ On 21 July 1972 the Provisional IRA exploded 22 bombs in Belfast in just eight minutes, killing nine and injuring 130. Among the dead was 14-year-old Stephen Parker, killed by a bomb on Cavehill Road as he sought to warn people. This became known as Bloody Friday.

A range of strategies were developed by the security forces in order to recover some sort of control, particularly over working-class residential areas. From 3 to 5 July 1970 the army imposed a curfew on the lower area of the Falls Road using 3,000 soldiers, 1,500 rounds of ammunition and 1,500 rounds of CS gas grenades, with four civilians killed, 57 wounded, 18 soldiers wounded and over 300 people arrested. On 9 August 1971 internment without trial was introduced, with the army undertaking dawn raids all over Belfast and other parts of Northern Ireland. They arrested 342 people, all from nationalist
areas, although 103 were released within days. This strategy led to an upturn in violence, and the use of the Long Kesh/Maze prison outside Lisburn opened up a new space in which the struggle for state legitimacy would develop. On 3 July 1972 the army attempted to break down the barricaded ‘no-go’ areas that the UDA had set up in the Shankill, Woodvale and Oldpark areas. The confrontation, reported to have involved 8,000 members of the UDA, was eventually resolved partly by the army accepting the UDA’s right to patrol areas and an army promise to police the boundaries with Catholic areas. On 31 July 1972 Operation Motorman was another attempt by the army to remove barricades from the streets and wrestle back control of space. In Belfast about 5,300 soldiers were used with armoured bulldozers to clear the roadblocks, this time in nationalist areas.

Between 1968 and 2005 around 1,400 people were killed and 20,000 injured by paramilitary and state violence: 85 per cent of these deaths took place within 1,000 metres of an interface, 65 per cent of those killed could be categorized as civilians, and 78 per cent of killings took place in north and west Belfast.74

It is not surprising that violence encouraged political and cultural retrenchment and the physical and cognitive remapping of the city. The reorganisation of space, due to violence, increased separation and reemphasised the fundamentals of ethno-sectarian ‘difference’.71

Aerial view of Woodvale and Ardoyne, west Belfast.
Photograph © National Museums Northern Ireland and Cecil Newman.
Boal suggests that Belfast is a polarized city, as opposed to simply a divided one. A crucial element of his description is that the governing of parts of the city takes place without consensus. "Simple service delivery questions and planning decisions regarding the use of space are transformed into conflicts." By the 1990s 35 of Belfast’s 37 local council wards contained either a 90% per cent Catholic or 90% per cent Protestant population. Violence dominated the urban landscape where many working-class people in Belfast lived in the early 1970s. It was to fundamentally change the shape of the city, particularly in working-class areas of north, east and west Belfast. While the ‘no-go’ areas disappeared, the reality for the forces of the state, the RUC and the army, was that their ability to work in these areas was limited and their legitimacy was challenged. The makeshift boundaries became institutionalized through the building of more permanent barriers and then fences and walls. In April 1971 an internal Government of Northern Ireland report called Future Policy on Areas of Confrontation recommended that the redevelopment of west Belfast, including the new ‘urban motorway project’, take the security situation into account. One paragraph in particular foreshadowed the approach that was to dominate Belfast over the next three decades:

42. (a) As part of the overall development programme, various factories and warehouses will have to be located. Consideration should be given to the possibility of locating such accommodation along the line of confrontation, with high walls forming natural barriers […] (b) Plans for housing adjacent to the line of confrontation […] should be revised to provide more open space particularly on either side of the new natural barrier […] (c) Generally the number of open routes between the Falls and the Shankill (ie the routes which at present have to be controlled by peace-line barriers) should be substantially reduced.

Meanwhile public facilities such as health and leisure centres, public services such as buses, and local businesses all had to adapt to the changed landscape. Roads were closed off and some disappeared altogether as planners and policymakers accepted the security environment.

People’s experience of the city changed behaviour. The normal everyday lives of parents were altered as ordinary tasks such as shopping and looking after children were made more complicated and potentially dangerous. Begño Aretxaga argues that the roles played by working-class women shifted significantly as political activity took place on the doorstep. Schoolchildren developed knowledge of which buses to get on and which to avoid. People would move through the city avoiding certain areas. Formerly vibrant shopping streets such as Duncarrin Gardens in north Belfast found themselves on boundaries and became places people were unwilling to visit. Depending on your background, areas of the city became out of bounds. A simple task such as ordering a taxi would require local knowledge since many cab firms would not
pick up or drop off in certain areas. The damaging effect that the civil unrest had on the bus system in the 1970s led to the adoption of a distinctive mode of transport for citizens wishing to traverse the west and north of city. London-style black taxis served as buses and ran particular routes, with passengers asking to be left off or picked up anywhere along this route. The existence of this alternative transport system led the black taxi to become almost a symbol of resistance in Belfast and many of the Republican political demonstrations in the 1990s would be led by these vehicles.

The people of the city adapted to the new environment. The population of Belfast shifted. Working-class residential areas became more single identity than at any time previously. A Northern Ireland Community Relations Commission report in 1974 suggested that between August 1969 and February 1973 conclusive evidence existed for the forced movement of 8,000 families (6.6% of the population) from their homes in Greater Belfast as a result of intimidation, though it was thought the actual figure could be as high as 15,000. The newly formed Northern Ireland Housing Executive developed policies that took into account the separated neighbourhoods. Separation between Protestant and Catholic became a central factor both in the allocation of housing and in decisions on new building projects. The struggle for resources was effectively polarized. More than ever, Belfast had what Murtagh and Shirlow have described as ethno-sectarian enclaves.

People’s perceptions of parts of the city were constructed around an ongoing use of violence. In examining the spatial formations in Belfast, Allen Feldman describes the interface/sanctuary relationship, the interface being a place of danger with areas farther away being secure. Frank Burton, who worked in west Belfast in the 1970s, described the existence of ‘safe’ and ‘unsafe’ places.

In Belfast one generally walks round parked uninhabited cars with suspicion, casts unnerving glances at unattended parcels, scrambles to get home before it gets too dark, maps out safe and dangerous routes for journeys, all in an effort to evaluate risks which previously could be ignored.

The landscape itself was not only altered by the nature of the violence but also symbolically marked through identity practices amplified by the conflict. For example, parades had always been a potential site of conflict in the city, but the intensification of the territorial divisions and the development of symbols and practices reflecting the conflicting identities magnified the role they played. Parades by the Orange Order became the particular site of confrontation since a number of ‘traditional’ routes moved across what had become more entrenched boundaries. In December 1970 a government commission chaired by John Taylor, then minister of state at the Ministry of Home Affairs, recommended, among other things, a ‘substantial reduction in the number of parades’, that members of Orange lodges in Belfast should make their way to assembly points.
as individuals and not conduct local parades, and that new legislation on parades should take into account community relations. The Orange Order adapted its practices to adjust to the new landscape by curtailing small marches prior to the annual Twelfth of July parades and instead developing larger local parades. In the east of the city Orange parades from Ballymacarrett would inevitably pass by the Catholic area of Short Strand. In the west the annual Whitrock parade on the last Saturday of June had a route that took it across the Falls/Shankill boundary and on to Springfield Road. In the north, parades coming from Ballysillan down to the Shankill past the predominantly Catholic Ardoyne area, and the annual Tour of the North parade, whose routes every other year included Antrim Road, close to the New Lodge, likewise became flash points. Indeed the Northern Ireland government report recommended that ‘in the present circumstances Orange Parades should not be allowed to process along the Grosvenor, Springfield or Crumlin Roads, or along parts of the Antrim Road between Carlisle Circus and Duncairn Gardens’.

No part of the city was unaffected by the violent struggle for legitimate control of space, but clearly some were more affected than others. The most prosperous parts of the city saw the lowest levels of political violence. The city centre, on the other hand, became a major target. The first bomb attack was at a bank on High Street on 16 July 1970, injuring 33 people. Many attacks followed using either car bombs or incendiaries. On 4 March 1972 two people were killed and 130 injured when the Abercorn restaurant was bombed. Sixteen days later six people were killed by a car bomb in lower Donegall Street. Between 1970 and 1973 300 establishments in central Belfast, a quarter of the overall retail floor space, were destroyed. The policing response to this was clearly different to that used in residential areas. This was not so much an issue of legitimacy as one of security. From 24 March 1972 two control zones were set up around the city. The inner one stopped cars parking at any time, the outer zone permitted parking only after 6 p.m., although Royal Avenue, Donegall Place, High Street and Castle Street remained open to traffic. By July a system of crude barriers was in place and pedestrians and vehicles were stopped and searched. By 1974 these had become permanent iron and steel gates with civilian searchers. The consequences for the commercial life of the city were unsurprising. At a time when many British cities were struggling economically, Belfast became a city unlikely to attract investment. Forty firms folded in 1971 and in 1972 three department stores and two hotels closed for good.

Physical fear, the depressing bomb-scarred environment and problems of accessibility, including the lack of car parking facilities and the frequent disruptions to traffic and bus services by bomb scares and security checks, made shoppers increasingly reluctant to patronise the city centre establishments in general and evening entertainment venues in particular.
On 26 March 1976 a single security zone was introduced, dubbed by some the ‘Merlyn Wall’, after Secretary of State for Northern Ireland Merlyn Rees. This effectively made the city centre traffic free but also led to those businesses outside the urban core suffering. Buses were allowed in but to begin with could not pick up or drop off.36

These drastic measures coincided with the first phase of the IRA campaign, intended to produce a quick political result by a strategy of maximum destruction. By the end of the 1970s the emphasis had switched to a ‘long war’ of attrition that would gradually wear down the resistance of the British government and the Unionist population.37 Against this background some politicians as early as 1980 were suggesting a significant relaxation in city-centre security measures, but research at the time showed that shoppers preferred their retention. From September 1982, however, late-night shopping was introduced one night a week and from July 1983 buses were allowed to pick up and drop off passengers in the city centre. Searches by security staff at the edge of the zone became far more selective and searches of pedestrians were abandoned in 1984.38 A new shopping complex was even planned for the Smithfield area of Belfast on the site of the former Grand Central Hotel. The opening in 1990 of the Castlecourt shopping centre began the recolonization of Donegall Place and Royal Avenue by a new range of retail outlets, most of them national chains.
No, don’t trust the maps, for they avoid the moment: ramps, barricades, diversions, Peace Lines. Though if there is an ideal map, which shows this city as it is; it may exist in the eye of that helicopter ratcheting overhead, its searchlight fingering and scanning the micro-chip deviations. The surge of funerals and parades, swelling and accelerating, time-lapsed, supped back into nothingness by the rewind button; the wired alleys and entries; someone walking his dog when the façade of Gass’s Bicycle Shop erupts in an avalanche of glass and metal forks and tubing, rubber, rat-trap pedals, toe-clips and repair kits.

Ciaran Carson, ‘Question Time’, from Belfast Confetti

The changes in the city centre influenced commercial life, how people moved through the city and the image of the city. The civic life of the city could not remain untouched. The annual Lord Mayor’s Show organized by the Junior Chamber of Commerce took place each year in June. In the 1960s it featured a broad spectrum of civic life including charities, major local companies and various representations of the military. Belfast was depicted through ideas of industry and modernity with themes such as ‘Pride in Progress’ (1964) and ‘Enterprise Ulster’ (1965). The majority of the floats were sponsored by businesses, from Guinness to Massey Ferguson tractors. The parades moved
down Royal Avenue past locally owned department stores Robinson and Cleaver and Anderson and McAuley. In the changed environment of the 1970s all this was hard to sustain and by the mid-1970s the city's showpiece event was struggling to get participants. By 1980 the president of the Chamber of Commerce was appealing for the big employers, who had not recently taken part in the Lord Mayor's Show, to return. In 1994 the Lord Mayor's Show in Belfast had only 40 floats.46

Alongside the decline in the commercial and industrial heart of the city, and the significant shifts in population brought about by both ethnic conflict and economic change, the urban landscape altered through redevelopment. Regeneration in the public housing stock and the redevelopment of the transport system, particularly the roads, was to have a profound effect on how people experienced the city. The first survey by the then new Housing Executive in 1974 revealed that 24 per cent of dwellings in the core of the city were unfit.47 Belfast was far from immune from the introduction of the prefabricated tower block. In the north of the city the Rathcoole estate, built in the 1950s, had seen a striking development which included four blocks effectively looking across Belfast harbour. Around the Divis area of west Belfast and the New Lodge in north Belfast equally dramatic changes took place. In the 1960s one tower block and a series of eight-storey decked flats were built in the lower Falls Road. These had a role in the dynamic of the conflict as they became the stage for numerous confrontations between the IRA and the British army.

The failure of these housing projects led very quickly to a second round of redevelopment that saw the removal of many of the traditional two-up, two-down dwellings but also of some redevelopment projects from the 1960s, still less than twenty years old. The style of the new developments was

Senator Joseph Kennedy (son of the assassinated Robert Kennedy) is shown around by Father Matt Wallace from St Peter's Cathedral during a visit to Divis Flats, April 1988.
(Reproduced with the kind permission of Pat Dunbar Press International Ltd.)

The Divis Complex, built between 1966 and 1972 as a high-rise solution to the housing problems of west Belfast. Most of the complex was demolished during the 1990s and replaced by more traditional housing, but the 20-storey Divis Tower remains.
Photograph © National Museums Northern Ireland and Cecil Newman.
dictated not only by the depopulation of the city and the demand for low-
level single dwellings but also by the security situation and the new sectarian
geography of the city. Some roads disappeared altogether while others were
re-routed to take account of the interface boundaries, many now marked
by walls and fences. G.M. Dawson describes one example, the development
between 1980 and 1984 of Cluan Place, a small Protestant enclave on the edge
of the largely Catholic Short Strand in the Ballymacarrett area of east Belfast.
Here the removal of a former tram station from the Short Strand, to allow
for housing redevelopment, also removed a barrier between the Short Strand
and the small Protestant population in Cluan Place. Unionist politicians
therefore lobbied for walls to be put up around two dozen residences in
Cluan Place and plans to make it a through road were abandoned. Like so
many developments in Belfast it remained a cul-de-sac to provide residents
with a sense of security. Security had essentially been added to a range of
factors that planners in Belfast needed to consider when redeveloping roads
and housing in the city.

The shipyard, the mills, the factories and the skyline of red-brick chimneys
were disappearing. The population of Belfast reflected these changes. Between
1951 and 1971 there had been a steady move of people from the core of the
city to more suburban areas, with the urban area reaching around 600,000 in
1971. Through the 1970s and 1980s Belfast core city saw a continued decline
in population and a decline in the number of households. Indeed from 1971
to 1991 the inner core of the city lost 33 per cent of its population. At the same
time the outer regional area of the city grew by 39 per cent.

Throughout this period the city was becoming more segregated. In
1969 59 per cent of public-sector households resided in streets that were
almost completely segregated; by 1977 this had risen to 89 per cent. A
rise in segregation can also be found in the private housing sector, but,
interestingly, the increase, from 65 per cent to 73 per cent, was less severe.
The geographer Fred Boal, who over this period did more than anyone
to map the changing dynamics within the city, also points out that these
changes led to the increasing understanding that ‘west’ Belfast was Catholic
and ‘east’ Belfast was Protestant.

Boal quotes Northern Ireland: Regional Physical Development Strategy 1975–1979:
‘Belfast faces a combination of economic, social communal and physical
development problems unparalleled in any major city in Europe.’ In 1982
Cowan asked the obvious question: ‘What should Belfast’s planners do?
Should they use their position and skills to try and provide the physical form
appropriate to a harmonious society? Or should they accept the existence of
fear and hatred between Protestants and Catholics, and the active presence of
the army and the police and merely do what they can to accommodate a state of
permanent tension?’
Just as significant for the landscape of Belfast was the development of the road network. Planners in 1969 produced elaborate schemes for a dual carriageway to ring the city and connect to motorways heading into counties Down and Antrim. If ships and rail had defined the previous hundred years, the car was destined to define the decades leading up to the twenty-first century. Only the western and northern elements of the ring roads were to be realized. The building of the M2 and Westlink dual carriageway cut a swathe through the working-class residential districts of the western inner city, while the completed highway effectively acted as a barrier between the Antrim, Shankill and Falls Road areas and the centre, with only four crossing points for vehicles. This had security implications, which by April 1971 were clear to the government, as it allowed the centre of the city to become more easily secured from key working-class districts and acted to separate the largely working-class Protestant areas of Sandy Row and the Village from working-class Catholic Falls Road and Divis.

The redevelopment in the north of the city was even more dramatic. The M2 motorway eventually became eight lanes in width and cut right through the traditional docks or Sailortown district. This redevelopment rendered the York Street area almost unrecognizable and effectively destroyed it as a residential district. The working-class Protestant areas of York Road and Shore Road and the working-class Catholic areas of the New Lodge and lower Antrim Road had

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Belfast punk band Stiff Little Fingers, formed in 1977, had critical and chart success in Ireland and the UK. Many of their songs, including their first two singles, ‘Suspect Device’ and ‘Alternative Ulster’, dealt with the conflict.

Photograph © Virginia Turbett / Redferns / Getty Images.
major road junctions placed between them and the city centre. In the east of
the city the three road bridges that crossed the Lagan were in the 1990s added to by a
motorway bridge linking the system to the road to Bangor and a rail bridge that
connected York Street railway station with Central station. But, as with the north
and west of the city, working-class residential areas in the east, the predominately
Catholic Short Strand and Protestant Ballymacarrett, already separated from
the city centre by the river, are now further dislocated by large road junctions.
To the south the Malone and Lisburn Roads provide a lived-in and, in the case of
the Lisburn Road, commercially vibrant corridor linking predominantly
middle-class residential areas directly to the city centre. To the north, west and
east, by contrast, the pedestrian walking to the city centre from most working-
class residential areas is confronted by a desolate and intimidating combination
of road junctions and empty wasteland. The Belfast Metropolitan Plan 2015,
published in 2004, recognized this continuing problem.

The Inner Ring Road which currently surrounds much of the city centre has left
a scar on the urban fabric with large expanses of roadway inappropriate to the
scale of the city, a fractured townscape and a physical and psychological barrier
separating city centre from surrounding residential communities.10

Conflict and Consequences

While de-industrialization, road plans and rehousing provided the backdrop,
it was the ongoing conflict that gave parts of this landscape particular meaning.
The nature of the violence resulted in practices that changed the way that the
public spaces of Belfast were used. The Ulster Workers Council strike in May
1974 brought down the power-sharing executive created by the Sunningdale Agreement of the previous December. With the UDA, which had been organizing matches in working-class Protestant areas since 1972, throwing its populist weight behind the strike, roads were blocked and the ability to control movement around the city became a key issue. Indeed, the RUC and army were often unwilling or unable to break roadblocks. The Daily Mail provided a particularly colourful description:

So your wee Belfast Johnny is going to go home filthy tonight. But you can’t bath him. No hot water.

Can’t read him a bedtime story. No lights. Can’t cheer yourself up with a fire.

No coal.

Can’t make a hot drink. No electricity. Can’t pop out to the pictures or bingo. They are either burned down, bombed out or closed.

You can’t catch a bus. There aren’t any. Can’t post a letter. It won’t arrive.

Can’t make a local phone call without being deafened by crackles. Can’t fill a carrier bag with shopping without queuing for hours. Can’t use your car for pleasure. Petrol’s so scarce some ingenious folk are trying to run their cars on paint thinners.

[...] Whatever happens politically, Belfast teeters on the abyss of total administrative collapse today.6

This was probably to be the high point for Loyalist and Unionist groups in the widespread control of public space. The Ulster Workers Council strike was the most effective mobilization of both mainstream Unionism and Loyalism in common cause. The legitimacy of the state never looked weaker.

Violence peaked between 1971 and 1976. The stories of the victims, all briefly retold in the compilation Last Lives, are a sad and brutal reminder of the nature of the conflict.6 Some of the most notorious incidents were the work of a group from the west Belfast UVF, commonly referred to as the Shankill Butchers, who between 1975 and 1982 committed gruesome murders, estimated by some to have numbered up to 30. Most victims were grabbed from Catholic areas of the city and taken back to the Shankill Road before being brutally murdered. Other victims were Protestants from the Shankill area with whom gang members had differences. These and many other killings in the streets and back alleys of the city, particularly the working-class districts in the north and west, created a fear that altered everyday behaviour.

Another example of the relationship between violence and public space was the brief flowering of the Women’s Peace Movement. On 10 August 1976 three children were killed and another fatally injured when an IRA man, Danny Lennon, was shot by the British army while driving along Finaghy Road North, so that his car careered out of control. Mairéad Corrigan Maguire, sister of the children’s mother Anne Maguire, along with Betty Williams and
Ciaran McKeown, galvanized support into what became the Women's Peace Movement. For a brief period they offered a serious threat to the growing hegemony of the paramilitaries, particularly the IRA. A meeting on 14 August 1976 at Andersonstown in west Belfast attracted widespread support from Catholics and Protestants, with an estimated 10,000 people gathering for the occasion. This was probably the high point for popular, mass-participation peace movements as only on rare occasions after this was the sectarian space of working-class Belfast broken down. Despite the appearance of many peace activists in Belfast over the years, there was a dearth of popular cross-community mobilization. Williams and Corrigan won the Nobel peace prize and their movement developed into the Peace People. Sadly, Anne Maguire became the fifth victim of 10 August 1976 when in 1980 she committed suicide.

The streets of Belfast saw a different form of violent struggle when on 1 March 1981 Bobby Sands, leader of the Provisional IRA in the Maze prison, renewed Republican prisoners' demands for special category status by going on hunger strike. On 5 May he died and people in Republican areas came out on to the streets which echoed to the sound of bin lids being banged on the ground. An estimated 50,000 people took to the streets for the funeral parade from St Luke's chapel to Milltown cemetery in west Belfast.

The funeral stopped close to the Busy Bee shopping centre and Bobby's coffin was removed from the hearse and placed on trestles. Then, from among the people, emerged three IRA Volunteers armed with rifles who were called to attention in Gaelic by a fourth uniformed man. They delivered three sharp volleys over the coffin, removed their berets and bowed their heads in silence. [...] Gerry Adams officiated at the graveside ceremony which began with playing the Last Post. The Tricolour was then removed from the coffin and along with the beret and gloves presented to Mrs Sands.  

Ten hunger strikers died before, some of their demands having been met, the campaign was called off. But the implications of such widespread popular support changed the course of Irish Republicanism in Northern Ireland.  

While on hunger strike Sands stood successfully in a by-election for a Westminster seat, and in the aftermath key Republicans, in Belfast particularly centred around Gerry Adams and Danny Morrison, decided to contest local and national elections through the political wing of the IRA, Sinn Féin. This had a profound effect on the politics of the city. On 2 June 1983 Gerry Adams was elected as MP for West Belfast, defeating the SDLP's Joe Hendron by over 5,000 votes. Irish Republicans, while continuing an armed struggle, were also demanding to be part of the political and civic life of the city. This was to become apparent in the landscape of Belfast streets as well as in the council chamber of Belfast City Hall.

The entry of Sinn Féin into the political and civic realm was emphasized.
further in 1983 when seven councillors were elected to the city council. Needless to say this was to have a dramatic effect on the nature of debate as the confrontations between Unionism and Irish Republicanism, as well the contest for nationalist votes between the SDLP and Sinn Féin, now manifested itself within political institutions as well as through the security situation around the city. To begin with communication did not move beyond hostility, but as Sinn Féin’s long-term position within the institutions became clear the initial Unionist strategy of refusing to acknowledge its representatives, and denying them a place on committees, became untenable. Instead the proceedings of Belfast City Council and other district councils in Northern Ireland provided a foretaste of the political engagements to come in the developing peace process of the 1990s.

A Landscape of Politics and Violence

The Belfast landscape was demarcated not only by people’s experience and memory of the ongoing violence, but also through cultural manifestations such as parades, murals, flags and, particularly after the 1990s, memorials. As part of the changing tactics of Irish Republicans after the hunger strikes, and particularly their entry into politics, they began to imitate Loyalists by decorating the many gable ends of Belfast with political murals. One suggestion is that the first quasi-murals appeared in the Lenadoon area in response to the hunger strikes, with at least 100 seen within just a few months of Sands’s death. Many of the early Republican murals reflected the violence of the struggle, both within the prison and on the streets, with hooded gunmen depicted as symbols of resistance. But Sinn Féin’s developing political and cultural agenda encouraged the appearance of more diverse messages and images. Scenes from Irish history depicting the United Irishmen, the Famine and the 1916 Easter Rising, as well as murals linking the Republican struggle with those of Australian Aborigines, native Americans, the Basques and the Palestinians, and symbols of left-wing politics such as the Starry Plough, all found a place in an increasingly diverse range of murals.

In Loyalist working-class areas the painting of murals can be traced back to the early part of the twentieth century. While a variety of images of loyalty could be found, by far the most dominant was the picture of King William III (King Billy), astride his white horse, crossing the river at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690. In the mid-1980s Loyalist murals also went through a transformation partially linked to opposition to the Anglo-Irish Agreement. Images of King Billy began to disappear from the walls as depictions of the UVF and UDA became more prominent. The change in iconography also seemed to reflect a decline in the importance of Orangeism within the Loyalist communities. The Orange arches which would have adorned so many roads in Protestant
areas of Belfast started to disappear. Murals became so redolent of the Belfast landscape that it became almost impossible to depict the city in news bulletins, in documentaries or through drama without using them as a backdrop. Belfast and the mural became synonymous. As early as 1992 The Rough Guide to Ireland tourist guide gave up five pages to describing where in west Belfast the best specimens could be found.

More important than the murals was the annual cycle of parades. The parades played a role in demarcating the nature of public space, not only though the routes of the marches, but also in the events and ephemera that accompanied them, such as bonfires, Orange arches, bunting, flags and painted kerb stones. In Loyalist areas of the city the most significant development was the growth in ‘blood and thunder’ flute bands. Silver, accordion and flute bands had long accompanied Orange parades around the First and Twelfth of July, commemorating the battles of the Somme and Boyne, but the rapid growth in flute bands represented an element of the parading culture independent of the Orange Order and often, but not always, reflected the rise of paramilitarism. Flutes were cheaper and easier to learn than other musical instruments and the ‘rough’ style of playing focused on the large bass drum was enjoyed by young men, many of whom were no longer learning skills in the shipyard. Early bands dressed simply in grey trousers with a coloured v-neck sweater and a cap, but through the 1980s and 1990s uniforms became much more elaborate and some bands started to carry flags and bannetettes referring to Loyalist paramilitary groups. Blood and thunder bands began to predominate in Orange Order events in the city, giving the parades a more assertive public face. The bands also developed their own parading repertoire, with each local band hosting an annual band parade. Some developed events that memorialized members of the UDA and UVF who had lost their lives. As with Republican murals, Loyalist bands reflected the changing political and cultural landscape in the city.
On 23 November 1983 Unionists organized a massive rally reminiscent of the signing of the Solemn League and Covenant in 1912. This was in response to the signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement, which gave the Irish government some limited say in the running of Northern Ireland. Despite overwhelming opposition to the Agreement, and a day of action on 3 March 1986 during which roads in Belfast and elsewhere were blocked, Unionist politicians were unable to repeat the success of the Ulster Workers strike of 1974. City Hall would be adorned for many years to come with a banner proclaiming that ‘Belfast Says No’, but Unionism and Loyalism were unable to mobilize effectively. Following the riots and intimidation that accompanied the day of action Unionist politicians were torn between their desire to mobilize on the streets and the likelihood that this would lead to confrontation between Loyalist groups and the RUC. The potential for violence became evident in a series of confrontations that developed after 1995 as the authorities sought to prohibit or re-route Orange parades passing through contested areas. While Republicanism, despite its use of violence, was increasingly entering the civic space, Unionism and Orangeism, when allied with Loyalism, found itself in confrontation with the forces of the state. This dislocation between working-class Loyalists and mainstream Unionism in Belfast became very obvious over the twenty years that followed the signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement.

A poignant way in which the violence impacted upon the Belfast landscape was through the numerous funerals. Many fatalities were of course buried in private family rituals but the burials both of the Maguire children and of Bobby
Sands provide examples of the potential political impact of these ritual events. Paramilitary funerals were frequently the site of contestation as security forces tried to prevent paramilitary displays or guns being fired over the coffins. Just as in the other public spaces in the city were contested, so was the cemetery. Milltown cemetery off the Falls Road, in the south-west of the city, deserves particular mention. It has many historical resonances but in the modern era it is the destination for the annual Easter 1916 commemorations and has been the burial site of many Irish Republicans. As such, it has been a site of contestation between the security forces and Republicans, between Loyalist paramilitaries and Republicans, and between competing Republican groups. On 16 March 1988 Michael Stone, a member of the UDA, attacked the funerals of three IRA volunteers who had been killed by the SAS in Gibraltar ten days earlier. Television cameras recorded the events as Stone killed three people, Thomas McErlean, John Murray and Caoimhín Mac Brádaigh. At the funeral of Caoimhín Mac Brádaigh, on 19 March, two British soldiers drove a car towards the funeral cortège which was led by black taxis. The two soldiers, David Howes and Derek Wood, were pulled from the car, beaten up, then murdered by the IRA. Again, much of this was caught by television cameras, providing further powerful images of the conflict.
A Form of Peace

On 10 April 1998 in some rather unassuming buildings on the Stormont Estate in the east of the city, the Irish and British governments, the major Northern Irish political parties (with the exception of the Democratic Unionist Party), and the political parties representing both Loyalist paramilitary groups reached an agreement on the political future of Northern Ireland. This had followed a process of talks which had been boosted in 1994 by the IRA, followed by the UDA and the UVF, declaring ceasefires. Following the Agreement a referendum was held in the Republic of Ireland and in Northern Ireland on 22 May 1998. In Northern Ireland 71 percent of those voting supported the Agreement. The city of Belfast was now potentially a capital city of a Northern Ireland that had a level of legitimacy not previously enjoyed. The level of organized violence dropped significantly. However, the legacy of the violence remained.

It is difficult to ascertain the exact nature of the social, political and economic context that created the possibility of change. Had the military strategies of the state and Republican and Loyalist paramilitaries come to a point where politics was the only way forward? Had the position of Catholics within the social structure of Northern Ireland altered enough to undermine the level of resistance? Was there just too much for Republicans to gain for them to refuse to enter the political process? And what did the slowly improving economic well-being of Belfast and Northern Ireland contribute to the process? What is more easily documented is the changes that were taking place within the city that both contributed to, and were outcomes of, the peace process.

The period of conflict from 1969 left a significant legacy for the city. Mosev, Shirlow and Downs record 1,601 victims of violence in Belfast between 1966 and 2007. Of these, the majority, 994, could be described as non-combatants, 677 of whom were Catholic, 307 Protestant and ten of other or unknown background. Of these civilians, 115 were killed by the security forces, 295 by Republican paramilitary groups (382 by the IRA), and 331 by Loyalist paramilitary groups (218 by the UVF and 248 by the UDA), with 53 victims coming under the category of unknown or accidental. Of the remaining dead 303 were members of the security forces or other state employees such as judges, prison officers or civil servants, and 39 were members of paramilitary groups, 130 Loyalist and 171 Republican. A spatial mapping of these casualties shows that most victims were killed close to their homes, with the highest concentration in north and west Belfast, the more deprived areas of the city and close to the interfaces.

These blunt statistics (and there were of course many more casualties) do not come close to capturing the effect of these deaths on family and friends and also on the way people lived in the city. The fear created was as real as the physical interface walls that now separated Protestant and Catholic working-class areas. Memories were embedded in the landscape of the city. And as
people, organizations and political parties started to come to terms with the peace process, narratives of the recent past developed. Victims demanded to know and understand the particular circumstances of the loss of their loved ones and the broad role of the forces of the state and paramilitary organizations. And practices of commemoration and memorialization developed. Memorials, particularly to members of the IRA, UVF and UDA, started to appear in working-class communities throughout Belfast. Viggiani's 2006 survey showed just how extensive the range of physical memorials had become. In west Belfast alone there were 30 memorials, 21 murals with plaques attached and 26 separate plaques. Another database on the Cain website recorded 279 memorials in the city by 2011, although these include some plaques inside buildings. Some of the memorials are significant structures, sometimes within gardens of remembrance. Along with murals, whose themes have also developed commemorative narratives, the memorials now represent a significant part of the physical landscape of working-class Belfast. Most have no planning permission and are thus an indication that the writ of the state is still weak in many of these places.

Belfast in the first decade of the twenty-first century was as residentially divided into areas of Catholic and Protestant as at any time in its history. This was despite what appeared to be an increased movement of Catholics into more middle-class areas. The lowest levels of segregation are in the middle-class areas of south Belfast while the higher levels are in working-class west
Plans for the development of Girdwood barracks in north Belfast, where the practicalities of demilitarization highlight the continued fragility of the political settlement. The former army base sits empty while Unionist and nationalist politicians squabble over how the allocation of social housing proposed for the site might affect the finely balanced territorial division between Catholic and Protestant.
Reproduced with permission from the Building Design Partnership.

Belfast. Between 1995 and 1998 there were very high levels of civil disorder in relation to disputes over the right of Orange parades to process through residential areas seen as predominantly Catholic. The annual Battle of the Boyne church parade to Drumcree church in Portadown, County Armagh, was the most high profile of the disputes but it had repercussions in Belfast and throughout Northern Ireland. Disputes in Belfast over Loyal Order parades on Ormeau Road, Springfield Road, Crumlin Road and Clifton Park Avenue were also highly contested. During a stand-off at Drumcree church on 7 July 1996 protests developed all over Northern Ireland. As had happened in Belfast so many times before, the tensions translated into people moving out of their houses in interface areas. This time Clifton Park Avenue in north Belfast probably suffered the worst.73

I really didn’t want to move out because it was my home, and I enjoyed living round there. I would have actually stayed, not in the flat, maybe in friends’ or my parents’ house maybe until it all blew over but I thought that if I didn’t get my stuff out I’m going to come back and the flat’s going to be burnt and I’m going to lose everything so I thought it was better to move out – it was very very nerve wracking.74

The housing on Clifton Park Avenue was vacated and later knocked down. The area adjacent, the Girdwood barracks, was, in 2011, subject to difficult negotiations over a development plan that might create more shared space.

The complexity of the territorial demarcations in the city was never more clearly exposed than by the feud between the UVF and UDA on the Shankill Road in 2000. On 19 August supporters of the leader of the UDA in the Shankill, Johnny Adair, popularly known as ‘Mad Dog’, unfurled the flag of the Loyalist Volunteer Force (LVF) outside the Rex bar, a favourite venue for the UVF. The UVF, already involved in a feud with the LVF, treated this as an act of provocation. A fight ensued followed by a series of murders over the days that followed, with hundreds of families intimidated into leaving their houses by the opposing groups. The Shankill Road had a further ‘interface’ along Agnes Street between the UVF area at the top of the road and the UDA in the lower Shankill. And this feud itself seemed to lead to many more UVF and UDA paramilitary flags being placed on lampposts to demarcate areas controlled by the two groups.75

Another indicator of the continuing high level of tension that exists around interfaces was the dispute over the Holy Cross school in the Ardoyne area of north Belfast in 2001. This Catholic girls’ primary school was sited at the top of the Ardoyne Road, close to the largely Protestant Glenbryn area. On 19 June 2001 confrontations arose when some men putting up UDA flags near the school were attacked. When the school year began in September, Loyalists picketed the school, protesting at what they saw as an incursion by

Residential segregation in the twenty-first century, the distribution of the Catholic population and the location of peace walls, 2001.
Source: CAIN (cain.ucc.ie/victims/)
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Republicans. The pictures of terrified little girls being escorted by their parents while protected by a line of police officers remain among the most poignant images of the recent conflict in the city.

A Community Relations Council report in 2008 suggested there were 81 security and segregation barriers in the city. A survey in 2006 counted 996 flags being displayed on the main roads of Belfast during July, with 929 still flying in September, significantly demarcating public space. Together with murals, memorials and parades, Belfast at the start of the twenty-first century appears utterly divided. Segregation is not just sectarian but also based on social class. The parts of the city that are most divided are also the places of high economic deprivation. In 2006 73.3 per cent of the population of the city were claiming disability allowance, 7 per cent incapacity benefit, 15.7 per cent housing benefit, and 15.5 per cent income support.

Yet there is another aspect to the story of Belfast’s development through the peace process. Belfast city centre began to be used by a greater diversity of groups. On 30 November 1995 perhaps as many as 10,000 people gathered in front of City Hall to hear US President Bill Clinton give a speech and turn on the Christmas tree lights. But an apparently minor event on 8 August 1993 might be just as significant. Despite protests from Unionist councillors, a Republican Internment Commemoration parade, starting at Twinbrook in the south-west of the city, proceeded down the Falls Road and was allowed into the city centre where the president of Sinn Féin, Gerry Adams, gave a speech in front of the statue of Queen Victoria at City Hall. This ended what had been throughout the twentieth century a de facto ban on Republican parades, indeed on nearly any event representing Irish nationalism, entering the city centre.
On 17 March 1998 the first major St Patrick’s Day parade took place in the centre of the city with feeder parades arriving from the nationalist areas of the Falls Road, New Lodge, Short Strand and the Markets. Máirtín Ó Muilleoir provided a vivid description:

The tens of thousands who turned Belfast city centre black with green on Tuesday were doing more than scribbling footnotes, more than even contributing chapters to our history. They were shredding the pages of past wrongs, binning the Belfast of the pogroms and second-class citizenship, erasing the painful memory of too many Twelfths on the wrong side of the swagger stick [...] and proudly painting their own prologue: we’ve arrived. 78

The next few years, however, were to see a profound change in the nature of the event. Through a complex process of negotiation, the St Patrick’s Day festival was purged of overt political symbolism, and in exchange began to receive official support as a community event open to Catholics and Protestants alike. In 2006 the organization of St Patrick’s Day events was taken over by the council with a carnival parade and a staged event in the newly re-opened Custom House Square.

A more long-standing event, the Lord Mayor’s Show, likewise adapted to the new civic ethos. In May 1998, the day after the referendum on the Agreement, it was led by the first nationalist lord mayor of Belfast, Alban Maginness of the SDLP. Instead of the commercial floats that dominated the event from the 1950s to the 1970s the show was now styled as a ‘carnival’, with community groups and representatives from the increasingly diverse ethnic populations in the city taking part, making it a multicultural experience. 79 In 2002 it was led by
Alex Maskey, the first Sinn Féin mayor of Belfast. In 2008 another Sinn Féin mayor, Tom Hartley, led the Lord Mayor’s Carnival while a few months earlier his predecessor, the Ulster Unionist Jim Rodgers, had led the St Patrick’s Day Carnival. Since 1991, meanwhile, a Gay Pride event has developed in the city. The early events attracted almost as many religious protestors as participants, but in the first decade of the new century Gay Pride grew into a well-sponsored, well-organized large carnival event.

Progress towards more equal access to civic space in central Belfast was facilitated by political developments. The 1998 Agreement, and the subsequent Northern Ireland Act, called for the creation of a more diverse cultural environment, and the same goal was recognized in the city council’s Good Relations Strategy in 2003.56 ‘Our Vision in terms of this Good Relations Strategy is for a stable, tolerant, fair and pluralist society, where individuality is respected and diversity is celebrated, in an inclusive manner.’ At the same time change was also promoted by economic developments. Unemployment in Belfast fell from 11 per cent in 1991 to 9.3 per cent in 1997 and to 6.5 per cent in 2009.57 Between 2001 and 2007 manufacturing jobs in the city declined by 35 per cent, with the number of employees, 10,279, numbering less than those employed in hotels and restaurants, at 11,814, and those employed in wholesale and retail trades, at 26,357.58 The days of the great independent Belfast stores of Robinson and Cleaver and Anderson and McAuley are long gone, but their place has been taken by a more diverse and cosmopolitan range of retail outlets. The Belfast cafe where you might once have bought a mug of tea or coffee is now a place where you can buy a cappuccino or latte. The opening in March 2008 of an impressive new shopping complex, Victoria Square, brought a
Runners in the Belfast marathon prepare to cross the peace wall at Lanark Way. The marathon, launched in 1982 and traversing both Protestant and Catholic areas, was an early success in terms of the creation of shared space.
In what other event would the gates of interface walls be opened with cheering as people run through?
Reproduced with the kind permission of Press Eye Ltd.

The former shipyard and docks, now redesignated the Titanic Development Area. With a little help from James Cameron’s 1997 blockbuster movie, Belfast has used the building of the ill-fated ship to market itself to tourists and big corporations.
Reproduced with the kind permission of Titanic Quarter Ltd.
further selection of the best-known multinational stores to central Belfast. The city's young people may remain defined by a Protestant or Catholic residential identification and educational upbringing, but both sides are equally keen on Hollister or Jack Wills labelled clothes.

These changes in the retail area of Belfast are matched by other developments in the built environment, set out in the Belfast Area Urban Plan 2001 published in 1990. In 1989 the Lagan Corporation was created to secure regeneration from the docks down to the gasworks off the Ormeau Road area. This saw a number of high-end residential developments, office space around the Clarendon Docks, the redevelopment of Custom House Square, the opening of the impressive Waterfront Hall in 1995 and the Odyssey entertainments complex in 2000. But there have also been attempts to utilize cultural dynamics. Cultural 'quarters' have been identified. Cathedral Quarter near St Anne's Cathedral has become a hub for the arts and for nightlife while the Gaeltacht Quarter around the Cultúrlann building on the Falls Road provides a centre for Belfast's vibrant Irish-language community. There is also the Queen's Quarter around the university and the Titanic Quarter where ambitious redevelopment plans are remodelling the almost moribund Queen's Island area once dominated by the shipyard.

Titanic Town, Divided and Shared

In 2009 Belfast welcomed a record 7.6 million visitor trips. Residents of Belfast cannot but see the irony that many tourists are attracted by two tragic stories that emanate from the city: tours of the murals and interface walls focus on echoes of a violent recent history, while a growing number of attractions commemorate the disastrous loss of the Titanic. The new Titanic visitors centre, opened in 2012 for the 100th anniversary of the ship's sinking, presents itself as a very distinctive part of the city landscape.

Thanks to the beginnings of a coming to terms with the violent ethno-national struggle that marred the last three decades of the twentieth century, Belfast's 'Troubles' have become marketable to the tourist and the political solutions arrived at have come to be seen as worthy of study by political scientists and students of conflict resolution all over the world. The people of Belfast have struggled with their own particular problems but they share much in common with other areas of conflict and, as such, have an interesting story to tell. Belfast has found a form of peace and started to share in some common identities but it remains ravaged by division and a violent past. However, you can now view the divisions from the top of a tour bus.

Belfast is a post-industrial city like many others in western Europe, struggling with the decline in a once-buoyant manufacturing sector. It is largely on the periphery of Europe, but in the globalized capitalist
Tourists on a black cab tour to the west Belfast interface, 30 April 2011. It is one of the great ironies of Belfast in the twenty-first century that tourists now arrive in considerable numbers to view the interfaces and murals that are the products of a violent recent history.

Photograph courtesy of Dominic Bryan.

marketplace it can still benefit or suffer depending on the economic climate. On 15 September 2008 Lehman Brothers bank filed for bankruptcy in New York, sending the international money markets into turmoil and leading to major banks being bailed out in Britain and Ireland. American banking giant Citibank had moved into Belfast in 2004 and opened offices in the Titanic Quarter. On 23 November 2008 the bank required $25 billion from the US government to cover bad debts. On 4 November 2010 it announced that it would create 500 new jobs in the city. As it was when it built ships, Belfast is a city intimately connected to the world around it. There is, as yet, no monument to the US taxpayer in the Titanic Quarter.

The American urban ecologist Scott Bollens has described Belfast as a polarized city where ‘group identity is reinforced through ethno-nationalist expressions in the urban landscape’. Yet this divided city has developed areas of sharing and has an increasingly diverse population. At the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century there is a civic culture that is intent on trying to imagine a Belfast for all its people, with parades becoming carnivals, and two traditions becoming embedded in multiculturalism. Nevertheless, the limited numbers of official forms of commemoration are overwhelmed by the multitude of plaques, memorials, murals, parades and flags that provide alternative, clashing narratives of the past. The dearth of official processes, and the cacophony of commemorative practices from the groups that did the fighting, leave most of the victims remembered only by the friends and family left behind. Belfast is a city that cannot forget its recent past but is also not quite sure how to remember it.
Chapter 9


5. Gillian McIntosh, Belfast City Hall: One Hundred Years (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 2006).


10. Kennedy, Modern Industrialisation, p. 27.


17. Kelly, 'Belfast, August 1969'.


23. Shilliday and Murtagh, Belfast, pp. 73–74.


28. Paul Doherty and Michael Poole, Ethnic Residential Segregation in Belfast (Coleraine: Centre for the Study of Conflict), p. 41. Also Shilliday and Murtagh, Belfast, p. 70.

29. Shilliday and Murtagh, Belfast, p. 70.


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37 For the shift in PIRA tactics to a 'long war' of attrition, see Gillespie, *Years of Darkness*, pp. 146–47.
46 Boal, *Shaping a City*, p. 28.
52 Daily Mail, 18 May 1974, quoted in Gillespie, *Years of Darkness*, p. 98.
54 Gillespie, *Years of Darkness*, p. 142.
58 Rolston, *Politics and Painting*, pp. 79–89.
72 Resident of Clifton Park Avenue, quoted in Jarman, *On the Edge*, p. 49.
82 Belfast City Council, *Belfast: A Profile of the City*, p. 17.
83 Belfast City Council, *Belfast: A Profile of the City*, p. 16.