Creating Shared Public Space in the Contested City: The Role of Urban Design

Frank Gaffikin a, Malachy Mceldowney a & Ken Sterrett a

a School of Planning, Architecture and Civil Engineering, Queen's University Belfast, Belfast, Northern Ireland

Available online: 26 Aug 2010

To cite this article: Frank Gaffikin, Malachy Mceldowney & Ken Sterrett (2010): Creating Shared Public Space in the Contested City: The Role of Urban Design, Journal of Urban Design, 15:4, 493-513

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13574809.2010.502338

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae, and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand, or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
Creating Shared Public Space in the Contested City: The Role of Urban Design

FRANK GAFFIKIN, MALACHY MCELDOWNEY & KEN STERRETT

School of Planning, Architecture and Civil Engineering, Queen’s University Belfast, Belfast, Northern Ireland

ABSTRACT This paper examines relevant characteristics of the ‘contested city’ and the concept of ‘public space’ in that problematic context. It offers an appraisal of the historical and contemporary role of urban design in shaping social space and interrogates the feasibility of using urban design to facilitate more integrated cityscapes. It presents detailed case studies of two ‘contested cities’, Nicosia and Belfast, based on content analysis of policy and planning documents, extensive site analyses in both places, interviews and seminar discussions with policy makers, planners, community and civic leaders. The paper comprises four dimensions—conceptual, descriptive, analytical and prescriptive—and in its final section identifies core values and relevant policies for the potential achievement of shared space in contested cities.

Introduction

In deeply divided cities, in which a preponderance of space is partitioned into ethnic turfs, and where spaces of common belonging are at a premium, the public realm can be at once an important arena of potential civic identity, and also subject itself to inter-communal disputation. One such argument centres on the efficacy of deliberately deploying urban design as an instrument for the creation of public amenity as shared space across the divide. In so doing, it is recognized that, while social conflict has spatial expression, and that spatial form in turn helps shape the conflict, it is impossible to correct spatial manifestations of conflict independent of other resolution processes.

In exploring this question, the paper first examines relevant characteristics of the ‘contested city’, and subsequently the concept of ‘public space’ in that problematic urban context. Proceeding to offer an appraisal of the historical and contemporary role of urban design in shaping social space, it interrogates the desirability and feasibility of using urban design to facilitate more integrative cityscapes, using the case studies of Nicosia and Belfast. The dataset on the two cities derives from content analysis of key policy and planning documents and extensive site analyses in both places, together with interviews and seminars with policy makers, planners, community and civic leaders, and those involved in
urban regeneration. Since the paper comprises four dimensions—the conceptual, descriptive, analytical and prescriptive—in its final section it identifies core values and policies that offer prospective delivery of more shared space.

The Contested City

Given that urban formations are marked by limited spatial scope for development, whether through natural topography and/or statutory designation of settlement patterns, it can be said that all cities are ‘contested’ in the sense that such containment generates intrinsic dispute about how to use and allocate scarce land resources. However, an important distinction needs to be drawn between cities contested around standard issues of pluralism—disputes about social reproduction around differentials in class, ethnicity, power and status—and those contested around both pluralism and sovereignty—the latter concerning issues of state legitimacy and rival claims of national belonging. An example of the former is Chicago, a hyper-segregated city based on race, whereas Belfast, Jerusalem and Nicosia provide examples of the latter. While these latter cities also experience contentions about equity with regard to class, gender, age, ethnicity, etc., these are superimposed upon the fundamental dispute about ethno-nationalist affiliation. Since the literature about contested cities does not distinguish these precisely, often the term is used synonymously with other designations such as ‘divided’ and ‘polarized’. For example, some refer to the contemporary ‘contested metropolis’ typified by an expansive consumerism and conspicuous wealth on the one hand, and disaffected social and ethnic enclaves on the other (Byrne, 2001). This notion of a stark urban segregation, marked by community citadels, and rooted in an increasingly dual city, is taken as an inevitable precursor to significant urban conflict. As described by Caldeira (2000), the parallel social universes of fortified rich enclaves and poverty-stricken slums are cities of walls that inherently generate violent discord and impair democratic politics rooted in common citizenship.

More specifically, Hepburn (2004) sees the ‘contested city’ as a co-habited location of two or more ethnically conscious groups—divided by religion, language and/or culture and partisan history—where no side will acknowledge the ascendancy of the other. Neill (2004) interestingly characterizes negotiations between such groups as a game of ‘ethnic poker’, a game, moreover, in which it would be naïve to assume that the state is an impartial referee. Bollens (2007, p. 2) goes further when he sees the particular cleavages in a contested city as rooted in “the existence of competing nationalistic allegiances that can tear a society apart”. In such cities, the primary division about national identity and ownership of territory drills right down into small districts where the link between territory and identity produces its own partitions (Varshney, 2002). Moreover, the conflict is often perceived by the protagonists to involve indivisible entities such as ‘sacred homeland’, making compromise problematic (Toft, 2003). Since space is so central to the overall conflict, and planning is the main instrument for the social shaping of space, planning is unavoidably central to the conflict’s resolution. Shirlow & Murtagh (2006, p. 145), however, caution against “the implication that complex issues can be solved by careful and responsive planning”, but accept that planning “has a role to play in shaping spaces of opportunity”.

The way this linkage of conflict and planning permeates the routine of everyday life in such contested cities is very manifest in the ethnoscape of
Jerusalem, where Arab and Jew ‘live together separately’ (Romann & Weingrod, 1991). Thus, Misselwitz & Rieniets (2006, p. 26) refer to how the struggle over that city’s ownership has turned from one based purely on periodic military might to a permanent war of ‘cement and stone’ that invests the built environment with myriad codes of ethnicity amid a militant politics of defiance and resilience.

This is marked by both the clarity of unrelenting enmity and the hybridities produced by parallel lives lived in intimate proximity. Thus, there is a begrudging requisition of aspects of each other’s architectural and cultural references, evident in the assimilation of the Palestinian vernacular into contemporary Israeli architecture and in the way Palestinians can view Israeli settlements with uneasy ambivalence: “symbols of the occupation, yet a window on modernity and Western life-style at the same time, admired for their formidable organization and high-quality construction” (Misselwitz & Rieniets (2006, p. 32).

However, such exchange is occurring within an asymmetrical power relationship, in which discriminatory use of planning instruments such as building permits, zoning, land registry, infrastructure and indeed the bulldozer (Graham, 2004), favours the Judeoization of the city. In such a context, the meaning attributed to any particular space derives from the wider cultural collision (Dumper, 1997).

Importantly, contested cities like Jerusalem and Belfast that once stood out on the global stage as being centres of ancestral animosity are now on a spectrum of urban conflict that includes a very long list from Nicosia to Beirut to Mostar to Baghdad. Indeed, in this wider context, living with diversity and difference is highlighted as a central challenge in contemporary urban life (Sandercock, 2003; Binnie et al., 2006). For example, in the UK, the ‘identity’ debate is centred on the efficacy of multiculturalism (Keith, 2005), and policies designed to enhance inclusion and community cohesion. However, the issue is far from new. Early urban sociology was concerned about the eclipse of community and the replacement of solidarities and common bonds with the estrangement, impersonality and heterogeneity that characterized the modern industrial city, and the central issue of territoriality in this configuration has been well established (Sack, 1986). So, this is an old problem, a universal problem, but, one intensified in a more global age with the increasing mobility of economic and political migrants. The distinctive circumstances in contested cities such as Belfast, Nicosia and Jerusalem, with their particular forms of division, separation and spatial segregation, need to be set in this wider historical and contemporary frame.

Urban Public Space in the Contested City

In thinking about ‘public space’, the first acknowledgement then is that the city holds ‘many publics’, most evidently in those cities with very diverse populations. This is even more pronounced in urban centres that are the crucibles of rival ideologies about ethno-nationalism. However, such cities have not been immune from the main urban narratives over recent decades, e.g. the extent to which the commercialization and privatization of social life has crowded out the communal public realm and promoted partitioned social space (Marcuse & Van Kempen, 2002); the extent to which ‘fake’ anaesthetized public space is replacing the more authentic, if messy, ‘real’ urban spaces (Sorkin, 1992; Soja, 1996); the extent to which new threats like ‘global terrorism’ and ‘rampant violent crime’ have
rationalized the prevalence of the ‘surveillance city’, involving a militarization and fortressing of the city—particularly its public spaces—as a demonstration of urban resilience against perceived external and internal intimidations (Dandeker, 1990; Savitch & Ardashev, 2001); the ‘right to the city’ movements hailing the need for women to reclaim the streets as safe for their use; the ‘slow city’ movements seeking to reclaim the city from the spatial dominance of the car and commercial rush in favour of a better environment and quality of life; and the priority attached to the compact built form to support the inclusive and sustainable city (Rishbeth, 2001; DEMOS, 2007). However, these debates about urban space and ownership have been mediated in cities like Nicosia and Belfast within the dominant discourse about competing nationalisms.

At the same time, the objective of creating public space for shared city futures is not without definitional ambiguity. First, the concept of public space can be understood at two levels: (1) the physical; and (2) the procedural (Iveson, 2007). The physical sense is the one mostly addressed here, and within this, there are limited and generous definitions. The limited version sees public space almost exclusively in terms of the city centre, public parks, squares, waterfront townscape and such like. A more expansive interpretation, and the one adopted here, includes arterial routes, the streetscape at central nodes within communities, shopping centres and such like. However, in reality, there is no simple demarcation between the ‘public’ and ‘private’ realms. As social beings, people seek both communalism and privacy, and planning ‘public’ space needs to pay heed to this balance.

Iveson (2007) summarizes the distinction between these two models:

Put simply, topographical models of public space use ‘public’ to denote spaces of sociability in the city where one’s actions are visible to others, while procedural models of public space use ‘public’ to denote spaces where one may take part in collective discussions about common interests and issues. (p. 17)

However, these are not to be understood as two separate spheres. Rather, they can overlap. Moreover, given that there are many publics, not all have the same status, access and use of public space. In this hierarchy, the most marginalized can be characterized as ‘counter-publics’ for whom existing forms of public space may not work. Thus, Iveson (2007) continues to argue that:

rather than holding on to the principles of existing public spheres as the basis for challenging their limits, we ought to be more concerned with the production of counterpublic spheres which enable novel scenes of public address to develop. At the same time, the risk with such an approach is further segregation and ghettoisation according to race, gender, age, etc. (p.17)

Such debates illustrate the intrinsic controversy in defining ‘public space’. Similarly, the concept of a ‘shared future’ (OFMDFM, 2005) does not itself elude contention. Its most obvious meaning assumes a significant increase in integrated living and collaborative working across the divide, rooted in principles of inclusion, respect for diversity, equity and inter-dependence. However, a more differentiated understanding of the term begs the question of how much inter-communalism is actually sought by whom, in what places, over what time period?

Moreover, other vocabularies associated with the creation of a ‘shared future’ are intrinsically contestable. For some, this future implies a shift from managing to
transforming urban conflict around diversity and sovereignty, involving a step-change to a more pluralist city with less insular communities anchored in exclusivist ethno-nationalist affiliation. In turn, this conversion is taken to elide over the long term with the nurturing of a “cosmopolitan culture which is seen as globally open, and inviting cross-pollination, hybridity and fluidity” (Skrbis & Woodward, 2007, p. 731). Such receptive approaches cultivate increasing engagement, familiarity and ultimately empathy and reciprocity across the divide.

As these new sensibilities in turn create ever more porous boundaries and borders, it is speculated that the visceral fear of ‘the other’ that feeds conflict and separatism in time dissolves (Beck, 2006). A less ambitious agenda emphasizes the intrinsic character of conflict to the human condition. For example, the paradoxical resurgence of tribal identities amid the integrations of a globalizing world indicates the persistence of a human ‘Tower of Babel’, reflecting separatist identities and belongings. While for some this ‘Babel’ syndrome implies the need to promote the acceptance and tolerance of diversity, others (Jones, 2006) observe that:

Toleration is associated with disapproval: we tolerate only that to which we object … The demand that is most commonly associated with differences in identity is a demand for recognition rather than for toleration. ‘Being recognised’ seems to imply a form of positive endorsement that goes beyond being merely tolerated and that is altogether more consonant with cherishing and celebrating diversity. (p. 123)

However, if the concept of toleration is flawed in its assumptions about who has the power to designate certain identities and values as normal, according recognition and validity to all identities and their associated beliefs and behaviours is also problematic, as, for example, secularist France discovered in banning the Muslim headdress in schools.

Rethinking Public Space

Public space holds the potential for chance encounters among people of diverse traditions, and in such serendipities rests the opportunity for exchange and learning that can help break barriers. However, before inflating the role that public space can play in enhancing interaction across divides, it is important to address the argument of Amin (2002) that most public spaces are ‘places of transit’ that offer little meaningful or durable contact between strangers. This suggests the need to re-think what we mean by ‘space’, and to get beyond the common notion of a place that is both physically grounded and socially fixed. In recent literature about public space in the contemporary diverse city, two very different models emerge: the first conceives it as display space where difference based on distinctive and closed identity can be affirmed, while the second suggests that it is relational space where a greater pluralism of identities and belongings emerges from constantly negotiated collaborations and contestations across divides.

Massey (2005, p. 9) argues three main propositions about space that are relevant to this debate: (1) space is the outcome of interrelations; it is ‘constituted through interactions’; (2) space is an arena of ‘coexisting heterogeneity’, reflecting and changing the multiplicities and pluralities of contemporary society; and (3) space is forever a work in progress, continuously being remade. In this, she is
arguing against the conventional understanding of space as associated with stasis, closure and representation, and instead is elevating concepts of change, openness, mix, difference and ‘relationality’. Following Laclau (1990), she sees space not as a site but as an event. This disavowal of spaces as ‘pre-given discrete entities’ leads her to propose a new spatial imagination: “for the re-conceptualisation of places in a way that might challenge exclusivist localisms based on claims of some eternal authenticity” (Massey, 2005, pp. 20–21).

A persistent narrative in recent literature about public space is that through processes of privatization and commercialization of social life, the public realm has been compromised or diminished. As posed by Robbins (1993, p. vii), this begs the question: “for whom was the city once more public than now?” Iveson (2007) agrees with this rejection of a ‘paradise lost’ analysis, while acknowledging that the language of retreat and retrieval can serve a purpose in setting an ideal of public space, around which a city politics of inclusion can develop.

Changing the perception and social use of space in a city with long-standing fixed territories demands ambitious vision and proactive intervention that writes a new script, while appreciating the capacity for such scripts to become self-fulfilling. As expressed by Watson (2006, p. 7):

Stories of the city and its public spaces as dangerous, dead or dull, or as sites of exclusion, marginalisation and violence ... contribute to, and produce, the very conditions that they describe ... But new stories of public space as life enhancing, exciting, safe and inclusive ... can take us far in creating those spaces in just that way. (p. 7)

However, in thinking through the role of deliberate intervention to shape public space, Iveson (2007), Watson (2006) and others suggest that an important consideration is whether all public space can best be ordered, designed and planned. There may be a role for the irregular, random and ramshackle ‘public’ spaces that hold some of the improvisation, spontaneity and messiness that also characterize an interesting and vibrant cityscape. Space that facilitates chance encounter, happenstance, the accidental and contingent, and allows for exploration and discovery is part of what a dynamic urban environment should offer. Massey (2005) sees this as fitting in with an appreciation of the complexity and indeterminacy of contemporary social life, and a distinctive modification in the scientific paradigm. She quotes Zohar (1997) in this regard:

Like Newtonian science before it, twentieth-century science has grown out of a deep shift in general culture, a move away from absolute truth and absolute perspective toward contextualism; a move away from certainty, toward an appreciation for pluralism and diversity, toward an acceptance of ambiguity and paradox, of complexity rather than simplicity. (p. 9)

This shift is reflected to some extent in the changed thinking about urban development and design from the modern to the postmodern city.

**Shaping Urban Public Space: The Urban Design Tradition**

Any serious reflection on the urban design tradition as it relates to urban public space suggests at least three key themes which are worthy of consideration: first, the fundamental relationship between the citizen and civic space; second, the
implications of the return of the ‘sustainable’ compact city; and third, the temporal and spatial components of urban design—its’ ‘process’ and its ‘product’. In all three discussions the key issue is their relevance in the particular case of contested cities.

On the relationship between the citizen and civic space, Eric Kuhne, design consultant to Belfast’s Titanic Quarter, argues that good ‘civic’ space—urban open space identified with the ‘civis’ (citizen)—should have the qualities of utility, identity and inclusivity. It should be space that all citizens make use of, identify with and are free to enjoy on a regular basis (personal interview, 2007). This socio-spatial relationship is the focus of Madanipour’s (1996, title page) “inquiry into the socio-spatial process of urban design” which identifies seven areas of ambiguity in the concept of urban design and summarizes these in terms of ‘process and product’ (see below). The distinction between the (involved citizen’s) civic space and the (amorphous or ‘left-over’) public space is also important—the implied criticism of public authority management of public space being directly addressed in the recommendations of the Urban Task Force (1999) which places key responsibility with local councils. However, these precepts confront particular challenge in the context of contested citizenship, as in those cities that are central crucibles of ethno-nationalist conflict. Mutually incompatible identities confound attempts to create common symbols of belonging and attachment. In such places, the predominance of ethnic space can crowd out the ‘civic’, and by the same token, place a premium on good civic space.

On the implications of the return of the sustainable compact city, it is interesting to identify three historical phases: the original mediaeval city, as analyzed by Camillo Sitte (1965, cited in Heckscher, 1977); the picturesque, nostalgic townscapes as depicted (graphically, in the UK) by Cullen (1960) and (verbally, in the USA) by Jacobs (1961); and the current ‘sustainable’ compact city as promoted by Breheny (1992), Jenks et al. (1996) and by the Urban Task Force (1999). Whilst compaction limits the opportunities for major open spaces, it facilitates the realization of a genuine pedestrian environment, with a network of inter-connected urban ‘places’ that relate to the local built environment and to the achievement of a distinctive ‘sense of place’. However, in contested cities, compaction can be compromised by the perceived need for buffer zones—sterile space that separates contending communities and the limitations on the use of brownfield sites. Such sites are seldom seen simply as disused and neglected spaces of mature built environment. Rather, they contain sensitive historical association and partisan proprietary claims, and their reclaimed use can be seen as loss of territory by one side or the other.

On the temporal and spatial components of urban design, Madanipour (1996, p.215) argues that:

Space and time, the product and the process, integrate closely in an investigation into the nature of urban design; to understand space we must understand the processes which produce it. Similarly, to understand these processes, which include urban design, we need to have an understanding of their product.

Carmona et al. (2003) expand the concept of ‘process’ to consider the entire property development process, with particular reference to the role of urban design within it. In strictly professional terms the urban designer role may be less influential than that of other agencies—McGlynn’s ‘powergram’ (McGlynn & Power, 1994, quoted
in Carmona et al., 2003, p. 230) suggests that the urban designer role is one of ‘interest/influence’ (by argument or participation) as compared with the ‘power’ (initiation) role of the landowner/developer and the ‘responsibility’ (control) role of the planner and engineer. All such agencies, of course, are involved in the multi-disciplinary process of urban design in its widest sense, but it is useful to be reminded of the hierarchy of power in such arrangements.

On the concept of urban space as ‘product’, these authors debate the aesthetic, functional, social and perceptual dimensions of such space, as does Madanipour (1996) in similar categorizations. Moreover, he identifies an interesting change in emphasis over the latter part of the twentieth century:

For modernists, it was the space that mattered ... their undertaking was to radically transform space to take on new characteristics. Post-modernists, on the contrary, demanded an emphasis on visible, corporeal mass, on buildings, their details and their relationships, including the spaces between buildings. (p. 216)

Contemporary understanding of the urban design ‘product’ involves accommodation of both the above perspectives, as neo-modernist ambitions evident in the first years of the decade inevitably give way to more modest aspirations in the wake of economic recession.

While traditional principles such as composition, form, enclosure and variety may still inform the aesthetic sensibility of public spaces, it is also vital to acknowledge the divergent social meanings expressed in urban design. Although this is true for every built environment, it is particularly so in the case of acutely divided cities. For example, it may not be appropriate to transpose certain approaches to safety such as theories of ‘defensible space’ (Newman, 1972) since this would be tantamount to ‘criminalising’ a political conflict. On the other hand, aspects of the theory, such as how to design the edges of public spaces to encourage ‘overlooking’ and informal surveillance, may hold relevance. Similarly, consideration about the relational scope of space (Sennett, 2004, p. 10) may distinguish between borders and boundaries as two distinct edges in urban space: a border being like a ‘porous membrane’, a place of exchange between different communities, sometimes, different classes in the city, whereas a boundary is “a guarded territory ... (it) establishes closure”.

Urban Design, Public Space and the Contested City: Case Studies

The expanded definitions of public space and urban design, elaborated here to incorporate procedural as well as physical space in the former, and socio-political as well as physical processes in the latter, offer the opportunity for comparative analyses of two well-known ‘divided cities’ of comparable scale, regional significance and ethno-national contestation—Belfast and Nicosia. The focus of the analysis is on the role of urban design (and the planning process) in the achievement of ‘shared space for a shared future’, and the choice of the two case studies is designed to demonstrate complementarity rather than direct comparability, in the cities’ responses to the problems of division.
Nicosia: Master Planning and Urban Design for Public Space

The recent history of Cyprus and its capital city is well known. Following the colonial struggle with Britain, growing inter-communal violence between Greek and Turkish Cypriots through the 1960s precipitated the Turkish invasion of the northern part of the island in 1974 and the forced sub-division of the capital city into antagonistic northern and southern enclaves. A ceasefire line (the Green Line) was drawn across the island, and this has since operated as a UN-patrolled buffer zone between the separated parts of the island and the city (see Figures 1 and 2).

Despite a series of negotiations to achieve an agreed settlement, in 1983 there was a unilateral declaration of the establishment of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, whose legitimacy is currently recognized only by Turkey (Gaffikin et al., 2008). Cyprus joined the European Union (EU) in 2004, although formal membership applies only to the Greek-speaking southern part of the island; as EU membership is currently sought by Turkey there may be potential for a future settlement under EU auspices.

Nicosia is therefore in some ways ‘the last divided city in Europe’ (A. Caramondani, personal interview, Nicosia, May 2008) in physical, governance and military terms, with the southern part of the city operating as the capital of the Republic of Cyprus (population approximately 270,000) and the northern part functioning unofficially as the capital of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (population approximately 85,000). Moving from the government-controlled southern part of the city to the Turkish-Cypriot northern part requires showing a passport and getting a visa stamped by Turkish authorities, which many Greek-Cypriots refuse to acknowledge. Such a pronounced form of division, whereby Nicosia has become a microcosm of a sovereignty dispute in a partitioned island, makes it a particularly appropriate case study comparison with a city like Belfast.

Faced with the prospect of the old city of Nicosia, divided by the buffer zone, literally becoming a ‘dead-end’ location, with consequent disinvestment and dereliction, and the separated parts of the wider city developing in a totally uncoordinated fashion, the Nicosia Master Plan was initiated in 1979 under the auspices of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). This was a bi-communal project, involving both Greek-speaking and Turkish-speaking planners, architects and engineers, collaborating initially on essential

![Figure 1. Nicosia: city centre with buffer zone.](image1)

![Figure 2. Nicosia: city centre without buffer zone.](image2)
infrastructural co-ordination (of water-supply and sewerage systems) and subsequently on the revitalization of the now-derelict historic old city within its famous Venetian walls. This now operates as an integrated conservation policy, providing packages of economic incentives to private owners and public implementation agencies, and it has had considerable success in physical terms, restoring key buildings of architectural heritage significance, providing strategic pockets of high-quality residential development and stimulating small-scale industrial/commercial activity in vacant and underused buildings. The recent opening up of cross-buffer zone pedestrian streets such as Ledra Street, which now provide direct access between the two contested zones and are much-used by tourists, has provided an important economic stimulus as well making a powerful symbolic statement of nascent integration.

What is interesting about this initiative is the fact that the planning process (involving both Greek and Turkish-speaking professionals) has been able to circumvent the stalemate political process (although local mayors from both sides of the divide also co-operated in the project). In fact, the current Mayor of Nicosia (E. Mavrou, personal interview, May 2008), argues that the fact that these initiatives were not legal, in a formal sense, made them easier to implement on an experimental basis, and the presence of an overarching external funding agency, the UNDP, was essential to ‘jump-start’ the process. This is, therefore, an urban design process, providing useful civic space in both static and dynamic forms, which has the potential to be both ‘shared’ and ‘cosmopolitan’ in the terms of the definitions above.

Residential development is the principle component of any urban design process, and in the divided society that was post-invasion Cyprus, the provision of massive refugee-housing projects for the thousands of Greek-Cypriots displaced from their homelands in the north was the first priority of the state. Government-owned land to the south of the city was identified for this purpose, leading to haphazard growth and ribbon development southwards, and the relocation of the commercial city centre (CBD) into the high-rise 1960s apartment blocks of the inner suburbs, and away from the buffer zone severed old city. The urban design quality of the CBD is therefore characterized by bland 1960s modernism, with a conspicuous lack of established public space, pedestrian streets and public transport provision which are the essentials of the ‘sustainable city’. Even privatized space is limited, with high-density apartment blocks in the new CBD, and large suburban villas in relatively small plots in the outskirts, many in half-developed estates with limited public infrastructure provision.

Therefore, the implications of the divided city are manifest even in the ‘undivided’ parts of the city (see Figures 3 and 4), through distorted settlement patterns, sub-standard urban design and a general lack of civic space and public service infrastructure. Nevertheless, individual development projects (including the design of refugee housing) are often of high architectural quality, and there are strong cultural factors influencing the preferences for large family villas and the casually accepted dominance of the car as transportation mode. There have also been some recent additions to the city’s stock of public open space—pocket parks in the inner suburbs and the Athalassa National Urban Forest in the south-eastern outer suburbs. Nicosia’s central location within a relatively small, and environmentally beautiful, island is also a positive factor. C. Demetriou (personal interview, Nicosia, May 2008) recounts favourably a Nicosian resident’s response to a question about urban public space: “the Mediterranean coast is our public open space”.

Ironically, the most significant public open space in the city is the sterilized land and vacant property along the Green Line, which varies in size from single-plot depth to substantial playing-field dimensions. It represents physically and symbolically the single, massive and formalized barrier between communities that contrasts directly with Belfast’s series of smaller and less formal ‘peace walls’. Historically, Nicosia’s civic leaders and town planners turned their backs on the intractability of the Green Line and focused on the rapidly-developing suburbs (Demetriou, 2004). Now, however, the most recent Nicosia Local Plan (2003) proposes an “expanded, coherent and linked open space system of parks, greenways and natural habitats, and the New Vision for the Core of Nicosia (G. Constaninides, personal interview, Nicosia, May 2008) includes a ‘cultural option’ which prioritizes built and natural environments and the promotion of education and tourism, to both of which the buffer zone could make an obvious and significant contribution. It is notable, however, that the former Plan, produced by a Department of the Cyprus Government, makes little direct reference to the Green Line, as it has no jurisdiction over it, while the latter Plan, the roll-forward of the United Nations Master Plan, focuses almost exclusively in it.

This indicates the fundamental importance of the governance context within which planning and urban design takes place. ‘Turning their backs on the intractability’ of communal division is a common, and understandable, reaction for civic leaders whose remit is essentially a separatist one. It can be argued that the total separation of two protagonist communities has ensured the end to persistent inter-communal violence, and that this safety factor may appeal to some residents as an imperfect but realistic solution to ethnic strife (Gaffikin et al., 2008). (There is some evidence of a comparable ‘colour-blind’ approach to sectarian divisions having been adopted by housing and planning policy-makers in Belfast; see below.) However, the target of ‘shared spaces for a shared future’ will never be achieved by this approach,
and here the examples of the original Nicosia Master Plan and the current New Vision for the Core of Nicosia are the ones to be emulated.

Indeed, there is huge potential for urban design based regeneration in the heart of Nicosia. The architectural quality of the old Italianate townscape and impressive set-piece buildings such as mosques and Byzantine churches provide an excellent opportunity for the type of cultural option identified above, and the opening up of pedestrian routes through the buffer zone, such as Ledra Street, provide economic as well as symbolic benefits. Nicosia’s tourism market is clearly under-developed, in the heart of an established tourism-dominated island economy which needs diversification to balance its beach-holiday reputation. Local planning and urban design initiatives have already begun to bypass the political logjam; they should now become more central to the long-term process of achieving political accommodation.

Belfast: From Defensible to Shared Space

The most striking difference between the urban design expression of communal division in the cities of Nicosia and Belfast is one of scale:

whereas Belfast has a series of small scale, informal and, perhaps, diminishing physical and symbolic barriers between communities, Nicosia has a single, massive and formalised barrier, which is dominant in itself and has had a devastating effect on its urban surrounds (Gaffikin et al., 2008, p. 33).

Another essential difference relates to historical location. The Belfast of today is arguably less divided than it was 10 years ago, when gloomy comparisons were made with another divided city:

Unlike Berlin, where the Wall appeared almost overnight, and disappeared almost as quickly, Belfast’s walls, both metaphorical and physical, appear to be built to last. (Sterrett & McEldowney, 2001, p. 16)

Belfast has followed Berlin in the diminution of its more obvious divisions, and Nicosia can take some encouragement from both of them, but Belfast’s walls—some 40 of them at the latest count—provide stubborn physical reminders of the accuracy of this prediction and the immutability of some of its divisions.

The most extreme, and symbolic, physical solution to behavioural problems, is the erection of a wall between warring communities—it is, in many ways, an admission of defeat. Belfast had a long tradition of relatively separate development for its Catholic and Protestant communities before its ghetto boundaries were formalized with walls in the early ‘seventies, as Brett (1986, p. 34) acknowledges in his description of their origins:

Whole terraces of houses were burnt out and makeshift barriers were erected … a massive shift of population took place, accompanied by large-scale squatting and intimidation; a so-called Peaceline, initially of corrugated iron, was hastily erected to separate warring factions. It was no accident that this barrier followed, to within a few inches, the demarcation line between the two communities noted almost a hundred years earlier.
The original walls were of corrugated iron (replacing stones and burnt-out vehicles in many cases), solidified later into mass shuttered concrete with metal cladding. These were single walls, and vulnerable to determined attack, so the next variant had a double barrier with a landscaped strip between the walls, and some (occasionally bizarre) aesthetic improvements with picket fences and timber trellises to offset the starkness of the walls (see Figures 5 and 6). Therefore, what were originally temporary barriers in emergency situations took on the depressing character of permanent street architecture. Urban design, unfortunately, was being harnessed to the production of more effective means of community segregation, and the fact that the designs were of higher quality perversely reflected the accepted permanence of the problem.

Within residential communities themselves, the need for security prompted the adoption of ‘defensible space’ approaches to layout design in public housing projects, although American (Newman, 1972) and UK (Greater London Council, 1978) theories and practices were already pointing in this direction. Stollard & Warren (1988) list the requirements for such ‘design against crime’ as layouts which facilitate neighbourhood surveillance, perimeter control and access for policing in emergency, although there is some conflict between the latter and the former, and there were strong conspiracy theories in the Catholic/Nationalist communities (Smyth, 1994) about ‘coralled living space’ and ‘tank-friendly roads’ in West Belfast. Again, planning and urban design were contributing to defensive and segregationist community postures, which Brett (1986, pp. 15–20) argues was not entirely surprising:

in a situation of conflict, considerations of security cannot be left entirely out of account ... plans that work perfectly well in a united community may present risks of trouble in a violently divided one.

While residential enclaves, and the ‘peace walls’ that separate and protect them, are representative of what is defined as Belfast’s ‘ethnic space’, the prime example of ‘neutral space’ continues to be the commercial city centre, which has emerged from the protection of its 1980s ‘ring of steel’ (manned security barriers on all entrance routes) to present a modern, consumerist, face to its now-burgeoning retail and tourist trade. The desire for modernist imagery (neutral and forward-looking) rather than traditional conservation (backward-looking, therefore potentially divisive) is reflected in the delayed designation of the city-centre conservation area (compared with most UK Victorian cities), and in the planners’
preference for large-scale modern retail complexes such as Castle Court and Victoria Square. A more practical consideration was the fact that in a situation where buildings could be destroyed overnight (as was the case during the ‘troubles’), architectural conservation was not an immediate priority. A consequent laissez-faire ‘postmodern’ approach to urban design was reflected in many pastiche infill-buildings, fake reproduction street furniture, and most bizarrely, in the decorative design of security features, for example, neo-Doric columns on sentry-boxes. As with the design of peace walls (above), they had evolved over time from being functionally crude to (disturbingly) decorative, although, fortunately, most of these have disappeared in the relatively peaceful recent past.

More permanent reminders of the troubled past are the many individual buildings where security-conscious architecture has made an indelible imprint on the city centre’s urban design image. The ‘blast wall’, where a single storey projection at ground floor level faced with a solid wall of high-quality material (Portland stone for the High Court, marble for Central Station) is designed to reflect upwards a car-bomb explosion from road or footpath, is now a common architectural feature. Similarly, many prominent buildings have blank ground floor facades, or slit windows and sloping sills (the BBC Building), while others have been designed to provide controlled access and easily-supervised internal space (Europa Hotel). Stollard (1984) documents many examples of such architecture in Belfast and debates their applicability to other UK cities, an argument whose relevance has been subsequently underlined by recent bombing atrocities in London. The universality of terrorist threat to urban security is now widely accepted, but more insidious and potentially influential, perhaps, are the increasingly defensive designs of residential and retail property in city centres, for reasons which have nothing to do with urban terrorism.

Rogers (1998) see this increased privatization of civic space and the consequent decline of the public realm as the prime reasons for the transition from multi-functional to mono-functional urban spaces from ‘open-minded’ to ‘single-minded’ cities.

The disappearance of open-minded space is not simply a cause for regret: it can generate dire social consequences launching a spiral of decline … as the vibrancy of public spaces diminishes we lose the habit of participating in street life … the natural policing of streets that comes from the presence of people needs to be replaced with ‘security’ and the city becomes less hospitable and more alienating. (pp. 9–10)

A positive sign in this regard is the obvious difference in the urban design ethos of the recently-opened Victoria Square compared with that of Castle Court in the late 1980s. The former, although disproportionately massive in urban scale, respects existing street patterns and building materials, and is open to public thoroughfare throughout the day and night. The latter, designed defiantly in modernist glass and steel at a time when street bombing was still a serious problem, was symbolically important to the emerging peacetime Belfast (Sterrett & McEldowney, 1999), but provides what is essentially inward-looking, closed and privatized commercial space. The trend toward more ‘open-minded’ and publicly-accessible urban space which Victoria Square represents (and the Liverpool One complex in Liverpool best epitomizes) is welcome in this respect, although the commercial over-confidence implicit in their overwhelming scale
may not survive the current recession. The fact that Victoria Square is more traditionalist than modernist in its design theme is, ironically, positive—it suggests a level of civic confidence, taken for granted in most UK city centres, that accepts ‘looking backwards’, in urban design terms, as no longer necessarily dangerous or divisive.

More important than commercial open space, however, is the prospect of a city-wide system of linked and accessible public or civic spaces, as suggested (above) in the Nicosia Local Plan and as proposed in a succession of urban plans, most recently the City Centre Public Realm Master Plan (DSD, 2006), for Belfast. This is particularly important in cities like Belfast (and unlike London, Paris or Dublin) which lack significant areas of formal city centre civic space, so must be reliant (like Dutch and Flemish cities) on a network of small-scale ‘pocket’ parks linked by a series of well-designed (or well-conserved) pedestrian-friendly streets. At a more strategic level this type of ‘connectedness’ needs to be extended beyond the city centre to embrace the pedestrian paths and nodes on arterial routes and a potential city-wide ‘greenway’ network, using disused railway/road lines to link parks and recreation areas throughout the urban area (Gaffikin et al., 2008). After years of technocratic neutrality in the face of sectarian conflict, recent planning and urban design initiatives in Belfast have begun to address the potential implications and positive benefits of ‘shared space for a shared future’ (Gaffikin et al., 2008). Yet, even now, the extent to which division is explicitly addressed in these plans and policies remains varied and, in some cases, hesitant (Belfast City Council, 2004, 2005). The scope, potential and limits of a more proactive approach is considered in the next section.

The Scope, Limits and Potential of Urban Design in Dealing with Division

The case studies (above) illustrate the significance of urban design in the public realm, first as a visible manifestation of conflict and division (see Figures 7 and 8), but second as a potential contributor to reconciliation and integration. The discussion (below) documents, first, some essentially negative manifestations of division which have been expressed in urban design terms, and second, proposes

Figure 7. Belfast: wall mural in Republican area.

Figure 8. Belfast: wall mural in Loyalist area.
some positive contributions to the achievement of ‘shared space’ through spatial planning and urban design initiatives. Some of these relate to the ‘process’ of urban design and are reliant on development and management initiatives over time (see discussion above); most relate to the urban design ‘product’ and seek to make positive functional, aesthetic, symbolic or social impact in the short or medium term.

In so doing, it is recognized that “planners and the methods and techniques of land use planning have much to offer the management of one of the most crucial spatial problems in the city” (Murtagh, 1995, p. 210). It is also accepted that “urban design may well be barometer of change . . . a situation where design is turned to expressing difference less contentiously than cosmetically masking it by decorating peace walls” (Neill et al., 1995, p. 234). ‘Expressing difference less contentiously’ is a not a modest ambition in the historical context of the divided cities discussed above; it may be achieved by recognising the negatives and promoting the positives discussed below.

Urban Design as a Manifestation of Division

Amongst the many and varied definitions and interpretations of urban design, the most succinct and common-sense one is probably “. . . everything you can see out of the window . . .” (Tibbalds, 1988, p. 1). On the basis of this interpretation, one of the most dominant, and infuriating, pieces of urban design must surely be the huge rock-constructed mosaic of the Turkish flag on the southern side of the Kyrenian mountains in North Cyprus, deliberately large enough to be clearly seen from the windows of every Greek-Cypriot house in Nicosia. By the same token, the provocatively painted pavement, kerbs, lampposts and flag-bedecked houses in both parts of Belfast constitute significant, and confrontational, examples of urban design in that divided city. These pieces of urban public art undoubtedly provide a sense of identity to local people and a sense of place to their locality—both key requirements of good urban design—but they also provide something more visceral: they annoy and provoke their community rivals, sometimes to the point of violence. That, more than anything else, is the reason for their existence.

This is the first contribution of urban design in a contested city—the dominant assertion of a particular identity—based on religion, ethnicity or a combination of the two. That assertion can be made from a distance, as in the case above, or it can be much more immediate, as is the case in Nicosia with the architectural conversion of Gothic or Byzantine churches into mosques, by the stripping-out of their Christian iconography and the addition of Muslim features such as minarets. There is no direct Belfast equivalent of this assertion of dominance, although many Catholic/Nationalists see the proliferation of British imperialist imagery around the City Hall, or the neo-classical monumentality of Parliament Buildings at Stormont, as something similar. Brett (1986) acknowledges this in his description of the City Hall and the Presbyterian Assembly Buildings in central Belfast as:

the corporate expression of embattled Unionism . . . an effort (perhaps largely unconscious) to convert a brash and sprawling industrial centre into a politico-religious capital city. (p. 47)

A second, and consequent, contribution of urban design in this context is the construction and decoration of defensive architecture, as illustrated above by the
account of peace wall development and defensible space housing layouts in 1980s Belfast. These, of course, are merely recent examples of the long legacy of defensive architecture which is now the major selling point for most European historic tourist towns—Roman earthworks, mediaeval castles, city walls and ramparts, as well as high-density, narrow-streets, fortified towns and villages. In Nicosia itself the dominant design feature of the old town is the Venetian rampart, which encircles and defines this historic quarter, while the more recent military installations of the United Nations peacekeeping forces dominate the skyline around the buffer zone. Belfast’s more recent defensive architecture, as discussed above, was in the process of taking on the rather worrying appearance of ‘decorative permanence’ until relatively recently, but fortunately this has begun to disappear in the city centre. Many small-scale peace walls still remain, particularly in North Belfast, although there is general agreement on the desirability of their long-term removal, provided the peace process continues.

A third contribution of urban design is obviously the idea of ‘defensible space’ in residential layout design, pioneered in the urban crucible of New York in the 1960s, but given a distinctive Belfast flavour in places such as Poleglass and Short Strand in the 1980s. This approach provides the urban design qualities of enclosure, privacy and communality, but lacks the other key quality of permeability. The clash between these has a security implication in Belfast, as indicated above, with the need for cul-de-sac based ‘natural surveillance’ conflicting with the demand for policing accessibility; there is considerable suspicion that there were ‘security’ inputs to design decisions in order to facilitate the latter. It is interesting to note that in the ‘mosaic’ pattern of community divisions in Belfast, these defensible layouts in public housing encouraged high-density, hence environmentally sustainable, residential developments, while in the totally-segregated ‘single barrier’ division in Nicosia, residential development evolved in less-sustainable patterns, with large units on single plots, often totally reliant on private transport. Different economic and cultural forces were also obviously at play here.

Urban Design and Spatial Planning as Forces for Reconciliation

On the positive side of the equation, carefully considered urban design, within the context of a strategic planning framework, can have a beneficial influence in a contested situation. This first requirement is a realistic acknowledgement of community division by public authorities and there has been considerable criticism (Brand & Gaffikin, 2007) of the deliberately ‘colour-blind’ approach to sectarian division adopted by some housing and planning professionals in Belfast over the period of the ‘troubles’. The Nicosia example is very positive here, with planning and architectural professionals taking an integrative lead in setting up bi-communal planning and infrastructural strategies across the divided city, and laying down a path for politicians to follow. Belfast, in more recent times, has adopted a similar approach, with government agencies such as the Department of Social Development, local authorities such as Belfast City Council, and voluntary agencies such as the Community Relations Council, pooling resources to promote the concept of ‘a shared future’ and all its implications. The process of changing political mind-sets on this has been painfully slow. There is much debate as to whether “difference is to be bemoaned or celebrated” and
well-rehearsed arguments “dressing up sectarianism as a form of pluralism” (Wilson, 2007, p. 1), but there are tentative signs of progress in relation to the notion of ‘shared space’.

Central to this positive approach must be the prioritising of potentially integrative over potentially segregating projects. In the Belfast case, this could entail a ‘good relations’ audit of key public spaces to ensure that their, location, accessibility and visual character were conducive to cross-community, rather than single-community, identification and use. It is interesting that in Nicosia most integrative projects have been initiated by an outside agency—the United Nations Development Programme—in the absence of local agreement. There are echoes of this in the role of the Direct-Rule Administration in Belfast during past decades, although it has been perhaps over-tolerant of perceived tribal divisions of territory. The forthcoming devolution of planning and housing responsibilities to the City Council provides an opportunity to challenge such established sectarian spatial patterns.

A prime example of this is need to challenge traditional sectional territorial claims whether in relation to static situations such as brownfield housing land in inner-city Belfast (most if it in ‘Protestant areas’ but in demand from a rapidly-growing Catholic population), or in dynamic situations such as the ‘traditional routes’ of ceremonial parades through unwelcoming host communities. The former needs to be addressed in the light of wider strategic planning priorities, the latter on the basis of local negotiated agreements; both, however, demand honest and transparent communication between decision makers and local representatives as part of a spatial planning process that reflects community needs and aspirations.

Hence, there is a need to establish an effective community spatial planning system, in which a current plan, with statutory powers, becomes the spatial manifestation of community requirements in relation to a wide range of functions—economic, social, educational and environmental. Such a planning system was originally envisaged in the forthcoming devolution of local planning to District Councils, although the Reform of the Planning System in Northern Ireland (DoENI, 2009) consultation paper seems to dilute the previous commitment to community centrality in plan-making. There are some interesting contrasts here with the Nicosia ’New Vision’ Plan (2008) which rolls forward parts of the Nicosia Master Plan (1979) for the core city of Nicosia, but is now under the auspices of a bi-communal community council. Here the planning professionals who previously bypassed the political stalemate are now accountable to a cross-community representative body, a microcosm of the evolving situation in Belfast, albeit in the context of a more intractable political problem.

In relation to civic space—space that all citizens can use, identify with, and feel free to enjoy without fear or intimidation—the most important urban design contribution identified in case studies above is the need for the design and provision of a linked system of shared and accessible public spaces from ‘edge to centre’ of the city. In Belfast, this would attempt to link established urban parks, major recreational and cultural facilities, arterial routes and the city centre’s pedestrian and ‘public realm’ systems. In implementation terms this would have to be an incremental approach that starts with securing the centre and waterfront areas for integrated living, moves out to ‘de-sectarianize’ the arterial routes by the removal of flags, emblems and tribal markings, before attempting to address issues in the segregated neighbourhoods in the longer term.
The arterial routes are doubly important: as well as communication space they frequently provide borders between communities and opportunities for the location of key services to bring local communities out of segregated enclaves and into shared space. Sennett (2004) makes a distinction between ‘borders’ (porous membranes which can act as places of exchange) and ‘boundaries’ (which guard territory and establish closure) in his analysis of Spanish Harlem in New York. He argues for the establishment of key services, like markets on borders (to encourage inter-community activity) rather than in the centre of a neighbourhood (which fosters isolationism). The historic core of Nicosia provides such an opportunity at the macro-level in that city, and there are countless examples at the micro-scale in Belfast; key nodal points along arterial routes provide the best opportunities to achieve this type of community integration.

At a more local scale the potential benefits of positive urban design are many and various, but a first necessity is to undo some of the negative contributions identified above. The rebranding of antagonistic public art and display has been addressed in Belfast by an Arts Council-funded ‘reimagining’ programme which has successfully replaced aggressive (and mostly non-artistic) wall murals with more professional paintings promoting local history, as well as reducing the extent of sectarian pavement-painting and flag-mounting. In similar vein, a policy to promote cross-community tolerance of protestant/unionist parades and street celebrations under the banner of a cultural ‘orangefest’ has been introduced, as has a ‘friendly fire’ policy to encourage more environmentally-sustainable bonfires during this ‘festival’ period. Expressions of local culture and public art are important, but they do not have to be divisive. The Flemish approach of humorously celebrating the ‘common man’ (with street sculptures of butchers, bakers and drinking students) is a positive example of celebrating what unites rather than divides a local community.

The removal of defensive walls and barriers has to be a longer-term objective, being addressed by reducing the appearance of ‘permanence’ in the structures and the introduction of controlled through-access points between communities. This reflects the recent Ledra Street experience in central Nicosia and the successful re-imaging of Belfast city centre following the removal of its security barriers. A more intractable problem is addressing the air of dereliction and decline that accompanies such ‘barrier-building’ in commercial areas. This is still serious in Nicosia, but in Belfast has residual impacts in the form of shuttered after-hours shop-fronts and a proliferation of small-scale barriers (mostly unnecessary) around areas of civic space such as the City Hall gardens.

The city centre’s civic places are crucially important as they provide neutral and cosmopolitan space and display symbolic affirmation of a shared identity. Spatial planning and urban design have key roles to play in the achievement of this ideal, but they are small components in a much larger social and political project. They cannot be immune from the conflict, cannot wait for an overall settlement before making an intervention, and cannot take an independent role in corrective action. They must, however, take a proactive role in coherent collaboration with other public and civic agencies in the transition from the segregated and exclusive city to the open and pluralist one. The alternative to ‘shared space’ is ‘scared space’ (D. Morrow, 2005, quoted in Wilson, 2005, p. 10), and that is no alternative at all.
References


Belfast City Council (2005) *Your City, Your Space: Belfast City Council Strategy for Open Spaces* (Belfast: Belfast City Council).


