Signs of a city: semiotic markers at odds with constructed narratives in Belfast

Professor Ian Montgomery, Dr Ruth Brolly Ulster University, Belfast
Reimaging Belfast post ‘troubles’

The past twenty years has been a difficult transitional time for the city and those who would envision a robust economic future.
Redevelopment at an all time high

On social media planners, architects and heritage bodies report daily on ongoing development.

The former are concerned with building and regeneration

The latter with the disappearing architecture of a city with no desire to remember the past through associations bound up in an enduring built environment
Belfast city centre reimagining emulates other cities

Invokes identifiable quarters (lots of them) to which artists and cultural entrepreneurs are attracted
In Belfast city centre shops are:

‘Marshalled like icons to oppose the array of images painted on the gable walls of housing areas in the city, which portray divisive identity symbols of the past’ *

City living, long absent from Belfast, is returning slowly.
Gentrified city centre

Troubled past concealed behind new development/shifting narratives a threat to authenticity.

Overarching city centre theme of safety, neutrality.

On arterial routes, where communities reside, an entirely different city image is apparent

Still prevalent ideologies and societal divisions are expressed through architecture and a semiotic landscape imbued with meaning.
The contemporary urban structure and layout of Belfast showing city centre surrounded by arterial routes where communities of the city reside.
In housing estates, to the North, South, East and West of the city, new narratives do not apply.

Perpetuation of cultural norms and hegemonies often expressed through graphic and other semiotic marks.

Tourists would not see these places unless electing to undertake one of the increasingly popular tours of the city’s troubled places.
Arterial routes once commercially active and ‘walkable’ to the city centre, now isolated, fractured by physical firebreaks.
Vast swathes of derelict land (interspaces) emphasise societal boundaries as a result of roads infrastructure concentrated on interface areas.
As an example of how walls can be used to control urban populations, Belfast’s (Peace) walls are concentrated on defensible spaces surrounding and within the housing estates.
Cupar Way, West Belfast
Bryson Street, East Belfast
Impact of walls/interfaces/interspaces on communities

A proposal for the removal of walls by 2023 has been met with both skepticism and objection. The majority are likely to remain in place beyond that date.

People living in interface areas are concerned for their safety should walls be removed.
Location of interfaces/peace walls Antrim Road

main arterial routes

Interfaces
Blighted spaces
Location of interfaces/peace walls Falls Road

main arterial routes

Interfaces
Blighted spaces
Since the mid 1970s all major development projects had to be previewed and approved by the British Army. The legacy of these measures remains today.

Social housing solutions have been centred on two storey red brick houses ‘served by “shared surface” courts’ with an emphasis on ‘defensible space’ and limited vehicle access.*

'Throughout the housing areas various devices, from small walls, to bollards block wider urban pathways and metal fencing in various forms and heights ensures the ‘uncongenial-sounding urban framework’. *

Donegall Pass

Limestone Road

North Queen Street
Community spaces and places in housing estates
Semiotic and graphic marks reinforcing the nature of place hegemonies / tribalism /contested space
Flags must be flown, as to ‘disobey’ the unwritten rule often results in damage to property by vandals who require residents to show their loyalty by displaying a flag.
This is a world of hushed conversations, vigilante law, illegal protection rackets, and paramilitary rule in an environment where visible loyalism acts as the veneer to wider social, political, and economic problems.
Even recently built housing, perhaps not obviously from a distance but on closer inspection, reflects the need for security measures to prevent against missiles or other threats to the persons within.
In interface areas murals, flags, flagging of related messages and graffiti, reinforce the territorial nature of place.
WE ARE THE PILGRIMS, MASTER: WE SHALL GO ALWAYS A LITTLE FURGER

EAST BELF
DONEGALL PASS

UVF

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The rebuilding, reimaging, rebranding and new Belfast narratives stop at the edge of the city’s core.

In and around the city’s housing estates defensive architecture and military planned space reinforces underlying societal divisions.

Should the built environment of Belfast’s housing estates not effectively convey a narrative of enduring societal divisions, hegemonies and ideologies, graphic and other semiotic markers, as co-creators of the image of place, do.