



Transitional optics: Exploring liminal spaces after conflict

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Transitional Optics: Exploring Liminal Spaces after Conflict

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Transitional Optics: Exploring Liminal Spaces after Conflict

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to engage in a new conceptualisation of liminality, as it applies to space and place in societies emerging from conflict but not yet at peace. We adopt a case study approach of two urban environments: Derry/Londonderry, a city that experienced acute levels of violence during the Northern Ireland conflict, and Bilbao, the largest city in the Basque Country which has been at the crux of the cultural and economic struggle for Basque independence. The visual, built environment has been significantly reconfigured in both cities to communicate the transition from conflict. Yet the optics of peacebuilding does not necessarily reflect the experiences of communities as they move through complex processes. A more nuanced and critical reading of the urban environment often reveals stagnation within peace processes and the existence of liminal, inbetween spaces. This paper suggests that 'transitional optics' in societies moving out of conflict can physically illuminate the complex nature of building peace, and argues that the idea of permanent liminality can offer new ways of understanding the ways in which transitional processes can become trapped. An 'end-point' is not always achievable, or perhaps for some, desirable. The characteristics of permanent liminality can be identified in three main areas: political imagery, physical regeneration and public space as a conflict arena.

Keywords

Politics, Built Environment, Public Space, History, Heritage, Memory, Liminality, Conflict

Introduction

In societies emerging from violent conflict, the optics of ‘peace’ are often critically important in providing a framework for transition and soothing anxieties at a time of uncertainty. The aim of this article is to engage with the emerging conceptualisation of permanent liminality, as it applies to space and place in societies that are coming out of conflict but are not yet at peace. It does this by exploring ‘transitional optics’, visually manifested through the built environment of two case studies: Derry/Londonderry in Northern Ireland, a part of the UK (where the politics of nomenclature underscores continued division¹), and Bilbao in the Basque region of Spain (where semantics and language speak to continuing conflict (see Gomez, 1998; Jack, 2015)). We contend that these cities, and the societies in which they are situated, may be seen as liminal spaces – framed in the space between war and what comes after. Northern Ireland has since 1998 been engaged in a protracted period of volatile peacebuilding, while the Basque Country, which continues the grapple with the legacy of Franco, celebrated the disarmament of the militant organisation ETA, after seven years of a ceasefire in April 2017 (BBC News, 2017). Since the publication of Galtung’s seminal work on negative and positive peace in 1967, scholars have worked hard to deconstruct and extend conceptualisations of transitional processes and the spaces that emerge after war. Those researching the dynamics of transition and transformation in Northern Ireland, for instance, have pointed to the nuanced nature of peacebuilding. Shirlow (2008: 32), has written about progress in Belfast as ‘a tale of two cities’ with some communities locked in violence while others prosper, while O’Dowd and Komarova (2011: 48) have pointed to the persistent, rigid and deep-rooted political and cultural nature of ‘territorial fixity and division’ in many of the city’s neighbourhoods despite significant urban regeneration. This is mirrored by Bollen’s (2012) characterisation of the ‘darkly present’ conflict amidst regeneration and development in the Basque region. Framing peace processes as a continuum, subject to progression and regression, may convey the idea of an end point that perhaps is not always fully achievable, or for some, even desirable. We suggest that emerging conceptions of permanent liminality have the potential to provide a useful additional lens to enhance our understanding of this transitional space. In particular, we contend that an exploration of liminality allows us to develop understandings of the way in which conflict transformation can get ‘stuck’ and fail to progress, and how that ‘inbetween-ness’ can even be actively sought by conflict actors in an

¹ The city’s name was originally named Doire (Derry) in the 6th Century. It was changed to Londonderry in the 1600s and the name continues to be a source of division.

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3 attempt to reappraise their roles amid a rapidly changing political landscape. We argue that it
4 is possible to identify visual expressions of this liminality, and environments that appear
5 permanently trapped in liminal space, through transitional optics in the urban landscape.

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7 These visual manifestations speak of a space stuck between a violent past and a future which
8 is still emergent.
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11 Defined as a state of ambiguity or ‘inbetween-ness’, liminality is a construct which is
12 increasingly of interest to those studying the processes, phases and iterations of change and
13 transition. However, despite a considerable body of important work on liminal spaces
14 (Matthews, 2007; Moran, 2013), liminal times as contexts for transformation and alternative
15 interactions (Turner, 1967) and liminality as dialogue in identity construction (Beech, 2011),
16 there is little work utilising liminal conceptualisations of conflict transitions. While the
17 process of transitioning often evokes or conjures the idea of an endpoint, it also leaves open
18 the possibility of ‘permanent liminality’ - an inability to progress through liminal space, and
19 to an ultimately peaceful environment. This emerging concept and its relationship to conflict
20 manifestations, is the focus of this paper. We argue that within the cases of Derry and Bilbao,
21 three persistent themes can be identified in relation to an analysis of liminal space and
22 permanent liminality. These include public imagery as a persistent conflict identifier;
23 significant strategic attempts at spatial, including architectural alteration as conscious post-
24 conflict ‘framing; and the ongoing use of public spaces as interfaces of protest and unrest.
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27 This paper therefore makes three significant and novel contributions. Firstly, it extends the
28 literature on liminality and applies the emergent concept of permanent liminality to the
29 context of conflict transformation and the transitional contested space that exists after active
30 conflict. Secondly, it dimensionalises constructions of liminal space within conflict transition,
31 using two cases and focusing on the visual manifestations of ‘inbetween-ness’ and the
32 possibility of ‘fixedness’ in liminal space. Finally, it reflects upon how the concept of
33 liminality can enhance our understanding of space and transition in conflict environments.
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35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 48 49 **Liminality, conflict and peacebuilding: The space inbetween**

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51 Liminality is a concept which is of increasing interest to those engaged in work around
52 transitional or emergent change in physical and social spaces. Deriving from the Latin for
53 ‘threshold’, liminality conveys an equivocal, in-between state, which holds the possibility of,
54 and conveys the journey to, a changed reality. A ‘betwixt and between’ space with altered
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3 rules and meanings (Turner, 1967), liminality is often marked by rituals, ceremonies and
4 other forms of expression. Such places create openings for different thinking or give
5 permission to try out new or alternative ways of interacting (Schirch, 2005). These 'rites of
6 passage' that allow individuals to pass from one identity state to another (Van Gennep, 1960)
7 are often conceived of as a processual process characterised by an initial stage of separation
8 and detachment; a middle stage of liminality in which the subject or 'liminar' moves through
9 a space that is different to both the 'before' and 'after' states; and a final stage of
10 'aggregation', or consummation of the liminal journey (Chreim, 2002). Soderlund and Borg
11 (2017) suggest that there are three levels of liminality: individual liminal experiences,
12 collective organisational processes and liminality as place or space. This type of scholarship
13 on liminality which focuses on structures and organisations has a useful contribution to make
14 in our understanding of conflict and conflict resolution processes. There is also a growing
15 body of literature which explores, within different disciplinary contexts, the developing
16 concept of 'permanent liminality'. Turner's (1969) assertion that certain environments can
17 lead to an 'institutionalisation of liminality' has led to an additional body of work suggesting
18 that liminality can gradually become a permanent state (Szakalczai, 2000; Thomassen, 2012;
19 Johnsen and Sorensen, 2014). We contend, like Johnsen and Sorensen (2014), that
20 conceptions of liminality have much to offer in environments where boundaries become
21 blurred and that there is potential for these environments to 'reconfigure' the concept from a
22 temporary one to the permanent one and towards Agamben's 'zone of indistinction' (1998).

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36 Instabilities in social, political and organisational contexts, multiple meanings and the
37 persistent nature of the liminal experience, all draw parallels with complex conflict
38 transformation experiences. Reconceptualising liminality as a collective longitudinal
39 experience of ambiguity and inbetween-ness within a changeful context, allows us to think of
40 it less as a transition and more of a prolonged and potentially negative hiatus to an
41 unknowable future. Extending this analysis allows us to conceive of the idea that such
42 liminality may become a permanent state - with consequences for peace itself. This inherent
43 paradox involves 'a fundamental suspension of ordinary social structures' and has been
44 applied to contexts where overlaps in activities, identities and behaviours bleed from one
45 sphere to another, and where clear delineations are no longer possible (Johnsen and
46 Sørensen, 2015:322). Johnsen and Sørensen identify this in relation to modern work-life
47 balance but it is, we suggest, equally applicable to societies where both peace and conflict
48 seemly existing in overlap within the same spaces. This 'institutionalization', (Thomassen,
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3 2014) is a useful way to engage with liminality and its visual representations within our
4 spatial cases, as well as an emerging recognition that liminality can be a collective as well as
5 an individual experience (Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003). Identifying that liminal space may
6 be a more permanent construction, with a 'continuous stress on transformation and
7 transgression' (Thomassen 2012:160) also allows us to conceive of these spaces differently
8 within the vicissitudes of peacebuilding.
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13 To some extent this work from organisational studies mirrors significant scholarship around
14 conceptual approaches to understanding the transitional undercurrents of a range of physical
15 spaces, within conflict environments. For example, Boyer (1996:18) suggests that visual
16 representations like architectural spaces give us an idea of the way that things 'could be'.
17 They can become an 'anesthetized social world divorced from the realm of difference,
18 diversity and antagonism' (Allen, 2006:442). For Weizman (2007: 13), architecture is a form
19 of 'political plastic', something malleable that can be moulded to facilitate political
20 aspirations or struggles. Allen (2006) writing about the power of public space and
21 architecture, suggests that it offers 'something that is felt through the invitation to mingle,
22 circulate and inhabit' (443). Yet the regeneration of public space in the cityscape can result
23 in a 'contrived diversity rather than a real social mix' with a 'controlled policing of the public
24 realm.' (Allen, 2006: 443). This leads to questions of what is really happening in public
25 spaces that inhabit the transitional space between active conflict and sustained peace. Allen
26 (2006) contends that the staging of spaces as promoting accessibility can often remain an
27 illusion.
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38 In order to think about the application of liminality to a reading of transitional space we must
39 also look at our traditional conceptualisations of peace, conflict and contestation. We
40 understand peace, like many others do (Koopman, 2011; McConnell et al, 2014; Ross, 2012),
41 as something fluid, as a state of being that can change and evolve across time, place and
42 scale. Political geographers have called for greater attention to be given to the nuances of
43 building peace after conflict (Megoran, 2011; Koopman, 2017; Loyd, 2012). As Richmond
44 (2014) and Brickhill (2015) observe, what looks like peace on one level (and to some actors),
45 many look entirely different on another. In both Derry and Bilbao there has been distinct but
46 concerted efforts to transform the built environment and convey a sense of successful
47 transition. Yet this particular lens can conceal what Purdevkova (2017) calls the ongoing
48 'ontopolitical struggle' on the ground, over the terms and practices of restructuring a post-
49 conflict space. This struggle she observes 'encompasses the ways in which people act within
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3 the new spaces, asserting their interests not only by manoeuvring in physical space, but by
4 appropriating the very logistics and languages that drive these initiatives' (2017: 537). We
5 suggest that transitional optics are paradoxical, and if properly analysed can reveal pervasive
6 tensions that resonate with this idea of permanent liminality.
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12 **Liminal Spaces: Derry and Bilbao**

14 The city of Derry/Londonderry played a pivotal role in the Northern Ireland conflict. It was
15 home to a vibrant civil rights movement in the 1960s and the birth of the locally named
16 'Troubles' are attributed to a violent exchange between civil rights protesters and the
17 police force which appeared to tip a society on tottering on the brink of violence over the
18 edge in 1969 (Murtagh, 1999). With a history of economic and political discrimination the
19 city suffered from high levels of deprivation and became a recruiting ground for Republican
20 paramilitaries following the fatal shootings of 13 unarmed civilians in 1972 by members of
21 the British Army (see Prince and Warner 2012; Conway 2003; Dawson 2005). The early
22 years of the Troubles witnessed the formation of no-go areas for security forces as the city
23 became increasingly polarised. Divided by the River Foyle running through its centre, the
24 West Bank was predominantly Catholic (with one sizeable Protestant community living
25 under the shadow of the infamous plantation walls) and the East Bank was predominantly
26 Protestant. Until 1984 the city with a population of roughly 100,000 inhabitants were
27 connected solely by one bridge - the Craigavon. The opening of the second bridge was a
28 response to the swelling population and the pressure to alleviate traffic issues within the city.
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39 As the conflict continued, the city was never far from violence. Its streets and buildings
40 incurred the scars of shootings, riots and bombings, and its landscape grew increasingly
41 militarised; from road blocks and burnt out cars acting as boundaries and policed by
42 paramilitaries during the early 1970s, to the ever higher walls built around the Protestant
43 enclave in the Fountain estate to alleviate inter-communal violence. The architecture of the
44 Troubles was further reinforced by army checkpoints and watchtowers dispersed across the
45 city to monitor a tense population. The birth of the peace process ushered in a new period for
46 the city and its geography began to evolve. Normalisation began slowly, but gained currency
47 following the 1998 Belfast Agreement and the gradual withdrawal of the British Army. The
48 military base at Ebrington on the East Bank was transferred to the public as part of the
49 Chancellor's Reinvestment and Reform Initiative in 2003 to transform sites of conflict into
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3 multi-functional spaces that could underpin and support the peace process (The Executive
4 Office, 2015). The redevelopment of this site was to become a cornerstone for the
5 reimagining of what the city could become. The mammoth task of turning Ebrington, a site
6 associated with the military since the 17th Century, into an open, shared and de-
7 territorialised space was undertaken by the Ilex committee who began working on a blueprint
8 for the site (see Hocking, 2015). The idea for a footbridge to connect the city's population
9 had been discussed for many years but was given weight by this new development
10 opportunity. The footbridge, named the 'Peace bridge' was not only a symbolic entity, but
11 one practically designed to enhance the mobility of the city's inhabitants by opening up the
12 largely segregated city. In June 2011, the new bridge opened, (see Selim, 2015) and in 2013
13 the city embarked upon a year of celebrations as the first UK City of Culture. This year of
14 celebrations were perceived to be a seminal moment for the city, the culmination of an
15 arduous journey from a violent past. As Culture, as Boland et al, (2015) suggests was to be
16 'valorised' to finally consolidate an elusive peaceful future. McDermott et al, (2015: 623)
17 argue that the initiative did have a number of successes: 'Whatever the original intention, the
18 city did succeed in initiating its 'new story'; one that radically, if only temporarily, reframed
19 its inhabitants in a revised geographical context with a common heritage and a shared future'.
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31 Bilbao is a port city and capital of the Basque Vizcaya province in northern Spain. For de
32 Cerro Santamaría (2011:91) it is the place where the 'urban phenomenon of Basque
33 nationalism' was born. As the largest city in the Basque country, it is known for its
34 spectacular Guggenheim museum (designed by Frank Gehry and opened in 1997) and as a
35 key location of the Basque conflict and the actions of the extreme nationalist grouping ETA.
36 Bilbao's history reflects similar themes to many areas in the region, centring on the birth of
37 modern Spain and the conflicting nationalist and ideological iterations of its development
38 (Vacario and Martinez Monje, 2003). The devastation of the Spanish Civil War, including
39 the destruction of the city's bridges was followed by an economic revival, especially of the
40 iron industry and a significant growth of population. However, this influx of new workers
41 also contributed to an environment where Basque and Spanish nationalisms clashed fiercely
42 (Rice, 2013; Woodworth, 2001; Jack, 2015). Violence and calls for independence continued
43 following the death of Franco and the Spanish transition to a constitutional monarchy in
44 1979. While the Basque country achieved extensive autonomy, a campaign for independence
45 and ongoing political conflict became more significant. Meanwhile, the underlying industrial
46 strength of the city was hit hard by the worldwide crisis in the iron and steel industry, and
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3 dealt a further blow with the closure of the famous Euskalduna shipyards. The economic
4 restructuring that followed, including a shift from an industrial to a service based economy
5 saw significant urban and spatial regeneration. The creation of Bilbao Ria 2000 (Bollens
6 2012) and latterly Bilbao Metropoli-30 have played important roles in engaging local
7 stakeholders in developmental initiatives. The emblem of this 'New Bilbao' is the
8 Guggenheim, but in tandem to the iconic building is the regeneration of the historic centre,
9 the creation of the metro and the clean-up and recovery of the estuary waters and the new
10 bridges. For Bilbao, they were an attempt to outwardly create a trajectory away from both a
11 failed industrial heritage and the conflict of the past. However, even the Guggenheim is not
12 untainted with the conflict. In the week before its inauguration a number of attacks attempted
13 to disrupt the official opening ceremony including the murder a policeman who died of
14 gunshot wounds after challenging two men unloading plant pots outside the entrance. Urban
15 regeneration has taken place against a backdrop of tense Basque politics and until recently, an
16 ongoing ETA campaign of violence (alongside equally long-running efforts to create peace).
17 The ETA process of disarmament with international verifiers that began in February 2014,
18 and the announcement of a move towards dissolution in the summer of 2014 were significant
19 junctures in the conflict resolution process. While ETA has announced a dissolution, the
20 dispute between Basque nationalism and the central Spanish state continues to manifest itself
21 in the frequent large and small prisoner protests. The message is visually reinforced by the
22 'Etxera' signs (meaning *back home*) that festoon streets and apartment buildings throughout
23 the city. They are matched by other signs and graffiti around the iconic buildings and the
24 revived waterways of the old city '*Not French, Not Spanish, but Basque*'.

41 **Methodological approach**

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43 The theoretical framework informing this study seeks to explore the liminal nature of space in
44 societies in transition from conflict. The conceptualisation of these cities as liminal spaces
45 was an emergent one, resulting from a number of similar broadly-based studies of conflict,
46 change and space over a seven-year period. While the struggle for Basque independence and
47 the struggle for Irish unification have often looked to and referenced each other (see Alonso
48 2004), Derry and Bilbao are two very different cities and engaged in divergent processes of
49 transition. The built environment also differs. The constructed environment of peacebuilding
50 is juxtaposed with the physicality of segregation and continuing division. Derry's new
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3 'spaces' (see Doak, 2014) coexist alongside the continued trappings of sectarianism and
4 division-of peace lines, barriers, murals and flags. Bilbao is emerging from a dissimilar
5 conflict and its built environment has been at the fore of a radical separatist and culturally
6 transformative politics that sets the region apart from Spain (Jack, 2015). Yet both cities
7 continue to grapple with how best to deal with the past and have engaged with each other
8 during times of active violence (see Sanchez-Cuenca, 2007) and peacebuilding (see Espiuo
9 Idiago, 2015). In spatial terms, the reimagining of both Derry and Bilbao has centred around
10 the development and regeneration of two iconic bridges which have contributed to the place
11 identity of these 'post-conflict' cities (Bollens, 2012). Our research encompassed three main
12 methods of data collection – interviews, witness seminars² and two day residential workshops
13 with a range of participants. Workshops were location-based and participative in that they
14 involved an opportunity to visit urban spaces in order to capture significant images of the
15 environment, and to discuss these images within the workshops. Methodological approaches
16 which included walking through (sometimes alongside participants) and observing specific
17 places are practices that are gaining increasing currency (see Evans & James, 2011; Mitchell
18 and Kelly, 2011). Data was initially analysed and coded to explore institutional change,
19 management of contested spaces and the development of commemorative communities after
20 conflict. As the liminal nature of these environments emerged as a finding, the data was re-
21 coded to explore transitional space in both locations. The three themes dealt with in this paper
22 emerged from that coding process and were common to both cities. For example, the theme
23 that came to be tagged 'political imagery' contained recurring sub codes such as 'graffiti',
24 'murals' 'flags' 'emblems' and 'posters'. The 'physical regeneration' theme included sub-
25 codes such as 'public space', 'bridges' 'art' and the 'ongoing' protest theme contained
26 recurring concerns around 'protests' 'parades' and 'living with the past'. Those who engaged
27 with the research included community workers, managers responsible for the maintenance
28 and development of urban and spared spaces, those engaged in urban and economic
29 regeneration, and those active politically in both contexts.

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47 ² Witness seminars, developed as a technique to facilitate the creation of material or insights
48 from recent history, allow for the exploration and focused discussion on complex areas of
49 concern, pivotal moments, and controversial events see for example J Coakley and J. Todd,
50 'Breaking Patterns of Conflict in Northern Ireland: New Perspectives', *Irish Political Studies*,
51 29/1 (2014), 1-14..

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3 Participation in data collection was secured through a process of snowball referral and the use
4 of existing research networks (Saunders and Townsend, 2016). Individuals were invited to
5 participate and suggest additional invitees from a range of public private and third sector
6 organisations in both Derry and Bilbao. Interviews were semi-structured and focused on
7 institutional and community change after conflict. The four witness seminars were arranged
8 in neutral venues³, in both locations with experienced researchers who had previous
9 familiarity with conflict environments and explored issues of shared space, visual
10 manifestations of the past and attempts to frame the future. The witness seminar format lends
11 itself to discussions on particular issues or topics and the seminars were facilitated on that
12 basis with key topics such as ‘regeneration’, ‘the past’ ‘public commemoration’ and ‘the
13 future’. All aspects of the data collection adhered to strict ethical guidelines in relation to
14 participant’s anonymity, data management and storage. The facilitators had contact with
15 participants beforehand to ensure that the research questions themselves did not raise or
16 provoke difficulty or distress among the participants (Svorenčik & Maas, 2015).

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26 The remainder of the paper will explore the three key themes that emerged from the data
27 collection and subsequent process of analysis that each speak to this idea of permanent
28 liminality: public imagery as a persistent conflict identifier; significant strategic attempts at
29 spatial, including architectural, alteration as conscious post conflict ‘framing; and, finally, the
30 ongoing use of public spaces as interfaces of protest and unrest.

31 32 33 34 35 36 37 **Political imagery as a tenacious conflict identifier**

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39 One of the most interesting spatial characteristics of these two liminal cities is the way in
40 which political imagery represents tenacious or persistent conflict. This imagery is diverse,
41 from commemorative monuments with their emotive language (as one witness seminar
42 participant put it ‘*commemoration tends to assign blame*’ - Derry 2015) to murals, flags,
43 emblems and political graffiti. Language such as ‘killed by’ or ‘murdered by’ is particularly
44 pertinent in the commemorative streetscape of Derry which has a saturation of monuments,
45 plaques and commemorative murals. Here we see a competition for hegemonic victimhood in
46 the wake of armed violence and a struggle to legitimate violence or attribute blame (see
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3 McDowell and Switzer, 2010). In the neighbourhood of the Bogside, political imagery
4 suggests a dynamic conflict which has not necessarily ended. In addition to the murals and
5 monuments, political posters continue to call for justice and historical inquiries into crimes
6 committed throughout the Northern Ireland Troubles. Language as a conflict signifier is also
7 evident in Bilbao and perceived by many as a symbol of the continuing separatist conflict. A
8 witness seminar participant in Bilbao observed: *'We've got symbols that are still difficult*
9 *here. One for example are our languages... the use of the Basque language in our case, has*
10 *been a barrier the way some people perceive and treat the Basque language and has been a*
11 *barrier to how some people treat peaceful coexistence'*. A participant in Derry made a similar
12 comment *'inside the walls everyone calls the city 'Derry' – outside the walls the choice*
13 *between 'Derry', 'Londonderry', or 'Derry/Londonderry' is used to mark out politics and*
14 *identity'*. In these instances, we see language posited as a symbol of continued division, as an
15 expression not just of communication, but as a cultural and political tool to further perpetuate
16 and sustain conflict.

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26 In both environments there has been a great deal of work to, as one participant in Derry put it,
27 *'take the heat out of cultural expressions'*, however the dichotomy of a city's public and
28 private face still looms large. Other participants talked about the reality of dissident
29 Republican paraphernalia resurfacing, both privately and in public spaces, in the form of
30 graffiti and flags. Dissident Republicanism takes many forms in Northern Ireland but is
31 largely used to describe those who did not support the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement
32 and still hope to achieve a united Ireland. Dissidents who advocate using armed violence,
33 despite the absence of a significant mandate (see Tonge, 2012), remain a persistent threat to
34 the peace process (see Frampton, 2012). Dissidents in Derry have used the streetscape to
35 document their aspirations and to refute the hegemony of 'mainstream' Republicanism which
36 they believe has 'sold out' by accepting a power-sharing government in Northern Ireland.
37 The framing of graffiti as an expression of conflict is well-documented. Waldner and Dobratz
38 (2013: 377) view the practice as an 'expressive resistance tactic' that challenges power
39 relations. Aimed at a specific audience, graffiti articulates a particular discourse or political
40 motivation (Kan, 2001). Hanauer's (2011) analysis of political graffiti on the separation
41 barrier in Abu Dis in Israel/Palestine points to its discursive function. It, he argues, strives to
42 directly influence macro-scale politics by raising awareness of the political situation in
43 Palestine. Bush writing in 2013, suggested that political graffiti was 'curiously absent' from
44 the urban landscapes of Northern Ireland. We would argue that it has, in fact, become much
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3 more prominent, as dissident Republican subculture makes its mark on the streetscape of
4 Derry- and has become more acute since the death of the former Deputy First Minister Martin
5 McGuinness, in February 2016. McGuinness was a former member of the paramilitary group,
6 the Irish Republican Army before becoming a key player in its political wing Sinn Féin.
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8 Before his death, McGuinness symbolised mainstream Republicanism. Dissident Republicans
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10 launched an audacious commemorative campaign between April and May 2016 (*The Irish*
11 *News* 17th April 2017). This campaign has had a profound visible presence in the landscape
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13 with a plethora of graffiti, flags, pictures of guns and slogans erected in residential
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15 communities around the city which had previously very little territorial trappings.
16
17 Furthermore a campaign to free a Republican prisoner has resulted in recurrent graffiti in
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19 public places since 2016 calling for an end to British internment. The ‘internment’ of
20
21 prisoners ‘of war’ in a ‘post-conflict’ context is significant and has important implications for
22
23 the process of transitioning. Individuals imprisoned either for allegedly continuing to engage
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25 in paramilitary activity in particular spaces is indicative of broader problems within
26
27 peacebuilding. Bush (2013: 167) sees graffiti as ‘a spatialized form of political
28
29 communication’ which offers an insight into ‘competing authority structures within the
30
31 contested, fluid, and volatile urban environments of both war zones, and non-war zones’.
32
33 This visible iconography of resistance perhaps illustrates a hardening of attitudes within some
34
35 communities, and of resistance to the notion that peacebuilding is a linear process.

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35 The omnipresent spectacle in Bilbao of both peace flags and ‘*Etxera*’ signs (literal meaning
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37 bring them *back home*) with reference to prisoners, and the visible tensions of an unresolved
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39 conflict over identity (‘*Not French, not Spanish, but Basque*’ - displayed in English for tourist
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41 consumption) and place (Bilbao or *Bilbo*) illustrates the unsettled nature of the region and the
42
43 ever present nature of contestation. Here again we see the lingering issue of prisoners and
44
45 ongoing struggle with the wider state structure. Street banners proclaiming political
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47 messages, allegiance and the referencing ongoing disputes, individual prisoners and the
48
49 legacy of past violence are impossible to miss. The counter violence message of *¡Basta*
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51 *Ya!* (*Enough is enough!*) and the bright yellow peace signs festooning private apartments all
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53 speak to an ongoing dialectic of both past violence and present day progress.

53 **Physical regeneration as a post conflict framing**

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3 The conscious 'reframing' (Kaufman et al, 2003) of the two case study cities spatially and
4 sometimes architecturally, was a significant theme of interest within the data. For Mitchell
5 and Kelly (2011:307) the regeneration of space in capital cities or places synonymous with
6 violence following a period of armed conflict can become the 'physical embodiment of
7 peaceful places'. Yet they suggest such places are often the result of uneven processes.
8 Governments and developers alike have often used architecture to intervene in conflict. In
9 Northern Ireland, the Chancellor's 2003 Reinvestment and Reform Initiative sought to
10 transfer the ownership of former military sites to the public as part of its commitment to
11 normalisation through demilitarisation. Each site, the initiative stated, must act as a beacon
12 for peace and generate economic income or represent socio-economic value (see Graham and
13 McDowell, 2007). The symbolism of this initiative was hugely significant. Using
14 regeneration to underpin the peace process has been a key strategy for policymakers and
15 developers seeking to consolidate a volatile political climate (see Neill, 2006 Large
16 architecturally iconic projects such as the much vaulted Guggenheim in Bilbao and the
17 'peace' bridge in Derry are conscious attempts at political, social and cultural reimagining.
18 The aesthetics of peacebuilding play an important role in underpinning transitional societies.
19 Gonzalez (2010: 2) discussing policymakers 'fascination' with the urban environment of
20 Bilbao, refers to the city as a 'phoenix that has emerged from a crisis'. Its economic
21 regeneration coupled with its architectural reimagining has captured the imagination of those
22 tasked with mimicking its success in other places. Other reshaping projects like the Bilbao
23 metro and the reimagining of some public spaces in Derry, have created opportunities for the
24 public to move more freely through what were once more contested or less cohesive
25 neighbourhoods within the urban landscape. This alteration was noted by a research
26 participant in Derry: 'the map shows a pathway between bridge and memorial as a shared
27 space', illustrating a recognition that positive changes have been made and could be built on.
28 For many participants, Derry is still a 'city of contrasts'. They cited empty houses with fake
29 frontage representing a 'quick fix attitude' embodied within the ethos of the 'City of Culture'
30 and a desire to 'make the city look good superficially'. Some participants noted that
31 architectural interventions since cessation of violence were 'limited to key public and
32 commercial spaces'. Measuring the success of built interventions imagined to consolidate
33 peace is intrinsically complex. Rybcynski (2002) suggests that the 'Bilbao effect' created by
34 Frank Gehry's 'iconoclastical' Guggenheim has been profound shaping not only what we
35 come to expect from museums but also radically informing architectural practice. For
36 Rybcynski (2002: 23) 'great architecture carries many messages about society and
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3 *individuals, about our values and our dreams*'. The architecture in both cities has been
4 praised for its 'symbolic importance' but as our research suggests, this is not always felt
5 equally across communities. The participants in witness seminars in both locations talked
6 about the continuing tensions embedded within a divided and contested past and the
7 challenge of moving forwards. One participant from Derry, a community worker from an
8 interface area in the city, talked about the importance of commemorating the past in
9 communities that had experienced some of the worst violence in the city. He suggested there
10 was a common feeling of '*We're never going to forget what you did to us. And we're never*
11 *going to allow you to forget it either*'. This was underpinned by concern over the continuing
12 levels of segregation in the city, symbolised by the many 'peacewalls'. A victims group
13 member present noted '*walls have a double meaning – both to protect those within and*
14 *exclude those without – they function very clearly as symbols, offering or denying a*
15 *welcome*'. Another talked about concerns when looking through or over walls, '*what I am*
16 *thinking of [is] the other person – are they a threat or a friend?*'. Another commented on the
17 anxiety associated with entering certain spaces '*I was struck by what you said about the fear*
18 *of the unknown, I was thinking about the fear of going into 'other' spaces*'.

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31 Similar concerns were echoed in Bilbao. One research participant actively engaged in
32 economic development spoke about the importance of the Guggenheim as a loci for change:
33 '*We want to get rid of this stigma of terrorism – to introduce ourselves better to the world*'
34 and another spoke about the importance of the metro as a unifying mechanism within the city
35 in general '*opening up*' previously less accessible neighbourhoods and pulling together the
36 diverse urban landscape. This participant also made reference to the abundance of public art -
37 and the need to pull together both disparate neighbourhoods and political perspectives.
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39 However, these spaces and connective devices also become imbued with the reality of
40 conflict. A memorial in the Guggenheim is a reminder of the violence that marked its
41 opening. As public art was being erected throughout the city, ETA remained commitment to
42 its political objectives. The regeneration of Bilbao was perceived by many research
43 participants as a deliberate attempt to change the conversation. The optics of peace and
44 prosperity, while maintaining a distinct sense of Basque identity, was vitally important. The
45 journey from an '*old and dirty city*' plagued by conflict to a new streetscape symbolic of a
46 peaceful and dynamic *Basque* future. Participants mentioned the deliberate use of colour
47 '*Bilbao blue*' as a cultural leitmotif and the complex inter dynamic between regeneration and
48 peace in the region. Ongoing disputes about historic street names in Bilbao and the Basque
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3 country more widely dating back to the Franco regime illustrate an ongoing concern and a
4 struggle which goes beyond the present day Basque conflict. The ongoing dispute with Spain
5 in terms of the nature of the conflict has also impacted upon the ability to physically
6 'reframe'. As on Basque workshop participant commented '*there is no Spanish application to*
7 *EU for help and support. There is meant to be no conflict, so there is no peace process*'. As
8 de Cerro Santmaría (2011) suggests these overarching 'globalisation discourses' have long
9 been understood by Basque nationalists as a tool through which to articulate a nationalist
10 agenda that seeks sovereignty as the end goal.
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18 **Public spaces as political arenas of ongoing protest**

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21 Of all the themes that arose within the research, the continued and sometimes increased use
22 of public spaces as ongoing areas of political protest was the most compelling. In Derry for
23 example, participants spoke about the '*politicisation of the landscape*' and the impact that it
24 had on generations of children. It was not just conflict in the past that was an issue in both
25 contexts. Representatives of prisoner groups in Bilbao who were instrumental in staging large
26 regular protests and marches spoke of the daily engagement in a conflict issue which isn't
27 close to resolution, and in Derry those working with former members of the British security
28 forces articulated the omnipresent threat to families of security forces from dissident
29 Republicans. Protests against inclusive remembering outside the Free Derry Museum, a
30 community museum which was first established to narrate the Bogside's community
31 experience of violence in the city, saw public space once again imbued with elements of
32 the past in the present. The museum came under fire in August 2017 for including the names
33 of British soldiers who had died in the community throughout the Troubles on an exhibit.
34 Siblings of some of the civilians killed by the Army on Bloody Sunday staged a six-day
35 protest until the decision was taken to remove the exhibit. Jeanette Harkin (BBC News,
36 2017), a member of the Bloody Sunday Trust who also lost a sibling in 1972 said '*I regret*
37 *that there's so much hurt in the community but that we can't recognise that hurt in other*
38 *areas*'. The furore over the decision to move away from partisan remembering is indicative
39 of the controversy wrapped around healing and moving on.
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52 The series of protests orchestrated by Republicans in Derry against the imprisonment of
53 political prisoners have often intersected with global separatist campaigns. In October 2017,
54 Republicans orchestrated a large protest in a busy traffic junction in the Bogside in support of
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3 Catalonia's referendum on independence. The protest also called for the immediate release of
4 Republicans allegedly interned in Northern Ireland's prisons. In Bilbao, research participants
5 spoke of the distance relatives had to travel to visit ETA prisoners distributed through
6 Spanish prisons. This was often juxtaposed with an acknowledgment that the shadow of the
7 Civil War still loomed large and that the recovery and memorialisation of mass graves and
8 victims remains was an ongoing process. Participants recalled the recent construction of a
9 public memorial or columbarium⁴ for those murdered during the civil war and whose
10 unidentified bodies have been recently recovered as an unsettling but foundational
11 experience, now reflected permanently in the landscape.

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14 In addition to marches supporting amnesty for political prisoners, and the relocation of
15 prisoners held in Spanish jails, street protests reflect wider debates such as support for the
16 Basque language and parallel independence movements such as those in Catalonia. One
17 witness seminar member reflected '*the narrative is the real war*', while others recalled the
18 kidnap and murder of Miguel Angel Blanco as a demarcation in both the peace process and
19 the use of public space: '*Miguel Angel Blanco was like a landmark. There was a before and*
20 *an after....The social reaction to that event was totally different to what we have seen in the*
21 *past. The streets were taken in a different way*'. For many participants, the outrage and shock
22 evoked by the murder of Blanco brought peace protestors onto the streets for the first time,
23 despite concerns about intimidation and disloyalty. This opened up these spaces to be both a
24 location for division and for a coming together.

35 36 37 38 39 **Conclusion: Liminality, Space and Transitional Optics**

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41 The sections above discuss visual illustrations of liminal space in societies moving from
42 conflict but not yet settled into a peaceful environment. Political imagery, physical
43 regeneration and space as a conflict arena are all optical manifestations of the liminal nature
44 of conflict transitions. Neither fully at peace nor fully at war, both cities are conscious of
45 their 'inbetween-ness', of the changed rules around interactions, and of the unanticipated
46 realities of the present situation. The liminal state for both cities is prolonged and propped up
47 on either end by an unresolved past and an as yet unknowable, unstable future.

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54 ⁴ A place for the respectful and often public storage of cinerary urns.

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3 It is useful to think of these spaces less as transitional and to draw instead upon the work of
4 Johnsen and Sørensen (2012) who regard liminality less as a provisional, processual stage on
5 a journey and more as a space where activities, characteristics and actions have overlapped
6 and clear distinctions between the present and the past are not possible. This
7 institutionalization of liminality, (e.g. Szokolczai, 2000; Thomassen, 2012) allows us to
8 configure our understanding of liminal space as a more permanent construction, with a
9 ‘*continuous stress on transformation and transgression*’ (Thomassen, 2012, p.160). We see
10 this as a collective, nuanced experience with communities aware of their ‘betweenness’ and
11 striving to move into a new environment, but understanding that underlying currents hold
12 them in liminal space. Transitional optics in Derry convey a sometimes faltering, sometimes
13 progressing peace process and illustrate the resilience of Dissident Republicans at street level.
14 These underlying tensions and their visual representations draw our attention to what is often
15 otherwise a less obviously conflicted space. Bilbao is a city which has actively tried to haul
16 itself into liminal space as a conscious act. Again, both popular protests and visual
17 demonstrations of identity and contestation surface despite the iconic beauty of the
18 Guggenheim and the connective physicality of the metro and bridges. Prisoners, protests, the
19 past and present identities continue to overlay cultural reimagining. For both these cities
20 building peace is a long term endeavour and stalled transition is all around. Drawing attention
21 to the liminal nature of these processes allows us to understand more about the outworking’s
22 of urban environments as they emerge from active conflicts and to identify both the paths and
23 blockages to a peaceful future that liminality represents.

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37 This paper makes a number of new contributions. Firstly, it extends the concept of liminality
38 into literature around transitions from conflict, and particularly around the spatial and
39 physical manifestations within urban contexts. Secondly, it identifies manifestations of the
40 liminal nature of these public spaces in two cities – Derry and Bilbao and identifies three
41 characteristics of liminality within the cases. These characteristics or ‘transitional optics’ as
42 we have termed them, are identified as the existence of persistent political or conflict
43 imagery; physical regeneration as a conscious act of framing away from past identification
44 with violence; and the continued utilisation of public space as a conflict arena. We see these
45 manifested in both cities. Visual markings like graffiti and slogans, physical improvement
46 and regeneration of significant public arenas, and ongoing parades, protests and
47 demonstrations all operate to entrap conflict transformational initiatives in liminal space. A
48 recognition of the optical manifestation of liminality allows us to better understand and
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3 recognise liminal spaces in societies engaged in the difficult and complex transition from
4 contestation. Thirdly, the paper reflects on how notions of liminality can allow us another
5 lens to explore the complexity of change and its impact on space and place. In particular, we
6 explore the associated, developing construct of permanent liminality and link it to
7 peacebuilding within an urban context. We argue that recognising that there is a possibility
8 that liminality can be reconfigured as a potentially permanent state gives us another tool with
9 which to refine our understanding of conflict transformation processes which are necessarily
10 complex and multifaceted. Framing liminality as a potentially permanent facet of urban
11 peacebuilding has the potential to facilitate a more nuanced understanding of spatial and
12 visual manifestations of the environment between war and what comes after.
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