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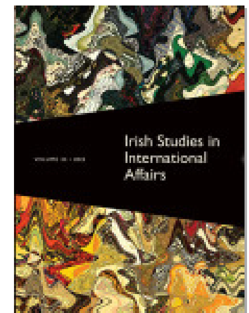

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Healing a Fractured Public: Everyday Shared Spaces in East Belfast

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ABSTRACT

Over two decades since the Good Friday Agreement was signed, social spaces remain heavily contested in Northern Ireland. On the one hand, top-down approaches toward ushering in a new spatiality for a shared future have had limited success. On the other hand, there is increasing evidence that a 'shared future' disconnected from local historical and cultural contexts is unsustainable. By studying the debates surrounding three contemporary 'shared spaces' in East Belfast—the Titanic Quarter, the proposed Naíscoil na Seolta and East Belfast GAA Club—this paper studies why some spaces are more acceptable to the general public compared to others. At a time when recent elections suggest that the region is at the cusp of political change, this paper argues that a new spatiality with grassroots community initiatives at its core must be simultaneously imagined in Belfast.

INTRODUCTION

A majority of the academic work on Northern Ireland (NI) in recent years, especially from political scientists, has focussed on government policies, institutions of power-sharing, or segregation in residential or school settings and flash points along peace lines, even as a critique has mounted about the limitations of such 'top-down' approaches to peace-building.[1] Less explored are the physical spaces

[1]Landon E. Hancock, 'The Northern Irish peace process: from top to bottom', *International Studies Review* 10 (2) (2008), 203–38; Jocelyn Evans and Jonathan Tonge, 'Religious, political, and geographical determinants of attitudes to Protestant parades in Northern Ireland', *Politics and Religion* 10 (4) (2017), 786–811, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755048317000487.

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of everyday interactions and the gaps that exist between how shared spaces are conceived by politicians, architects and designers, and their lived reality, especially in areas that are traditionally strongly nationalist or unionist. Yet, even as Belfast has grown to be more diverse, multicultural and balanced in recent years, areas such as East Belfast become a crucial case study in shaping a future NI in which conflict is replaced by a 'culture of tolerance'.[2] Traditionally a strongly unionist and loyalist area with a very small nationalist voting population, East Belfast has, over the past 20 years, seen steady growth in support for the Alliance Party—a voting choice that reflects the tremendous changes to the spatiality of the area since the Good Friday Agreement [hereafter the Agreement], and not in keeping with the area's public image. On the one hand, traditional industries offering long-term, well-paid employment, largely to the local unionist population, have been replaced, and tourist developments like the Titanic Quarter have emerged as more 'neutral spaces', providing low-paid employment to Belfast's various communities. On the other hand, several other 'non-traditional' 'shared' spaces such as East Belfast GAA have opened up social spaces that cannot be studied from the same lens as institutional spaces, because each of these is conceived, perceived and lived differently. Yet these social settings have a physical aspect and provide a means and 'space' for meeting on a cross-community basis, each of which has different impacts and levels of success.

This article analyses the emergence of shared spaces in East Belfast in the post-Agreement period and seeks to understand why some shared spaces are more acceptable to local communities compared to others as a place to interact with 'the other' communities or to find other cultural experiences. By focussing on East Belfast, the article deliberately chooses a 'difficult case' to show the potential and challenges of current approaches to healing, inter-community relations and the envisaging of a shared island. Drawing on three spaces within East Belfast—the Titanic Quarter, the Naíscoil na Seolta and East Belfast GAA Club—this paper focuses on the public perceptions, lived realities and everyday experiences of those who use these spaces to understand their role in healing the divide at the community level.

TOWARDS SPATIAL HISTORIES

Towards the end of the twentieth century, a school of thought emerged within social science research which argued for a reassertion of space (and spatiality—the relations dictated by and in space); growing awareness about spatial praxis, and a recognition of the need to rethink theory and incorporate the fundamental spatiality of social and political life, and to introduce a spatialised ontology.

[2]'A Shared Future: Policy and Strategic Framework for Good Relations in Northern Ireland' (OFMDFM, 2005), available at: https://www.niacro.co.uk/sites/default/files/publications/A%20Shared%20Future-%20OFMDFM-Mar%202005.pdf.

From being a mere backdrop, 'space' came to be considered an analytical tool at once both 'a product' and 'productive'. This turn was first seen in the works of thinkers like Henri Lefebvre and others, and since the 1980s has been developed by researchers from a wide range of related disciplines including urban geography, sociology and political science, as well as in philosophy, literature and cultural studies.[3] The last decade has seen a 'third-wave' of scholarship on spatiality, including a call to revisit the phenomenological themes in Lefebvre's work, and arguing that the resilience of the modern public sphere depends on its ability to have an inclusive and well-functioning public space,[4] and robust grassroots civil society, in addition to a democratic institutional framework. Academic literature has emphasised this approach towards peacebuilding, both in Northern Ireland and across the world.[5]

A study of shared spaces in contemporary Belfast must, like all efforts to understand social relations in the city today, begin with the Good Friday Agreement, which has laid out the 'terms for peace' in the post-Troubles era of Irish history. Interestingly, the question of what spaces would be created at the community level to encourage integration across the sectarian divide to work towards building a shared future is left unaddressed in the Agreement. The only mention of the word 'community-based' in the Agreement is in the section on Reconciliation and Victims, which recognised the need to support 'special community-based initiatives based on international best practice' but provides no specific details of the shape or structure of such initiatives. Peace, it was assumed, would 'trickle down' to the community level automatically, once it was established at the institutional and elite levels.[6] By 2010, a decade of political stability had made it possible to begin envisioning a common future built around ideas of sharing and inclusion. This resulted in a policy shift evidenced by initiatives like the Contested Spaces Programme (2011–14), European Union's Peace-IV Programme (2014–20) and the Together: Building a United Community (T:BUC) Strategy (2013–). These strategies and programmes proactively shared a focus

[3]Edward Soja, *Postmodern geographies: the reassertion of space in critical social theory* (London, 1989); Henri Lefebvre, *The production of space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford, 1991); David Harvey, *The condition of postmodernity: an enquiry into the origins of cultural change* (Oxford, 1990); Neil Brenner and Stuart Elden, 'Henri Lefebvre on state, space, territory', *International Political Sociology* 3 (4) (2009), 353–77; Sanal Mohan, 'Creation of social space through prayers among Dalits in Kerala, India', *Journal of Religious and Political Practice* 2 (1) (2016), 40–57; Ameet Parameswaran, 'Excavating the remains of the Left: radical geography and political affirmation', *Studies in Theatre and Performance* 39 (2019), 1–17.

[4]Eden Kinkaid, 'Re-encountering Lefebvre: toward a critical phenomenology of social space', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 38 (1) (2020), 167–86.

[5]For Northern Ireland, see Molly Hurley-Dépret, 'Waiting: history, fear, and healing in Ballynafeigh / the Upper Ormeau Road of Belfast, Northern Ireland' (PhD, New York, City University of New York, 2019). For other regions, see Roger Mac Ginty, 'Indigenous peace-making versus the liberal peace', *Cooperation and Conflict* 43 (2) (1 June 2008), 139–63; Oliver P. Richmond, 'Critical agency, resistance and a post-colonial civil society', *Cooperation and Conflict* 46 (4) (December 1, 2011), 419–40; Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai, *Experience, caste, and the everyday social* (New Delhi, 2019).

[6]Hancock, 'The Northern Irish peace process'; Evans and Tonge, 'Religious, political, and geographical determinants of attitudes to Protestant parades in Northern Ireland.'

on the need to create civic spaces that could be used by all sections of the community. Simultaneously, there was also a shift towards fostering grassroots organisations to build cross-community relations and bridging the sectarian divide by focussing on shared values and experiences.[7] Despite these efforts, segregation continues to be part of everyday life in the spatiality of Northern Ireland. On the one hand, ambiguity in defining terms like 'secular', 'shared' and 'interfaith' within policy documents has led to glaring gaps within the literature, while on the other, the emphasis on institutional and state-led solutions continues to impede organic informal social spaces. There have been attempts to study how shared public spaces can be designed, especially by urban geographers and architects.[8] This school of literature focuses on the importance of public spaces within an urban context for cross-community interactions. They are, therefore, concerned with the mechanics of the construction of such spaces. The other stream of literature, mostly from political scientists and sociologists, focuses on public perceptions of integration initiatives, including shared housing projects and integrated education.[9] These two sets of literature provide an extremely rich explanation of how spaces are designed and perceived, especially from institutional perspectives. However, this literature does not address the gap that exists between studies of institutional/non-institutional spaces on the one hand, and the conceived/lived space on the other, which is evidenced by the continuing sectarian divide. Only recently has scholarly interest turned towards exploring *de facto* understandings of shared space in Belfast,[10] and the supposed neutrality of parks and other public places.[11]

Meanwhile, despite the many policy documents from the institutional units and committees constituted to rebuild community relations in post-Agreement Northern Ireland, the idea of what a 'shared future' looks like continues to remain vague and subject to much debate. B. Graham and C. Nash note that this ambiguity plagues most state-led approaches in Northern Ireland:

> 'high in pious sentiments' and 'vague statements of goodwill', but lacking—perhaps intentionally—any working definitions of key terms. Prominent among these are: sectarianism; racism; conflict; reconciliation; criminality;

[7]Peter Shirlow and Brendan Murtagh, *Belfast: segregation, violence and the city* (Pluto, 2006).

[8]Frank Gaffikin, Malachy Mceldowney, and Ken Sterrett, 'Creating shared public space in the contested city: the role of urban design', *Journal of Urban Design* 15 (4) (2010), 493–513; Ian Mell, 'Beyond the peace lines: conceptualising representations of parks as inclusionary spaces in Belfast, Northern Ireland', *Town Planning Review* 90 (2) (2019), 195–219.

[9]Sheena Mcgrellis, 'Pushing the boundaries in Northern Ireland: young people, violence and sectarianism', *Contemporary Politics* 11 (1) (March 1, 2005), 53–71; Madeleine Leonard, *The making and shaping of Belfast: an emplaced approach*, *teens and territory in 'post-conflict' Belfast* (Manchester, 2017); Paul Nolan and Ciaran Hughes, 'Northern Ireland: living apart together', *The Detail*, 1 April 2017; Hadrien Herrault and Brendan Murtagh, 'Shared space in post-conflict Belfast', *Space and Polity* 23 (3) (2 September 2019), 251–64.

[10]Milena Komarova and Liam O'Dowd, 'Belfast, 'the shared city'? Spatial narratives of conflict transformation', in *Spatializing peace and conflict*: *rethinking peace and conflict studies* (Springer, 2016), 265–85.

[11]Luciana Lang and Ian Mell, 'I stick to this side of the park': parks as shared spaces in contemporary Belfast', *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space* 3 (2) (1 June 2020), 503–26.

integration; and sharing. With one or two notable exceptions (for example, Alliance Party, Northern Ireland Women's Coalition), this same definitional elusiveness is mirrored in the submissions.[12]

Space—physical social space where people live their everyday lives—remains entangled in these debates, and the view of the peace process as a zero-sum game means that top-down measures cannot alone resolve these issues.[13] In fact, Peter Shirlow's research showed that although working-class people had expressed the desire to participate in cross-community movements, political polarisation had made such contact less likely.[14] As we shall see, public perceptions about such initiatives are crucial in understanding the possibilities opened up for cross-community contact and shared spaces.

SOCIAL SPACES IN A 'DIVIDED CITY'

This article looks at three different social spaces that have been subject to much interest, debate and discussion in contemporary Belfast: East Belfast GAA Club, Titanic Quarter and Naíscoil na Seolta. These have been chosen because the first is an organic space that emerged through voluntary efforts, the second is seen as a 'commercial establishment', and the debates around the setting up of the Irish language school are seen locally as being funded by the state (Foras na Gaeilge). Lefebvre's framework allows us to study how the 'perceived' and 'lived' realities of these spaces differ from the 'conceived' ones.[15] The experiences of how these spaces are used/perceived might give us a sense of how top-down approaches to community relations view space in a very limited manner. First of all, the following sections set out, in brief, the narrative of events in recent years, before the article proceeds to discuss what these cases tell us about how space interacts with politics in East Belfast.

Titanic Quarter

'Regeneration' is a word often used to describe the aims of a long line of investment projects for mixed residential, commercial and leisure purposes planned along the river Lagan in the area that has come to be called the Titanic Quarter (TQ). Post-Agreement, the 'new' Northern Ireland saw the

[12] B. Graham and C. Nash, 'A shared future: territoriality, pluralism and public policy in Northern Ireland', 2006, 261, available at: https://doi.org/10.1016/J.POLGEO.2005.12.006.

[13] Sara McDowell, Máire Braniff and Joanne Murphy, 'Zero-sum politics in contested spaces: the unintended consequences of legislative peacebuilding in Northern Ireland', *Political Geography* 61 (November 30, 2017), 193–202, available at: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2017.09.001.

[14] Peter Shirlow, 'Who fears to speak': fear, mobility, and ethno-sectarianism in the two 'Ardoynes', *Global Review of Ethnopolitics* 3 (1) (2003), 76–91, available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/14718800308405159; John Nagle, 'Sites of social centrality and segregation: Lefebvre in Belfast, a 'divided city', *Antipode* 41 (2) (2009), 330, available at: https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8330.2009.00675.x.

[15] Lefebvre, *The production of space*, 38–39.

drive for the establishment of 'conventional economics' accompanied by a market expansion, a push for foreign and domestic capital, and the withdrawal of the state.[16] The development of TQ, a 185-acre site situated on Queen's Island at the edge of East Belfast, has gathered much interest over the last decade. TQ's official website, www.titanicquarter.com claims that by 2035, the project aims to deliver '8,800 residents, 28,400 jobs, 5.6 million annual visitors, 876 hotel beds, [and] £1.9 bn capital investment.' Although the development of TQ has arguably tried to contextualise itself within the spatial history of the area, critics have pointed out that such projects in 'New Northern Ireland' have 'neatly negated historical conditions for opportunities of development'.[17] In a similar vein, Joana Etchart (2008) notes that TQ has adapted history to the planners' needs and has been made an 'object of appropriation'.[18] In essence, a 'neutral' image like the one attempted, in this case, must appear 'unconnected to either of the competing communities', but this consequently means that the same policy can stir a feeling of 'alienation and marginalisation among the local communities'.[19] Even the adoption of the name 'Titanic Quarter' instead of the traditional name of 'Queen's Island' was, Brendan Murtagh argues, an attempt to 'veneer over aspects of the shipyard's unsavoury past in terms of discrimination and poor working conditions'.[20]

Despite the commercial and economic value that the TQ arguably brings to Belfast, critics have pointed out the cultural disconnect that plagues the project,[21] especially amongst the unionist/loyalist base who have been cut from the industrial history of the region.[22] Rather than having social, economic and political benefits for the common public, TQ is increasingly perceived as another project that serves the interests of capitalist development,[23] built on weak government policies that are disconnected from actual community realities and that have created new fissures, especially among poorer sections of the population, who have benefited little from these developments.[24] Communities in East Belfast see it as yet another example of a loss spatially, economically and politically, in the post-Agreement scenario.

[16]Phil Ramsey, 'A pleasingly blank canvas': urban regeneration in Northern Ireland and the case of Titanic Quarter,' *Space and Polity* 17 (2) (1 August 2013), 165, available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/13562576.2013.817513.

[17]Ramsey, 'A pleasingly blank canvas', 177.

[18]Joana Etchart, 'The Titanic Quarter in Belfast: building a new place in a divided city', *Nordic Irish Studies* 7 (2008), 34.

[19]Etchart, 'The Titanic Quarter in Belfast', 35.

[20]Brendan Murtagh, 'New spaces and old in 'Post-Conflict' Belfast', Working Paper, Divided Cities/Contested States (Belfast, 2008), 9–10.

[21]David Coyles, 'Reflections on Titanic Quarter: the cultural and material legacy of an historic Belfast brand', *The Journal of Architecture* 18 (3) (1 June 2013), 331–63, available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/13602365.2013.804855; Etchart, 'The Titanic Quarter in Belfast'; Ramsey, 'A pleasingly blank canvas'; Murtagh, 'New spaces and old in 'post-conflict' Belfast'.

[22]Etchart, 'The Titanic Quarter in Belfast', 35.

[23]Ramsey, 'A pleasingly blank canvas', 165.

[24]Etchart, 'The Titanic Quarter in Belfast,' 36; Murtagh, 'New spaces and old in 'post-conflict' Belfast.'

Irish Language School

In May 2021, East Belfast's first Irish language pre-school—Naíscoil na Seolta—was set to be opened on the premises of Braniel Primary School with the support of €86,000 received from Foras na Gaeilge, a public body, established in the aftermath of the Agreement to promote the Irish language on the island.[25] Within weeks, they had to relocate from the premises of the school, owing to what authorities called a 'social media hate campaign' of 'disgusting comments…littered with unfounded erroneous allegations about certain individuals and the Naiscoil.[26] Although most replies to reports of the school on Twitter are positive, some loyalists opposed what they saw as the imposition of a 'dead language' and 'foreign dialect' into the education system.[27] One user, who claimed to be a parent of Braniel Primary School, alleged that 'parents first heard about it on the news & school refuses to hold a meeting with community to discuss concerns'.[28] On Linda Ervine's tweet announcing the school, the same user quoted: 'As a parent of a child attending Braniel PS Id like to say I'm quite shocked there was no consultation with parents on this. But then again Im sure there's funding behind it [*sic*]'.[29] Ervine, the staunch Unionist and Irish language rights activist, was also at the receiving end of a number of these campaigns, bullying and intimidation, including instances of her face being superimposed on posters of nationalist Sinn Féin party, accompanied by the words: 'Every word of Irish spoken is like another bullet being fired in the struggle for Irish independence'.[30] The PSNI received multiple complaints following these

[25]Jonathan McCambridge, 'Principal 'sickened' after online hate campaign forces Irish language nursery to relocate,' *Irish Examiner*, July 28, 2021, sec. IE-Main/NEWS, https://www.irishexaminer.com/news/arid-40347800.html; Robbie Meredith, 'Braniel Primary: first Irish pre-school in East Belfast to relocate', *BBC News*, 28 July 2021, sec. Northern Ireland, available at: https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-foyle-west-58003239.

[26]Meredith, 'Braniel Primary.'

[27]British Alba [@BritishAlba], '@BBCNewsNI The Attempts to Impose the Irish Language on Everyone in Northern Ireland Is Dangerous and Must Be Resisted. The Irish Language Is Used as a Weapon by Republicans to Undermine Northern Ireland's Place in the UK and British Identity.' Tweet, *Twitter*, 29 July 2021, https://twitter.com/BritishAlba/status/1420679175577477129; Henry Campsie [@10thbnRIR], 'This Is the Question from the Leader of a Unionist Party on the Gaelic Language Being Pushed down the Throats of the Unionist Community. Unbelievable!' Tweet, *Twitter*, 16 June 2021, https://twitter.com/10thbnRIR/status/1405131686959009793; Marcos [@GlensChels], '@BBCNewsNI Incidentally, How Much Were the School Set to 'earn' from This Foreign Dialect Being Imposed on the Children?' Tweet, *Twitter*, 29 July 2021, https://twitter.com/GlensChels/status/1420732203173044232; scott [@scottfulton7], '@BBCNewsNI Learning Sign Language Has Far More Use than This Dead Language Forcing Your Hobby into Education System Is Ridiculous,' Tweet, *Twitter*, July 29, 2021, https://twitter.com/scottfulton7/status/1420700038867693569.

[28]Kells [@KellsShaw1], '@10thbnRIR @Swimmingsolo1 I Can Confirm as a Parent of Braniel Primary School They Will Have an Irish Speaking School in the Grounds in September, Parents First Heard about It on the News & School Refuses to Hold a Meeting with Community to Discuss Concerns.' Tweet, *Twitter*, 16 June 2021, available at: https://twitter.com/KellsShaw1/status/1405153761056669696.

[29]Kells [@KellsShaw1], 'As a Parent of a Child Attending Braniel PS Id like to Say I'm Quite Shocked There Was No Consultation with Parents on This.. But Then Again Im Sure There's Funding behind It.. 🤔 #soldout,' Tweet, *Twitter*, 21 May 2021, https://twitter.com/KellsShaw1/status/1395646528740597761.

[30]Sahm Venter, 'Protests against language school show Northern Ireland's post-Brexit divisions,' *National Catholic Reporter*, 20 August 2021, available at: https://www.ncronline.org/news/people/protests-against-language-school-show-northern-irelands-post-brexit-divisions.

incidents, which were reported by the authorities as 'hate incidents'.[31] On 28 July 2021, the school issued a statement that a decision had been taken 'with great sadness' by the Integrated Naíscoil na Seolta to 'relocate to another site due to actions of individuals not connected to the school'.[32] The official statement, however, reiterated that 'Braniel Nursery and Primary School is not and should never be thought of as a contested space', and that they were 'proud to be a shared space for all…[welcoming] all children, parents, families and individuals irrespective of religion, faith, creed or language'.[33]

The hate crusade online against Braniel School, Ervine and School head Diane Dawson was traced to a former Red Hand Commando who was jailed for blowing up a Catholic-owned pub. Speaking to a newspaper, the accused expressed 'delight' that the campaign led by the Facebook page 'United Ulsterman Group' was a 'success'.[34] Both Ervine and Dawson are publicly strong Unionists themselves, and believe the Irish language does not weaken their loyalist identity. Sinn Féin, Alliance Party and SDLP were quick to condemn the events. Alliance leader Naomi Long described the decision to relocate because of 'intolerance and bigotry' as 'tragic'.[35] Sinn Fein MLA Deirdre Hargey said it is 'outrageous' the nursery has been forced to relocate, while SDLP councillor Séamus de Faoite said those behind the online hate campaign are 'truly warped and twisted'.[36]

Addressing 'the loyal residents' of the area after the decision to relocate was announced by school authorities, one of the leaders of the rout posted on social media: 'STAY STRONG AND PROUD … THE DAYS OF LOYALISTS QUIETLY ROLLING OVER, FOR THE SAKE OF PEACE AT ANY PRICE … ARE OVER'. [37]

While at one level the opening of an Irish language pre-school by a prominent unionist might have been deemed less controversial than other issues from a politics of public space perspective, it generated a highly contested response. Although there was a lot of support from the local community and general public, ultimately the level and nature of the hostility forced those involved to move the physical location of the school. The wider context is one in which the question of

[31]Brian Hutton, 'Hate campaign' forces Irish language pre-school in East Belfast to move,' *Irish Times*, 28 July 2021.

[32]Braniel Nursery & Primary School [@BranielPS], 'It with Great Sadness and Regret That We Had to Inform Our School Community Today of the Decision of the Integrated Naíscoil Na Seolta to Relocate to Another Site Due to Actions of Individuals Not Connected to the School. @drgrahamgault @ DDawson2020 Https://T.Co/TV3op6A5iM,' Tweet, *Twitter*, 28 July 2021, https://twitter.com/BranielPS/status/1420385400695279617.

[33]Braniel Nursery & Primary School [@BranielPS]; Hutton, 'Hate Campaign' Forces Irish Language Pre-School in East Belfast to Move.'

[34]Hugh Jordan, 'Ex-Red Hand Commando ran online hate campaign against kids' Irish lessons', *Sunday World*, 10 August 2021.

[35]Meredith, 'Braniel Primary.'

[36]Mark Bain, 'Online hate campaign forces Irish nursery school Belfast relocation,' *Belfast Telegraph,* 28 July 2021.

[37]Susan McKay, 'The Irish language can give us all a sense of home: if we save it from sectarianism', *The Guardian*, 10 August 2021.

language has emerged as one that is heavily contested in Northern Ireland over the decades. In 2017, DUP leader Arlene Foster responded to a proposed Irish language act by saying 'if you feed a crocodile, it will keep coming back for more', [38] while another DUP MP said if there was such an act he would use it as toilet paper.[39] The Irish language has been a central part of the ongoing 'cultural war' in Northern Ireland; a 'litmus test for parity of esteem and unionist commitment to a shared space'.[40] DUP and SF each made concessions as part of the 2020 New Decade, New Approach deal, to restore the power-sharing executive n NI, and that deal included the promise of an Irish-language commissioner and increased Irish language rights.[41] These commitments were never implemented before the 2022 Assembly election despite majority support in the Assembly, as the DUP used their veto to prevent legislation from progressing. The British government has promised to legislate at Westminster but has yet to actually do so at the time of writing. However, notwithstanding this wider political context, Linda Ervine and others in East Belfast continue to promote the Irish language, though they were unable to do so in the physical space they had chosen.

East Belfast GAA Club

Sport has been identified as a potential unifier in conflict, and the United Nations has promoted sport as a cost-effective tool to accelerate the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals and promote peace.[42] At other times, however, sports teams and events simply reflect a wider conflict. In Belfast, there has been some discussion about the possibilities of using sport to build cross-community contact. The Belfast Giants Ice Hockey franchise, for instance, has been studied as a social space that 'normalised' interactions between fellow supporters belonging to opposite ends of the political divide,[43] even if the sport is seen as something that is 'peripheral to the lives and concerns' of most people.[44] Another example that is often cited is the PeacePlayers International network, a youth development project aimed at building 'a network of young leaders around the

[38]Claire Williamson, 'I regret crocodile jibe, it helped Sinn Fein to demonise me: Foster,' *Belfast Telegraph*, 10 March 2017

[39]McKay, 'The Irish language can give us all a sense of home: if we save it from sectarianism'.

[40]Brian Ó Conchubhair, 'Politics of language in a (Dis)United Ireland', *Irish Studies in International Affairs* 33 (2) (2022), 39, https://doi.org/10.1353/isia.2022.0002.

[41]Ó Conchubhair, 'Politics of language', 34–35.

[42]Ingrid Beutler, 'Sport serving development and peace: achieving the goals of the United Nations through sport,' *Sport in Society* 11 (4) (1 July 2008), 359–69, https://doi.org/10.1080/17430430802019227; Alexander Cárdenas, 'Peace building through sport? An introduction to sport for development and peace*,' *Journal of Conflictology* 4 (1) (2013): 4; Jonathan Lea-Howarth, 'Sport and Conflict: Is Football an Appropriate Tool to Utilise in Conflict Resolution, Reconciliation or Reconstruction?' (Unpublished Masters Thesis, Sussex, University of Sussex, 2006), https://www.sportanddev.org/sites/default/files/downloads/42__sport_and_conflict_reconciliation___ma_dissertation.pdf.

[43]Eric Lepp, 'Division on Ice: Shared Space and Civility in Belfast,' *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development* 13, no. 1 (2018): 32–45.

[44]Alan Bairner, 'On Thin Ice?: The Odyssey, the Giants, and the Sporting Transformation of Belfast,' *American Behavioral Scientist* 46, no. 11 (July 1, 2003): 1519–32, https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764203046011005.

globe who are creating a more peaceful and equitable world through sport'.[45] In Belfast, PeacePlayers worked with students of Holy Cross and Wheatfield Primary schools in north Belfast, an area that was witness to the Holy Cross disputes of 2001 and 2002. In the years since, the network has been working to bridge the divide between students in the neighbouring schools, by introducing the schoolchildren to each other through a shared sport—basketball.[46]

In both these cases though, emphasis has been placed on the fact that these attempts work precisely because the sports involved—ice hockey and basketball, respectively—are considered 'neutral sports' in the Northern Irish context. Gareth Harper, who has been involved with PeacePlayers, even notes that 'in Northern Ireland, the reason it works so well is that basketball is not one of the big sports—it is not one of the big three of Gaelic football, rugby or soccer', and that when they attempted to progress to rugby, soccer and Gaelic football, there was 'instant pushback'.[47] When it comes to these sports, the assumption is that their political nature, in essence, undermines the possibilities that might otherwise have opened up. Arguably, this is because, as Bairner notes, 'in divided cities it is more likely [for sport] to reflect divisions and, in some instances, to reinforce the sectarian identities that keep people apart'. To him, this is because 'while a specific sport may have cross-community appeal, its traditions are such that it cannot do much to heal inter-community divisions'.[48]

In this context, the growth of a GAA Club in Belfast in the last two years has garnered much interest from the media, academics and practitioners. In May 2020, two friends from east Belfast, David McGreevy and Richard Maguire, mused over the lack of a GAA Club in their neighbourhood, and curious to explore the possibilities, put out the following tweet:

> A new GAA club for East Belfast, if you're interested in playing, coaching or admin (More than likely all 3!) All ages, genders and backgrounds welcome. Please email EastBelfastGAA@gmail.com to register.[49]

It was an anonymous call for those interested in GAA in East Belfast to come together to set up a club. Within days, their inbox was flooded with interest from people across the sectarian divide to participate and join the club. This was the birth of East Belfast GAA Club [hereafter, the Club] in an unlikely Protestant neighbourhood of Belfast city. Within days of the tweet being sent out, the

[45]'PeacePlayers,' accessed July 13, 2022, https://peaceplayers.org/.

[46]Declan Bogue, 'How Peace Initiative Is Bringing Belfast Kids Together through Sport,' *Belfasttelegraph*, August 15, 2020, https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/sport/gaa/how-peace-initiative-is-bringing-belfast-kids-together-through-sport-39450955.html.

[47]Bogue.

[48]Alan Bairner, 'Titanic Town: Sport, Space and the Re-Imag(in)Ing of Belfast,' *City & Society* 18, no. 2 (2006): 162, https://doi.org/10.1525/city.2006.18.2.159.

[49]East Belfast GAA [@EastBelfastGAA], 'A New GAA Club for East Belfast, If You're Interested in Playing, Coaching or Admin (More than Likely All 3!) All Ages, Genders and Backgrounds Welcome. Please Email EastBelfastGAA@gmail.Com to Register,' Tweet, *Twitter*, May 31, 2020, https://twitter.com/EastBelfastGAA/status/1267006668073811968.

Club's website states that they received over five hundred emails from people of all age groups, and within seventeen days of the tweet, East Belfast GAA Club was 'a reality, officially recognised by the GAA'.[50] Eight weeks after it was formed, the Official GAA's YouTube channel featured a short introduction of the club, calling it a 'sudden success story'.[51] Two years later, the Club continues to grow both in size and success, despite some attempts at intimidation and some security alerts.[52] It has by and large been accepted by members and the community alike as a 'shared space' that has brought together people from all backgrounds thanks to a shared love for the sport, while also forging friendships and camaraderie. On a two-episode feature on the Club produced by RTÉ, multiple members spoke of the unlikely friendships they had forged after being part of the club, and about feeling like being part of one 'big family'.[53] Irish language activist Ervine, who was associated with the Irish language classes discussed above, was also made President of the Club. In an interesting section of the television series, four girls from the East Belfast GAA's Camogie team spoke about how they started meeting outside of training to practice by themselves—something that developed a friendship because they were able to 'get to know people better' in smaller crowds. One noted how her friendship with a teammate has now grown outside of the club, where they meet up with their respective partners for dinners and walk their dogs together.[54] Notably, the public space where the four are filmed practising is the sprawling premises of the Stormont Parliament, and the large overpowering structure is seen in the background as the girls play.

The GAA as an organisation and Gaelic games as sports have been the focus of much hostility over the years and this might have been expected to be at an even higher level than a pre-school, given the much greater numbers involved and the older age range through to adults. Yet, the contrast between the relative success of East Belfast GAA and the forced relocation of the Irish language school is interesting and provides some insights into how social spaces are perceived by local communities.

PERCEPTIONS OF SOCIAL SPACES IN EAST BELFAST

Looking at the possibilities in Belfast for Lefebvre's Right to the City framework, John Nagle notes that 'the highest form of participatory urban democracy required to overcome social divisions is the *oeuvre*—a work in which all

[50]East Belfast GAA, 'WELCOME | Fáilte | Ye-Welcome,' East Belfast GAA, accessed 13 July 2022, https://eastbelfastgaa.com/history.

[51]*East Belfast GAA: A Sudden Success Story*, Youtube Video, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CkZ5l3xOg0U.

[52]'Security Alert at East Belfast GAA 'Attempt to Intimidate'', *Belfast Telegraph*, accessed 13 July 2022, https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/security-alert-at-east-belfast-gaa-attempt-to-intimidate-39427901.html.

[53]*Le Chéile*, 2022, https://www.rte.ie/player/series/le-ch%C3%A9ile/SI0000012843?epguid=IP000067846.

[54]*Le Chéile*, 2022.

citizens participate; a collective, not a singular project emerges, and new modes of living and inhabiting are invented'.[55] In post- Agreement Belfast city, the challenge, as many have argued, is that the state has failed to pursue any coherent strategy to heal across the sectarian divide.[56] The heterogeneous and often contradictory strategies adopted by the state in the last two decades, if anything, appear to have exacerbated conflict,[57] or 'downgraded the assault on sectarianism and segregation [and] negotiated a consensus around the limits to cross-community investment'.[58] This has arguably led to a democratic deficit in post-Agreement Northern Ireland—a trend that appears to be changing in recent years, as seen in the performance of smaller political parties, independents campaigning as 'cross-community candidates' and around issues like environment.[59]

The scepticism towards the neoliberal state's attempts at appropriating spaces under the garb of 'commercial regeneration' is reflected starkly in the responses towards Titanic Quarter as discussed here.[60] The assumption that economic competitiveness alone can 'revitalize the "post-conflict-city" by creating new forms of employment and prosperity' to 'ameliorate the socio-economic factors' has led to new forms of gentrification and separations.[61] The case of the Irish language school, on the other hand, points towards the fear of the unionists of losing their grip over the old Orange state. Interestingly, most of the opposition in the case of Braniel appeared to stem from the accusation that it was being 'imposed' through public institutions like schools, using public money. Charlie Freel, who led the social media campaign, said in his interview:

> I've nothing against Linda Ervine. And I've also got nothing against the Irish language either. But as far as I'm concerned public money shouldn't be wasted on it. If you want to learn Irish, then it should be done in your own time and you should spend your own money on it.[62]

[55]John Nagle, 'Sites of social centrality and segregation: Lefebvre in Belfast, a 'divided city,'' *Antipode* 41 (2) (2009), 332–33; Henri Lefebvre, 'The right to the city', in Eleonore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas (eds), *Writing on cities* (Oxford, 1996), 63–240.

[56]Brendan Murtagh, 'New spaces and old in 'post-conflict' Belfast,' Working Paper, Divided Cities/Contested States (Belfast: Queen's University, 2008); John Nagle, 'The right to Belfast City Centre: from ethnocracy to liberal multiculturalism?' *Political Geography* 28 (2) (1 February 2009), 132–41; Ó Conchubhair, 'Politics of language in a (dis)united Ireland'; Shirlow and Murtagh, *Belfast*.

[57]Nagle, 'Sites of social centrality and segregation', 331.

[58]Murtagh, 'New spaces and old in 'post-conflict' Belfast', 22.

[59]Paul Carmichael and Colin Knox, 'Towards 'a New Era'? Some developments in governance of Northern Ireland', *International Review of Administrative Sciences* 65 (1) (1 March 1999), 103–16; Paul Stewart *et al*., *The state of Northern Ireland and the democratic deficit: between sectarianism and neoliberalism* (Glasgow, 2018), available at: https://www.vagabondvoices.co.uk/; John Doyle, 'Reflecting on the Northern Ireland conflict and peace process: 20 years since the Good Friday Agreement', *Irish Studies in International Affairs* 17 (2018), 12.

[60]Stewart *et al*., *The state of Northern Ireland and the democratic deficit*, 8–11.

[61]Nagle, 'Sites of social centrality and segregation,' 333.

[62]Jordan, 'Ex-Red Hand Commando ran online hate campaign against kids' Irish lessons.'

Even if many protestors would have opposed a privately funded school, the choice of their public argument, in other words, is that he—and others like the parent whose tweets were mentioned above—believed that the conceived purpose of an institution like a public school is *not* to 'impose' what they see as political markers. They oppose the conversion of a school in 'their' loyalist neighbourhood into a 'shared space' by introducing the Irish language. More importantly, in their rhetoric, they present this as a direct consequence of the school being appropriated with the help of public institutions for the benefit of one community over the other.

The relative success of the East Belfast GAA Club offers some useful insights into how shared spaces that deal with markers claimed to be ethnic may be envisaged. The Club was different from the other two cases in two ways. Firstly—and importantly—it was an organic informal space, and hence not perceived by the community in East Belfast as an institutional venture backed either by the state or by neoliberal capital. This is why the institutionalisation of the Club has brought some challenges. Soon after Ervine—a Presbyterian Loyalist—was appointed president of the club, the first conundrum was one particular section of the constitution of the Gaelic Athletic Association that claimed that the aim of the GAA is 'a national organisation which has as its basic aim the strengthening of the national identity in a 32-county Ireland through the preservation and promotion of Gaelic games'.[63] Speaking at a radio programme in October 2021, Ervine spoke about how she could not get on board with some parts of the constitution, adding:

> …I don't think by wanting to play Gaelic Games or wanting to be part of a Gaelic team that you necessarily have to be in support of a 32-county Ireland. A lot of people within the GAA have said to me, you know, 'We're not political, we never talk about politics, you know, we're really just in it for the sport.' And I accept that. So really there's no necessity then for anything political to be in the constitution.[64]

GAA's approved version of the guide from 2016 also reprints a letter from Archbishop Croke in 1884 in which he describes the Union Jack as 'England's bloody red'.[65] Even when GAA supporters welcomed the interest in the sport in East Belfast, Ervine's comments received a mixed response. Some have conceded that the particular provision was inserted in 1971 to appease hardliners, and, if necessary, should be revised.[66] On the internet's 'biggest and longest-running

[63]Nelson McCausland, 'Why the GAA's rulebook poses a conundrum for the Unionist president of new East Belfast Club,' *Belfast Telegraph*, 4 June 2020.

[64]Linda Ervine, 'East Belfast GAA on today with Claire Byrne', 7 October 2021, https://www.rte.ie/radio1/highlights/1252331-east-belfast-gaa-on-today-with-claire-byrne/.

[65]McCausland, 'Nelson McCausland'.

[66]Mark Gallagher, 'Across the divide,' *Irish Daily Mail*, 5 February 2021.

Gaelic games forum', one user expressed 'concern' about her comments, even while they acknowledged that they didn't have a problem with her being President because 'she seems progressive'.[67]

The second point to note is that for a club that has been in existence for two years, East Belfast GAA continues to struggle to find a 'home turf' for their club, and continues to train on rented or shared grounds. As soon as the City Council earmarked land to develop a Gaelic pitch for the Club in a disused corner of Victoria Park in East Belfast, 'a flurry of activity on social media by loyalists' brought any such efforts to a stop.[68] As seen in the case of the proposed Irish language school, some sections saw the GAA—and its link to the IRA Commemorations—as 'toxic'. As one loyalist activist put it:

> The notion that a GAA (club)—an organisation seen as toxic by many unionists and loyalists—could be plonked in the middle of a traditionally loyalist area, without any prior consultation with the community, is for the birds.[69]

Meanwhile, another unionist activist recently reiterated this perception of institutionalism as being the concern, and not the sport itself: 'I do have issues with the organisation but…I wrote a tweet supporting their right to have a ground. Everyone should be entitled to a place to play their sport, for the sake of the community'.[70] One member of the Club expected the problems of a pitch to persist for a while: 'Sadly, we will have them for another while especially in a city like this, and particularly in East Belfast where we have no GAA pitches'.[71] Unlike in the case of the Irish language school which was seen as an 'imposition' by the state and an appropriation of physical space, the Club's organic nature, and the absence of a designated physical space within East Belfast, means it is seen less as a 'threat'. On its part, the club's public imagery includes symbols associated with nationalism, unionism and neither—the crest features the iconic Harland & Wolff cranes, a sunrise, the Red Hand of Ulster, a shamrock and a thistle, and the word 'Together' written in English, Irish and Ulster-Scots—and the vocal reiteration that the Club does not intend to mix sport and politics appears to have been, at least in the short run, accepted by the vast majority of the immediate community.

[67] 'East Belfast GAA', GAA Discussion Board, East Belfast GAA, 6 June 2020, available at: https://gaaboard.com/board/index.php?topic=29671.135.

[68] Connla Young, 'Loyalist Jamie Bryson claims GAA not welcome in Unionist and Loyalist areas', *The Irish News*, 5 August 2022, sec. Online, https://www.irishnews.com/news/northernirelandnews/2022/08/05/news/loyalist_jamie_bryson_claims_gaa_not_welcome_in_unionist_and_loyalist_areas-2790928/.

[69] Young, 'Loyalist Jamie Bryson claims GAA not welcome in Unionist and Loyalist areas'.

[70] John Breslin, 'Influential Unionist activist defends embattled East Belfast GAA Club after attending first hurling game', *The Irish News*, 26 August 2022, available at: https://www.irishnews.com/news/northernirelandnews/2022/08/26/news/influential_unionist_defends_embattled_east_belfast_gaa_club_after_attending_first_hurling_game-2810057/.

[71] *Le Chéile*.

CONCLUSION

Nagle argues that of the four models of policy in contested urban spaces laid out by Scott Bollens,[72] the state in Belfast city has gravitated towards 'neutral' and 'equity':

> The 'neutral' approach assumes a colourblind view to conflict, leaving questions of space to 'neutral' technocratic and professional agencies. 'Equity' refers to planning strategies that seek to create equality between the conflicting parties in terms of resource allocation. Even if such strategies derive from a benign intent, they tend to accentuate divisions in contested space.[73]

This is why there is a need to 'encourage alternative readings of politics within which separation and an ethno-sectarian logic are viewed as repressive and retrograde relationships'.[74] The state's attempt at 'single-identity cultural alternatives' such as May Day and Pride marches, while welcome, are insufficient because they fall back on 'neutral' markers of identity that erase the past. The three cases discussed in this paper suggest that public perceptions of shared spaces benefit when these initiatives are seen as being organic and informal. The democratic deficit and discontent with neoliberal capitalism mean that political or commercial establishments continue to be perceived with a certain amount of scepticism at least by small sections of the general public who are still strong on either side of the nationalist/loyalist divide.

The recent elections of 2017 and 2022 have, for the first time since partition, brought results in which a majority of the members cannot be described as 'unequivocally unionist',[75] suggesting that there is the possibility for a more vibrant electoral politics in the years to come. The question, then, would be whether a political culture—backed by a new spatiality of secularism—can be simultaneously imagined in Belfast. The cases discussed in this paper suggest that more organic grassroots community initiatives might be an integral part of such efforts, owing to their wider acceptance to the general public, as compared to state-led initiatives.

[72] Scott Bollens, *Urban peacebuilding in divided societies* (S.l, 1999).
[73] Nagle, 'Sites of social centrality and segregation', 331.
[74] Shirlow and Murtagh, *Belfast*, 6.
[75] Doyle, 'Reflecting on the Northern Ireland conflict and peace process', 12.