The Conflict in Cities research teams gathered at Exeter University for a final three-day project workshop. The purpose of the workshop was to present and discuss the research completed by the project’s three research teams based at the universities of Cambridge, Exeter and Queen’s. The work presented included: forthcoming books, published and forthcoming articles and PhD thesis. A total of 27 research reports were presented and discussed over 9 thematic sessions.

The first session was devoted to the project’s four forthcoming books. The presentation of ‘Cities and Ethno-National Conflict’ by James Anderson and Liam O’Dowd provoked a discussion concerning the necessity and conversely the difficulties of comparing different periods of time, cultures and cities. The subject of what defines a ‘normal’ city in contrast to a city in conflict – was another central question. The discussion of ‘The spatial qualities of contested cities’ by Wendy Pullan raised the question of the salience of mobility, spatial fragmentation and other spatial manifestations (walls, rifts and roadways). Mick Dumper’s ‘Jerusalem and the Palestinian Israeli Conflict’ elicited questions about the difference between national and urban borders (both real and imagined). The resilience and fragility of urban everyday life during prolonged conflict was central in the discussion related to ‘Locating Urban Conflicts’ edited by Wendy Pullan and Britt Baillie.
CONFLICT IN CITIES
AND THE CONTESTED STATE

Everyday life and the possibilities for transformation in Belfast, Jerusalem and other divided cities

Physical boundaries and urban interfaces were the focus of the next session. The ‘Wall’ or Separation Barrier in Jerusalem was examined as a platform for resistance through graffiti on the ‘world’s largest canvas’. The contested landscape around the proposed route of the Separation Barrier was explored through competing conservation proposals for the Refaim Valley, which will effect the definition of the city’s future boundaries. In Belfast, research on the ‘Peacelines’ and the regenerated city centre explored resident’s spatial behaviour and young people’s perceptions and experiences of the ‘post Good Friday’ city. Self-restricting spatial behaviour in order to cope with fear and minimize exposure to perceived danger was observed despite the city’s ‘Post-Conflict’ branding. The role of holy places and churches as ‘hotspots’ of contention in these cities was discussed in terms of their use as ‘boundary markers’. Implications of potential shifts in the status quo at these sites was another key topic.

The project’s research on ‘shared’ space in contested cities generated a discussion about the different reasons a space is ‘shared’; the way that the physicality of the space impacts people; and the role of ‘shared’ spaces in normalising everyday relations between segregated groups. Emphasis was placed on ‘shared’ space as a spectrum of different types of interaction ranging from highly asymmetrical spaces such as prisons, to more symmetrically ‘shared’ spaces such as selected shopping malls.

Nicosia, Berlin, Beirut, Ramallah and Belfast were examined in a session that focused on reports dealing with memory and commemoration. While spaces of shared memory could be subject of competing alternative versions of the past – such as Nicosia’s Buffer Zone, they also have the potential to help transcend reified ethnic identities. The the manner in which youth ‘inherit’ conflict as well as the way commemoration can either be unifying or divisive also demonstrated how memory is not only the creation of a personal perspective of the past but also a political instrument used to shape the future.

Urban reconstruction and policing were themes examined by reports on the Naher el Bared Palestinian refugee camp (Lebanon), Kirkuk (Iraq), Brussels, Belfast, Jerusalem and Mostar. The rise of ethnically segregated schools in Kirkuk as an outcome of competing political agendas; the significant role of bureaucrats in sustaining power-sharing in the administrative level in Brussels and Belfast; the ability of art groups to challenge the narrative of Mostar as ‘divided’; and the expanding role of community activists in the policing of Belfast - showed that different social actors have a central influence on varied aspects of civic life in contested cities.

A ‘Round table’ final session concluded the workshop. Three major themes of the workshop were highlighted - space (‘shared’, contested, holy, everyday), time (transitional, temporary, permanent, legacy) and actors (bureaucrats, youth, planners, activists, mothers). The subjects of class, gender and transnational cooporation were suggested as areas for future research.