

CONFLICT IN CITIES AND THE CONTESTED STATE

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**Post-conflict Belfast ‘sliced and diced’: The
case of the Gaeltacht Quarter**

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Editorial note

This paper originates from the author's PhD dissertation. It relates to Research Module B1.2 'The Changing Built Environment and Socio-Economic Structures of Belfast', and to Working Papers 5 (Murtagh, *New Spaces and Old in 'Post-Conflict' Belfast*) and 10 (O'Dowd and Komarova, *Regeneration in a Contested City: A Belfast Case Study*).

Biographical note

Siún Carden recently completed her PhD on 'Place-making from the periphery: reimagining place and culture in Belfast's Gaeltacht Quarter' in the School of History and Anthropology at Queen's University Belfast. Her research interests include cities, minority languages, tourism, regeneration, space and place.

Post-conflict Belfast 'sliced and diced': The case of the Gaeltacht Quarter

Siún Carden

Abstract

This paper considers the recent proliferation of Belfast's 'Quarters' as part of global trends towards the theming of city space, and as a response to the particular situation of Belfast at the beginning of the twenty-first century. It focuses on the Gaeltacht Quarter, a site that exemplifies the difficulty of applying the internationally popular model of cultural difference as a resource for the production of tourist revenue to the context of contested cities. The 'quartering' of Belfast is represented as a response to post-industrial and post-conflict predicaments this city shares with many others. I consider how the urban context is sometimes exploited, as in exhortations to investors and tourists to contribute to Belfast's transformation from 'a city of two halves' to 'a city of seven quarters', and sometimes obscured, as in the recent re-invention of the Quarters as remnants of the city's distant past.

Keywords

Urban regeneration, tourism, boundaries, place-making, post-conflict

The Belfast Visitor and Convention Centre has recently updated the section of its website that informs prospective tourists about Belfast's Quarters. During the summer of 2010 it began describing these new ways of talking about place in Belfast as historical survivals: 'Like most cities of old, Belfast grew around its cottage industries in locales or quarters, from the old French term "quartier"... In Belfast the remnants of certain quarters still exist today' (www.gotobelfast.com). The decision to present these Quarters, which have been created in the decade or so following the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, as 'remnants' of Belfast's historically distant origins, and to associate them with lost 'cottage industries' of 'weavers', 'tanners' and 'butchers' rather than the night-time and tourist economies of the twenty-first century, reveals the anxious efforts to establish 'authenticity' that often surround place-making projects. This is combined with a desire to present the city as a destination for more than 'Troubles tourism' (www.gotobelfast.com). The project has parallels with many other efforts 'to establish continuity with a suitable historical past', which Hobsbawn (1983: 1), among others, has analysed in terms of the 'invention of tradition'. As is so often the case, the search for a 'suitable' past is driven by a need to simultaneously fulfil and obscure present-day priorities. The Gaeltacht Quarter ('Gaeltacht' being the Irish language word for an Irish-speaking area or community) is

a particularly interesting example of how these new names for places have grown out of specific moments in Belfast's very recent history. However, before focusing on the Gaeltacht Quarter, it is necessary to briefly consider the quartering of Belfast as part of a global place marketing trend.

Theming Cities

The rapid emergence of 'Quarters' in Belfast at the start of the twenty-first century is not at all unusual. The proliferation of themed spaces is a common characteristic of the contemporary city. The changing salience of place in the developed world, where most people feel less familiar with their neighbours than their parents did, means that identifiably localised cultures have come to be regarded with a mixture of exoticism and nostalgia by elites whose mobility breeds a sense of rootlessness. Thus, as tourism has been embraced by cities abandoned by manufacturing industries, localised difference that can be packaged as a commoditised leisure experience has become eagerly sought after by 'place marketers' (Kearns and Philo, 1993: 5).

As the promotion of tourism has become a common motivation for urban development, 'culture is more and more the business of cities' (Zukin 2001: 325). The idea of 'culture' in this formulation is a limited one; while social scientists see culture as pervading all human life, however banal or familiar, the 'culture' of 'cultural tourism' is generally understood as experience, knowledge or meaning that is pursued as recreation, for the sake of its difference from the everyday life of the tourist. Making such difference identifiable and accessible often means 'designating and branding particular spaces', a form of place-making that Bell and Jayne (2004: 249) write about as "quartering" cities'. Archer (1997: 322) remarks that the desire to package representations of cultural difference has led to the production of places in which cities 'have taken on many of the characteristics generally associated with theme parks'. Hannigan (2001: 305, 313) sees the growth of what he calls the 'theme park city' in the 1990s as characterised by the 'convergence and overlap' of 'shopping, dining, entertainment, and education and culture'. This strong interconnection between economic activity and 'cultural' activity in the narrow, 'cultural tourism' sense, means that 'the symbolic framing of culture becomes a powerful tool as capital and cultural symbolism intertwine' (Bell and Jayne, 2004: 1). This idea of the 'framing' of culture is a useful way of thinking about the Gaeltacht Quarter, as an attempt to make a bit of culture into something that can be bounded, distinguished from its surroundings, and put on display. In order to be established as competitive products, places need to be

represented as fundamentally different from their surroundings, so cultural diversity has become a marketable resource. The marks of difference that sometimes act as faultlines of social anxiety and unrest are now pursued as prized social capital and valued commodities (Zukin 2001: 235; Fincher and Jacobs 1998: 13).

The ‘quartering’ of Belfast

As political violence receded through the latter part of the 1990s and the beginning of the twenty-first century, Belfast joined the worldwide struggle for a place on the tourist map, and quickly began acquiring Quarters. These seven themed spaces are Cathedral Quarter, Queen’s Quarter, Titanic Quarter, Linen Quarter, Gaeltacht Quarter, Library Quarter and Market Quarter. The last two sprung up during the PhD research this paper draws on; as a Belfast property development company enthusiastically puts it, ‘7 Quarters...And Counting!’ (www.barnabasventures.com, 10/07/2009). While the Linen, Library and Market Quarters are yet to be developed far beyond street signage, the other four have found their way onto ‘hop-on, hop-off’ bus routes, into tourist literature, and to significantly varying degrees, into the consciousness of local residents and business people. The Cathedral Quarter has been marketed as a centre of the arts and leisure, the Queen’s Quarter for its student and academic life, the Titanic Quarter for its industrial heritage, and the Gaeltacht Quarter for the Irish language. As O’Connor (2007) reports, ‘Now, “post-Troubles” Belfast is sliced and diced for consumer convenience’ (*Irish Times* 7/9/07).

While the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 opened the way for a burst of urban redevelopment, the fact that the preceding three decades of violent conflict focused on ethno-national claims to space meant that new interventions in the cityscape were surrounded with dangerous sensitivities. As the peace process made fitful progress, and Belfast started to look like a city in slow convalescence rather than in eternal crisis, regeneration took on a new set of priorities. Even prior to the Agreement, Neill (1999: 271) remarks that the ‘announcement of a ceasefire by the IRA on 31 August 1994 unleashed a wave of optimism and a flurry of planning activity in Belfast’. The calming of violent territorial tensions seemed to offer new scope for the city to be developed and updated in the way other UK and Irish cities had been over the decades, and yet ethnic spatial segregation and territoriality remained stubborn realities that gave Belfast different requirements from less contested run-down urban areas. Applying the postmodernist architectural styles and accompanying ideals of cosmopolitan hybridity and fluidity that were then

fashionable to Belfast's often rigidly compartmentalised streets and attitudes risked being no more effective than, as Neill (1995: 69) put it, 'lipstick' on a 'gorilla'. Neill (1999: 269, 272) is scathing about the emphasis on 'harmonious "visions" for the future' in Belfast's planning strategies at this stage, warning against a 'retreat to the future in a city which has difficulty advancing from the symbolic landscapes of the past'.

Most of Belfast's Quarters are located far from the city's trouble spots, in terms of both geographical and what Neill (1999) calls 'representational' space. In their themes, the Titanic, Queens, Cathedral, Market, Linen and Library Quarters avoid obvious references to any of the features of Belfast life that have been used as symbolic markers of ethno-national division. Plotted on a map, they are clustered around the city's commercial centre, except for Titanic Quarter, which is situated in an almost deserted area of abandoned dockland. An architect who sits on the body responsible for the Gaeltacht Quarter, the Gaeltacht Development Board, remarked at a public event that 'Laganside, Titanic Quarter, Cathedral Quarter: they all avoided the neighbourhoods. I don't know why Belfast is afraid of its people but the Gaeltacht Quarter is the first opportunity to forge a regeneration initiative with people at its heart' (O'Muilleoir, *From the Balcony*: 16th August 2006). O'Dowd and Komarova (2009: 10) identify one reason why developers might avoid residential neighbourhoods when they identify 'residential space as the ultimate territory for the "two communities"' in Northern Ireland, suggesting that its development is therefore more contentious than other kinds of urban space.

O'Dowd and Komarova (2009:10) suggest that 'Consumerist Belfast', which regeneration has produced in Laganside, Titanic Quarter and city centre retail areas, exists alongside what they call 'Troubles Belfast', segregated working-class residential communities that have not benefited from the new developments. Murtagh (2008: 4), similarly, writes about Belfast as a 'twin speed city'. The creation of the Gaeltacht Quarter is one attempt to unite 'Consumerist' with 'Troubles' Belfast, both in the sense of producing marketable tourism products from the experience of conflict, and in the sense of bringing the benefits of regeneration and investment to an area that other development schemes have left behind. The Gaeltacht Quarter is a counterbalance to broader regeneration strategies which seem not only to have favoured other areas, but with the development of Laganside, the Titanic Quarter and Victoria Square, to be actually moving the city centre east. The areas of Belfast that were for so long marginalised by conflict are in danger of being marginalised further

in the years of peace, as the rest of the city reinvents itself as a regional capital that glories in long awaited 'normality', and the Falls and Shankill become mural galleries where tourists can walk through a potted history of the 'Troubles'.

Transforming a segregated city: from 'two halves' to 'seven quarters'?

The Quarters, with their variable impact on local understandings of Belfast's geography, are an interesting way of promoting a city already divided, physically and culturally, into a patchwork of neighbourhoods. As McGregor points out, 'divided societies, looked at more closely, appear as a jumble of different micro societies', and in Belfast these micro societies are mapped onto the physical layout of the city, in its 'glass ceilings *and* glass walls' (McGregor 1994: 239; Hepburn 1994: 90). In promotional material, visitors are encouraged to move between the Quarters, while the more longstanding cultural boundaries they might cross on the way remain largely undiscussed (see Celebrate Belfast Unit, Belfast City Council 2006: 33). This may be part of an attempt to use place marketing to create 'a public space, which re-connects the divided spaces of the cities' (McGregor 1994: 234).

The development of dualistic spatial segregation within Belfast is a story as old as the city itself, which Hepburn (1994: 93) traces back as far as the plantation of Ulster in the seventeenth century (see also O'Dowd and Komarova 2009: 3; Boal 1994: 34; Doherty and Poole 2000: 188). At the end of the 1960s, when civil unrest across Northern Ireland destabilized already tense inter-community relationships to the point of sparking 'the most severe and sustained period of violence the city [Belfast] has ever experienced', the boundaries of Catholic and Protestant neighbourhoods shifted and hardened as some residents were forcibly ejected from their homes and many more sought security in homogeneity (Doherty and Poole 2000: 183). Between 1969 and 1973 'an estimated 60,000 people' were displaced within Belfast as a result of ethno-religious conflict (Murtagh 2000: 191).

Throughout the decades that became known as the 'Troubles', patterns of residential segregation along religious lines persisted, although this segregation was not equally sharp throughout the city, neither across all areas nor across all social groups. Choshen (2005: 8) describes Belfast as 'Never fully integrated and never fully segmented', as 'the city presents a situation where many people live in conditions of ethnic segregation while still sharing some spaces'. This is not merely a patchwork of Protestant and Catholic areas, therefore, but a city where more subtly demarcated zones of commerce and coexistence are juxtaposed with

neighbourhoods commonly labeled in press reports as sectarian 'enclaves', 'heartlands', 'strongholds' or even 'ghettos'. Demographic division is particularly stark in working-class parts of the city, not surprisingly, since 'much of the violence of the conflict was played out within the narrow confines of working-class residential areas' (Lysaght 2002: 53; see also Bryan 2003: 258). Publicly owned housing has been shown to be more thoroughly segregated than privately owned accommodation (Keane 1990). It is on the margins of the least affluent parts of the city that most physical barriers or 'peace lines' are found. The sharp decline in paramilitary, state and sectarian violence since the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 has not been mirrored in levels of residential segregation. Indeed, in a well-known paradox, 'peace lines' have multiplied in the years of peace (O'Dowd and Komarova 2009: 10).

West Belfast, where the Gaeltacht Quarter is situated, has particular significance within Belfast's variegated geography. Containing both the Falls and Shankill areas, which are often twinned in public discourse as icons of Catholic Irish republicanism and Protestant British loyalism respectively, Livingstone (1998: 24) observes that 'during the thirty years after the 1969 burnings, the West Belfast constituency became known as the 'cockpit of the North'. Being what O'Hearn (2008: 110) calls 'centre of the war' has literally shaped this part of the city over decades, both through informing official planning decisions such as road layouts, and through the more ad hoc structures that have become longstanding 'peace lines'. The physical boundaries, whether walls or motorways, which separate these neighbourhoods from each other and from the city centre, reflect the powerful role of physical location in local senses of belonging and exclusion.

Catholic West Belfast has an especially self-conscious and cohesive local identity. Its peripheral location relative to the rest of the city, long-term patterns of deprivation and widespread sense of opposition to the state of which it forms part contribute to a feeling of separateness which can be experienced as cherished independence or enforced subordination in different contexts. Neill, writing soon after the Good Friday Agreement about the 'visions' of city planners for Belfast's future, points out that

Catholic West Belfast, without official planning, is arguably the most distinctive cultural quarter in the city. With a strong nationalist culture and ethos, extending, on the part of some, to the armed prosecution of a claim to places and with a Sinn Fein representative returned in 1997 to the British

parliament, West Belfast possesses a unique place identity almost as a city within a city (1999: 276)

This lends credibility to the idea of this area as a distinctive place, but also presents challenges to the intentional development of the area around the Falls Road into another kind of 'cultural quarter'. Perhaps the most ambitious aim of the Gaeltacht Quarter project is to make this relatively impoverished neighbourhood profitable.

The Gaeltacht Quarter's emphasis on economic development must be seen in the context of a long history of deprivation and failed regeneration attempts in this part of the city. West Belfast's status as 'one of the most deprived regions in the islands of Ireland and Britain' has not been transformed by the end of political violence (O'Hearn 2008: 110). While the coming of peace brought increased economic activity in the city as a whole, the communities on either side of the Shankill/Falls peace line have never caught up with surrounding areas economically or in the standard of the built environment. O'Hearn (2008: 102) argues that this reveals the role of 'structural inequalities', as well as violence and its economic aftermath, in the levels of unemployment and disadvantage experienced in West Belfast. Bryan (2003: 261) notes that from 'the 1970s onwards Belfast has seen a series of attempts at regeneration', which have met with varying degrees of success, but after which the Falls and the Shankill are still, according to the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, two of the most deprived electoral wards in Northern Ireland. A variety of agencies have been responsible for different types of regeneration, principally Belfast City Council, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, and the Department of the Environment. Co-ordinating the efforts of different bodies has been attempted through a succession of schemes, from Making Belfast Work and Belfast Action Teams in 1988 to the district Partnership Boards set up in the mid-1990s (Neill 1999: 271-2; Bryan 2003: 261). However, successive waves of Belfast-wide regeneration schemes have failed to make much impact in this part of the city.

In Catholic West Belfast, regeneration efforts throughout the Troubles were shaped by the fraught relationship between local people and the state which distributed public money. There is a widely held impression, shared by those who work in tourism or development-related groups in the Gaeltacht Quarter, such as Forbairt Feirste, Fáilte Feirste Thíar and An Ceathrú Gaeltachta Teo itself, that funding processes for decades relied more on evaluations of which people and organizations were 'safe' than on questions of need and efficiency. As the peace

process broadened the 'safe' category, links to republicanism were no longer a bar to public funding, and 'the combination of economic deprivation and political militancy made West Belfast a special target of public policy' (O'Hearn 2008: 110). This has resulted in a very large number of organizations, from tiny community groups to government departments, working to reverse patterns of deprivation in West Belfast but operating in a largely uncoordinated way. The complexity of this organizational infrastructure has been an obstacle to progress, fuelling confusion, contradiction and duplication between regeneration efforts. Long experience of failed or misdirected strategies has resulted in a profound weariness with 'plans' among the very people required to implement any new approach.

Through its promise of a new and profitable attitude to place, the 'quartering' of Belfast has sometimes been explicitly linked with efforts to deterritorialize city space. The idea that the Quarters are a solution to the problems of the past, and moreover a solution which tourists and investors can be part of, is a powerful marketing strategy in a city known around the world for political violence which once appeared to be intractable. All of Belfast's disparate quarters have been promoted in this way, with the 'quartering' process presented as both a sign of and a continuing move towards security and stability. For example, a Belfast property developer (CEO of the firm mentioned above) addressed an audience of Irish and American business people in Florida, at an annual gathering in February 2006 (www.barnabasventures.com, 10/07/2009). He remarked, in a phrase which was quickly adopted by many of the websites offering tourist information about the area, that Belfast, 'once a city of two halves', was 'now a city of seven quarters'. This shows that the tasks of 'selling' the city to potential investors and to potential tourists are sometimes undertaken using the same strategies, and that one of these strategies is a narrative of healing that outsiders can support.

The Gaeltacht Quarter

Uniquely among Belfast's Quarters, the Gaeltacht Quarter engages with a place, a theme and a residential population that have long featured in public discourse about Northern Ireland's divisions. The site of the Gaeltacht Quarter, along the Falls Road in west Belfast, is directly associated with political violence in local memory, and is among the highly segregated neighbourhoods that make up working-class Belfast, which is still largely a 'city of two halves' today. The theme around which the area is being marketed, the Irish language, is also more intimately bound up with Northern Ireland's divisive history than the qualities singled out in the

other Quarters.

The idea of a 'Gaeltacht Quarter' was first proposed in 2002, in a report by the West Belfast and Greater Shankill Task Force, a group that was set up in 2001 by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Industry (DETI) and the Department of Social Development (DSD) to look at ways to reduce deprivation in West Belfast as a whole. Clive Dutton, an English urban regeneration expert, was commissioned to produce a report, published in 2004, on how a Gaeltacht Quarter on the Falls Road might work. When my preliminary research began in 2006, a limited company called An Cheathrú Ghaeltachta Teo ('The Gaeltacht Quarter Ltd') had been set up to manage the development. This was loosely based on the recommendations of the Dutton Report (2004), but represented a scaling back of that report's ambitions in terms of the number of government departments and local interest groups directly involved. Unusually for an Irish language initiative, the Gaeltacht Quarter relied on a high degree of co-operation between government agencies and local 'community' organisations from the very beginning. While Belfast City Council and the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure are involved in delivering the Quarter, the driving force behind the project is a group of business people, Irish language enthusiasts and tourism and economic development professionals who almost all originate from West Belfast or have long term links with the area. This group shares some of the characteristics of broader decision-making elites in Northern Ireland, acting as cultural brokers between the Falls Road and Belfast City Hall. The residents of the Gaeltacht Quarter are often not aware of the details of the project, but the densely interconnected nature of the population means that most people have personal or familial connections to Irish speakers, and they usually welcome the idea of increased visibility for the language.

Whether the Gaeltacht Quarter will involve significant changes to the built environment of the Falls Road is uncertain, given the highly built-up nature of the area and the difficulty of securing powers over land use. Various long-term plans have been suggested, for a 'flagship building' and other visual statements, including 'the biggest piece of public art the Falls has ever seen. A 40ft tall statue of a man/woman reading Lá' (the Irish language daily newspaper) (O'Muilleoir: 23rd August, 18th September 2006). The Quarter contains several important sites for Irish speakers, including the Cumann Chluain Ard, seen as the birthplace of the modern language revival in Belfast, and the Cultúrlann McAdam O'Fiaich, an arts centre located in a former Presbyterian church and named after a nineteenth century Presbyterian Irish language activist. The Gaeltacht

Quarter aspires to the most contemporary, inclusive, even (according to the Celebrate Belfast Unit's Gaeltacht Guide, 2006) 'cosmopolitan' Irish-speaking culture. An Irish-medium primary school and an associated adult learners' centre, Ionad Uíbh Eachach, are also located in the centre of the Quarter. There is a Gaeltacht Quarter-based, Irish speaking Gaelic football team that competes with teams from Gaeltachts across Ireland, and an annual Gaeltacht Quarter Festival (Fleadh Feirste) began in 2009. Features not specifically related to the Irish language are marketed as important elements of the Gaeltacht Quarter as well, from the 'Troubles tourism' attractions of Milltown cemetery and the murals and Conway Mill arts centre, to 'retail therapy' and even the nearby Bog Meadows nature reserve (Celebrate Belfast Unit, Belfast City Council, 2006).

The Gaeltacht Guide presents the Quarter not as a hermetically sealed Gaelic world, but as a place where, in postmodern style, you can 'listen as the consonants of England jostle and jest with the vowels of Scotland and Ireland, where the mountains converse with the architecture and where the ancient past has emerged as a dynamic present' (Celebrate Belfast Unit, Belfast City Council, 2006: 4). This supports Misteil's (2006: 191) view that the Gaeltacht Quarter's value is as a site of 'cultural promiscuity', enabling the kind of 'global, hybrid, and cosmopolitan Irish culture' that Cheng (2004: 7) sees as the subject of a century-long national debate. However, framing 'cultural promiscuity' within a geographical area, in a context where space is profoundly territorialized and expressions of ethno-national 'culture' are often experienced as threateningly exclusive, sharply highlights some of the difficulties that often surround place-making projects.

'A dual signal': boundary issues

Questions of where, and how, to draw the line around themed spaces commonly are problematic. In the case of the Gaeltacht Quarter, the commercial desirability of creating a well-defined tourist product exists in tension with local anxieties about territorialism. The Gaeltacht Quarter's boundary has been defined by An Cheathrú Ghaeltachta Teo as running along two roads (the M1 and the Springfield Road), and following the course of the so-called 'peace-line' between the Falls and the Shankill. When I was given this information by those involved in decision-making about the Gaeltacht Quarter, it was always accompanied with disclaimers such as 'as far as I know', 'at the moment', or 'as it stands', and several of these people referred to the process of deciding on a boundary as one which had been contentious, and was as yet unresolved. Within the board of An Cheathru Ghaeltachta Teo, there has been much debate about how narrowly focused or widely targeted the Gaeltacht Quarter should be,

and the defining of the boundary is seen an ongoing process.

As well as the debatable question of where the border actually falls, a more fundamental level of uncertainty is attached to the boundary by the insistence of the project's leaders that it is 'a dotted line', rather than a solid one. When the Chief Executive of An Cheathrú Gaeltachta Teo described the boundary in a leaflet accompanying the *Andersonstown News* in 2008, he prefaced the information with an assurance that the border was not about excluding anyone. The words 'hub' and 'cluster' have been used by the company's board members to express the idea of the Gaeltacht Quarter as something not set apart from, but relying on and contributing to, the rest of the city and beyond. Words like 'hub' and 'cluster' also tap into the language of urban regeneration used in the Dutton report, which stresses the economic rationale for 'cultural clusters', and their popularity among place-makers in other parts of the world. They can therefore be seen as a way of distancing discourse about the Gaeltacht Quarter from its immediate physical location, or at least, of making claims to a wider set of cultural associations than that usually carried by the Falls Road in the public imagination. In an interview, prominent local Irish speaker and founding Gaeltacht Quarter board member Sean Mistéil stressed the importance of the 'dotted line' approach, calling geographical boundedness 'a really redundant way of thinking' in the contemporary, interconnected world. He was conscious of the potential contradictions thrown up by this outlook, but saw this ambiguity as fertile rather than problematic:

So it's a dual signal...we're saying to other communities that in creating something that is a quarter, defined physically, enclosed, our objective is actually the reverse of that, to reach out, spread out and multiply with whoever and wherever really.

The downplaying of location as the defining feature of the Quarter co-exists with the need to establish it as somewhere distinctly different from the city around it. Not only is a recognizable, discrete area more marketable to tourists than a diffuse set of experiences, but local residents are keen to know how exactly the Gaeltacht Quarter maps onto their existing views of the city. Reluctance to 'draw a line' around the Gaeltacht Quarter, to tell people where its boundaries lie, does not lessen the need to emphasise its distinctiveness from the rest of the city, or in the economic language used by local tourism professionals, its 'USP' or Unique Selling Point. The idea that the area of the proposed Gaeltacht Quarter is unique, and that this kind of uniqueness is what visitors and investors were looking for, is made much of in the

Dutton (2004: 23) report, which suggests that 'The cluster of cultural, educational, business and tourism activity related to the Irish language is the area's Unique Selling Point (USP). It is increasingly becoming a strong foundation for urban renewal on which to build'. It has been observed that 'tourism often does require 'finished', marked and recognisable pieces of culture in order to market its destinations' (Black 1996: 139). Defining the Gaeltacht Quarter as a specific, bounded space might be a way of forming a cohesive tourist experience and a discrete 'piece of culture' from a combination of features, such as political history and the Irish language, which are by no means 'finished' in terms of being resolved within the broader context of Northern Ireland. Rather, they remain a focus of emotive dispute. While these matters are still so vehemently contested, though, clearly marked boundaries would recall too closely the social and physical barriers that characterize post-conflict Belfast.

Conclusion

In many ways, the Gaeltacht Quarter is a typical example of the spaces themed around a vision of 'culture' as recreational experience that have become a frequent feature of urban life. Given the thirst for marked difference that planners and business people perceive among tourists and local pleasure seekers, the particular popularity of expressions of Irishness across the world, and the sudden opening up of Belfast as a leisure destination, the Gaeltacht Quarter seems to fit neatly with planning priorities at the start of the twenty-first century. It follows the logic of the international quest for identifiable, clearly framed bits of marketable culture, 'sliced and diced' into bite-sized pieces that can be consumed in a weekend city break.

However, 'place-making' does not happen through the smooth application of new meanings to old spaces, but through the negotiation of unstable relations of economic, political, social and symbolic power. The context of post-conflict Belfast, and the particular position of the Gaeltacht Quarter within it, mean that the issues of 'boundaries, exclusion and inclusion', which Bell and Jayne (2004: 251) argue are inherent in 'quartering' processes, are especially sensitive. It is no wonder that defining a boundary around the Gaeltacht Quarter has been a complicated process. Given that this area has often been used as a byword for divisive territoriality, the reluctance of An Cheathrú Gaeltachta Teo to be seen to lay claim to space is understandable.

Any redefinition of space in this context is inevitably entangled with longstanding divisions; to local audiences, the most obvious distinctiveness of the Falls Road is not its

difference from the homogeneity and blandness of globalized cities, but its difference from parts of the city that consider themselves British. The contested question of nationality in Belfast has often been reflected in the spatial organization of the city. The outbreak of violence in 1969 that is seen to have sparked the 'Troubles' of the late twentieth century precipitated what Murtagh (2000: 190) describes as a 'desperate spatial sorting process'. Four decades later, the rigidity of residential segregation in many areas has not decreased, and any kind of spatial sorting in Belfast, whatever its rationale, takes place in the shadow of old fears and enmities. Bell and Jayne (2004: 251) argue that ['Quarters are] 'the landscape embodiment of the process of ordering or purification – an act of tidying up', and as space is re-ordered in twenty-first century Belfast, the 'tidying up' of jagged edges left by conflict is undertaken with an uneasy awareness of the frequent convergence of spatial and demographic 'purification'.

The geographical organisation of Belfast shapes the political context as well as being shaped by it. As O'Dowd (1993: 56) remarks, any new 'spatial or territorial strategy' in Northern Ireland necessarily effects the 'ethno-sectarian geography which comprises the province as a territorial unit'. This means that the way in which the Belfast landscape is physically constituted and conceptualized is an integral part of the evolving political situation. Neill (1999: 273) highlights one current facet of this process, arguing that 'At the heart of the political peace process in Northern Ireland is the issue of how the identity of the nationalist Catholic population can be given agreed and officially legitimized forms of expression', and that given the profound link between identity and place, this is 'a spatial planning issue'.

In its engagement with a place and a theme that are closely linked to ideas about Irishness and its relationship to the Northern Irish state, the Gaeltacht Quarter is a move away from recent regeneration schemes that ignore the less comfortable ways in which location and identity intersect in Belfast. Yet, inevitably, the projection of a benign Gaelic-tinged multiculturalism in the Gaeltacht Quarter does not neutralise the element of contested boundary-making that goes along with the framing of culture. While such concerns are common to many place-making projects, the existence of so-called 'peace-lines' along some of the Gaeltacht Quarter's borders makes the paradox unusually obvious and uncomfortable. Considering these difficulties, it is little wonder that the majority of the Quarters are so far removed, in their locations and themes, from the events that have shaped Belfast's working-class residential areas over the last forty years, or that the Belfast Visitor and Convention Centre now presents the Quarters as archaic remnants of a pre-Troubles past rather than as responses to post-industrial and

post-conflict problems. In contrast to the 'two halves' to 'seven Quarters' narrative of healing mentioned above, we see the Quarters relocated to an imagined past in which Belfast was one whole. Analysing the Gaeltacht Quarter as an attempt to make a new place for the Falls Road within Belfast gives an important insight into why such evasions may be attractive to planners and place-makers, while demonstrating that the negotiation of uncomfortable historical perspectives cannot be avoided in the application of transnational regeneration trends to post-conflict places.

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