

PLANNING TO LIVE WITH DIFFERENCE



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For the first time in human history, just over half of the earth's people live in cities. While the global is urbanising in this way, the urban is globalising with patterns of migration across the world. Major cities of the world are becoming more diverse. Therefore, the issue of how we live with difference is going to become a major problem of development across the world.

On the island of Ireland, there is a long tradition of having to cope with this challenge. In the case of Northern Ireland, the region has gone through 16 years of a peace 'settlement', following the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, with many people now believing that we are living in a post-conflict society. Of course, in recent times, the people of this island have been reminded that that optimism is somewhat misplaced - the island of Ireland is not yet a post-conflict society. Rather, its people mostly live in a post-violent conflict society. But the conflict itself remains deep and ever present - particularly in Northern Ireland and along the Irish border.

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Introduction

When we talk about peace we talk perhaps about the guns being silenced, but when we talk about a 'just peace' we often find that, for each side in the conflict, this is achieved 'when we get what we want'. There remains a continued conflict in Northern Ireland and the Irish border region over fundamental issues of identity and sovereignty and these reflect themselves very deeply in socio-spatial segregation, particularly in the most deprived places --- in cities like Belfast for example.

Accordingly, with respect to Belfast, it isn't possible to think of planning the city without understanding that difference. Yet for decades, major planning documents, in reference to the City's development, would not openly acknowledge the relevance of the conflict. Indeed, there's been a tradition of the city planners trying to airbrush out the conflict as if it's something beyond their capacity and remit. But planning is about the social ordering of space, and space lies at the heart of these kinds of discord about territory and identity. It could, therefore, be argued that planning is at the heart of these contested issues. Planners and urban policy-makers cannot escape responsibility to address them as central to their mission.

But, in doing so, they face particular paradoxes and dilemmas; for example:

- One attribute of sound development is connectivity, the need to nurture relational networks, and the need to link the physical with the social, cultural, educational, environmental, and so on. In short, good contemporary planning demands multiple forms of connectivity. But when dealing with a place like Belfast, one is confronted by multiple forms of fragmentation. Instead of visioning the City as one unit to be planned coherently, the tendency has been to parcel it up into different territories and deal

separately with each one. So, we zone the city centre, Laganside, the Titanic Quarter, the deprived areas, and so on, without framing these distinctive interventions within an overall strategic approach to the whole city.

A key example of that concerns decisions about what to do with brownfield sites in an industrial city that has a substantial amount of mature and underused or redundant land. Again, sustainable urban development implies that before stretching out into greenfield sites, we ought to optimise brownfield capacity. But in a city like Belfast, much of the brownfield land is in or near Protestant working class areas, and so as the Protestant population of the City is haemorrhaging and retreating, more and more vacancy and void becomes available in brownfield sites in proximity to those Protestant areas.

Yet, the big demand for expansion in the City comes from the Catholic side. So in practice, many Protestant communities believe that if you pursue new housing on brownfield land, which on the surface appears a reasonable and sustainable thing to do, in practice you're actually making incursions into their former territory. For a community that has seen, in its view, a political retreat in many ways, the physical reflection of that retreat is there on their doorstep in those working class communities. Protestant communities, as a result, feel they're losing actual ground with this response to the sensitive demographic shift.

- Another example comes from the move to what is deemed to be a more democratic form of planning with the transfer of planning to local councils. Many people would say that such a shift in function is a good thing. But in a sense, this is a return to the late 1960s/early 1970s and the start of the civil rights movement when politicians did have such planning and housing powers and were seen, in some cases, to abuse them. One of the key paradoxes faced in the coming years is, therefore, can the politicians of today lead Northern Ireland out of this kind of sectarian geography when the politicians

themselves rely on such 'partisan' arithmetic - particularly since most of them belong to parties that are rooted in an electoral base linked to sectarian geographies? The problem to be faced over the coming years - in terms of the political control of planning - is to what extent this power can be de-sectarianised when politics is still dominated by the structures of a largely sectarian power-sharing.

- Another example is the whole issue of community itself. The word 'community' has a warm appealing side that invites one to endorse its solidarities automatically and uncritically, but *community* in a divided city can often be an exclusive rather than inclusive concept. It tends to be about who you keep out as much as who you have in and, therefore, many of the positive virtues of community can be nullified by the way in which community is ghettoised and set in rival relationships. Over the last 30 to 40 years of conflict in particular, many such communities in the poorest parts of Belfast, that have been undergoing the most violent elements of the conflict, have retreated in on themselves and have fortified themselves by guarding against the 'other'.

The key question to be addressed in the short-term is whether local government - in association with other key stakeholders - go forward with forms of community development and local planning in divided cities like Belfast or Derry/Londonderry. The risk that the approach adopted could inadvertently be accentuating community difference and supporting those in the community that want to fortress their community against the intrusion of the alien other must be borne in mind by decision-makers. Care must be given when endorsing that kind of community development in the context of a divided city.

The Social Impacts of Decades of Deep-Rooted Division

In terms of social inclusion and poverty policies, there is much that still needs to be done to redress

the deprivation and educational under-achievement in many parts of a city like Belfast. Yet, alongside the protests around the flag issue, many working class Protestant areas believe that all of these policies towards inclusion have not benefited them, and the cry has often gone up that 'compared to the other side, we're getting nothing'. How one distributes urban resources in regeneration programmes can often promote positive consequence towards inclusion for some, while at the same time they can inadvertently accentuate the problems of cohesion. In trying to resuscitate deprived communities, one can actually accentuate the division between those deprived communities as they argue with each other about who gets more resources. How to deal fairly with the distribution of urban resources based on relative need, while trying sensitively to cope with the challenge of social cohesion between the two communities, is a formidable policy dilemma.

Over the last four decades, inequality has accentuated considerably, reflected in a more socially and spatially polarised society in the

industrial world. The kind of social polarisation that all industrial countries are experiencing is true for both jurisdictions of the island of Ireland also; albeit in the case of Northern Ireland, there is the additional polarisation linked to a contested inter-communal inequality (see Figure 1). This makes viable intervention even more complicated.

In Northern Ireland, the top 20 least deprived wards are overwhelmingly Protestant in the sense of having a majority Protestant population, whereas if you look at the other end of the spectrum, to the most deprived wards, the majority of them are Catholic (see Figure 2).

Major changes have been made over the last 30 years in Northern Ireland in terms of addressing inequality between the two main communities, Catholic and Protestant. And while the gap between them has been narrowed considerably in the labour market and elsewhere, there is still a discernible difference between the two main communities around issues like poverty and deprivation. This

Figure 1: Inequality Gaps

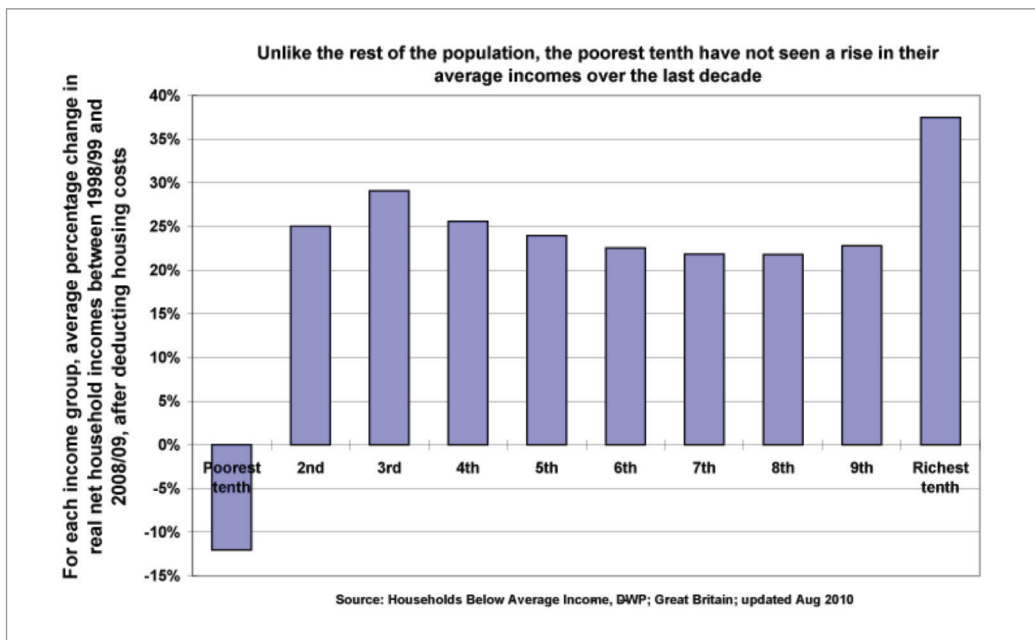


Figure 2: Deprivation across the Wards of Northern Ireland

| LEAST DEPRIVED WARDS | | | | MOST DEPRIVED WARDS | | | |
|----------------------|----------------|---------------|---------------------|---------------------|-------------------|-----------|---------------------|
| Rank | Ward | Town/City | Majority Population | Rank | Ward | Town/City | Majority Population |
| 1 | Wallace Park | Lisburn | P | 1 | Whiterock | Belfast | C |
| 2 | Hillfoot | Castlereagh | P | 2 | Falls | Belfast | C |
| 3 | Cairnshill | Castlereagh | P | 3 | New Lodge | Belfast | C |
| 4 | Knockbracken | Castlereagh | P | 4 | Shankill | Belfast | P |
| 5 | Gilnahirk | Castlereagh | P | 5 | East | Strabane | C |
| 6 | Jordanstown | Newtownabbey | P | 6 | Crumlin | Belfast | P |
| 7 | Stormont | Belfast | P | 7 | Clonard | Belfast | C |
| 8 | Ballymacash | Lisburn | P | 8 | Creggan Central | Derry | C |
| 9 | Bluefield | Carrickfergus | P | 9 | Ardoyne | Belfast | C |
| 10 | Galwally | Castlereagh | P | 10 | Twinbrook | Lisburn | C |
| 11 | Ballyloughlan | Ballymena | P | 11 | Upper Springfield | Belfast | C |
| 12 | Cultra | North Down | P | 12 | The Diamond | Derry | C |
| 13 | Carryduff West | Castlereagh | P | 13 | Colin Glen | Lisburn | C |
| 14 | Ballyholme | North Down | P | 14 | Duncairn | Belfast | P |
| 15 | Strand | Coleraine | P | 15 | Greystone | Limavady | C |
| 16 | Lisbane | Ards | P | 16 | Water works | Belfast | C |
| 17 | Knockagh | Carrickfergus | P | 17 | Creggan South | Derry | C |
| 18 | Crawfordsburn | North Down | P | 18 | Ballymacarrett | Belfast | P |
| 19 | Malone | Belfast | C | 19 | Woodvale | Belfast | P |
| 20 | Stranmillis | Belfast | C | 20 | Brandywell | Derry | C |

(Source: Nolan, 2013:93)

makes it very difficult to intervene, to deal with that difference without accentuating the division between the two communities.

This can be very clearly seen again in the case of Belfast. East Belfast is largely Protestant with a small Catholic area, Short Strand. West Belfast is largely Catholic with Protestant areas within it,

like Shankill and Suffolk. They've roughly the same population yet have a clear difference in terms of life expectancy for male and female; this tends to be better in East Belfast (see Figure 3). In addition, the percentage of children living in poverty in East Belfast is about half the percentage of that in West Belfast. In terms of education level (schooling situation), there is less of a difference. But, in terms

Figure 3: A Statistical Profile of East & West Belfast

| EAST BELFAST & WEST BELFAST STATISTICAL PROFILE | | | |
|---|-----------|--------------|--------------|
| Indicator | Year | East Belfast | West Belfast |
| Population Size | 2010 | 90,402 | 90,758 |
| Life Expectancy (M) | 2008-2010 | 75.5 | 72.5 |
| Life Expectancy (F) | 2008-2010 | 80.3 | 78.4 |
| % of children living in Poverty | 2010 | 21.8 | 42.7 |
| School leavers with 2 A-Levels* | 2010/11 | 52.5 | 48.6 |
| Invest NI Assistance (£ million) | 2011/12 | 13.27 | 4.22 |

(Source: Nolan, 2013: 95)

of major investment from Invest Northern Ireland, East Belfast has benefitted considerably relative to West Belfast.

Yet, as highlighted by the media images from the flag protests, large numbers of young males in the Protestant working class areas of East Belfast perceive their situation to be very different to that. They regard themselves as the victims of an unequal distribution in favour of the 'other community'. And so against what, you might say, is the evidence of the situation, there is a very strong belief among the wider Unionist community that the political tide, and the development investment pattern, has been going against their interests.

The problem of dealing with that kind of division is that there is no prospect for improvement in a region like Northern Ireland that is part of a Europe where there is a drag on future development due to a global economic depression, ongoing fiscal austerity and massive government debt, and related changing policy priorities. Given this difficult economic context, and the related fiscal stringency for a region like Northern Ireland where over two-thirds of its gross domestic product (GDP) is rooted in that public spending, we're facing a very tough prospect.

In looking at the rates of child poverty in the Wards below, it can be seen that some are at over 40%, compared to a UK average of 25% (see Figure 4).

Considering the link between child poverty and educational outcomes, and the fact that education in a knowledge society is pivotal to the prospect of people getting access to reasonable secure, well-paid jobs, the problem facing the region becomes very clear. In terms of educational attainment, there is a close link between poverty, social background, and low achievement, and this pattern is particularly evident in the case of urban Protestant working class males. Their prospect of getting a stable attachment to the labour market is not good.

Figure 4: Different Experiences of Poverty

| Local Authority and wards | Percentage of children in poverty |
|---------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| UK | 25% |
| Belfast | 28% |
| Woodvale | 36% |
| Crumlin (Belfast) | 43% |
| Shankill | 41% |
| New Lodge | 41% |
| Duncairn | 38% |
| Water Works | 39% |
| Ardoyne | 39% |
| Legoniel | 29% |
| Ballysillan | 24% |
| Cliftonville | 33% |

(Source: <http://www.endchildpoverty.org.uk/why-end-child-poverty/poverty-in-your-area>)

Belfast: Spaces of Difference

In dealing with a place like Belfast, there are four main types of space:

- *Ethnic space*, which is where, particularly in the working class areas, over 90% of people living in these areas are of one persuasion or another;
- *Neutral space*, in areas like the city centre and the waterfront, where attempts are made to create secure areas for all communities to shop, work and leisure;
- *Shared space*, places where people from different communities and traditions can come together and be in an engaged relationship across that difference, spaces which are very limited in Belfast; and
- *Cosmopolitan space*, that kind of space given to a more international and multi-cultural

expression that doesn't have a 'reading' in terms of the local conflict, spaces which again are very thinly evident in Belfast.

One of the problems facing Belfast for decades has been the attempt by planners to shape the city along these different kinds of spaces. Belfast's City Council's investment programme for the next period is a brave attempt to allocate very scarce money to good and proper projects. However, whatever the intrinsic merits of those individual projects may be, the overall distributional pattern basically involves sharing out resources across the City, making sure all political sides are happy and equalised. By adopting this 'shared out' approach, it is not therefore able to look strategically at what a 'shared' city needs as a whole. The investment programme is not underpinned by any kind of consensual vision of where the City should go, or able to provide a set of principles or criteria against which good projects can be measured and prioritised.

This approach clearly reflects what has been happening for decades in Northern Ireland. Even worse than that, the response often to situations of immediate intense conflict is to allocate resources to those communities involved, thereby unintentionally appearing to reward bad behaviour.

Where resources and investment are deployed in response to violence, one shouldn't then be surprised that gifting unruly behaviour, as one means of pacifying it, is likely to lead to more of the same. Instead of being able to step back and look at investment allocation in evidence-based terms of where need and opportunity are, policy-makers have tended to repeatedly respond to these kinds of conflictual events - thereby risking accentuation of the conflict.

In the context of 'new planning', sometimes now referred to as spatial planning, there is a prospect of getting away from some of this. Spatial planning is concerned about integrated and inclusive development within a comprehensive strategy. It argues for a more proactive form of planning,

underpinned by the principle that public agencies have the duty to cooperate across departmental boundaries. In the context of a divided society, this duty to collaborate is particularly relevant.

Spatial Planning: Facilitating Living with Difference

Spatial planning is evidence-based. Since it is focused on delivery, it's not just about producing ideas for development. Rather, it's concerned to pin down when these developments are going to happen, what agency is going to deliver them, where the portfolio budget that's going to help fund them comes from, and what the time-scale involved is. In other words, delivery and costing are built in to the process.

It's visionary. That's a very different kind of planning to the physical land-use zoning type of planning that we're all more typically used to, a land-use zoning type of planning that can be used in places like Northern Ireland to divide out the spoils, and to resign to 'the natural grain' of segregation.

To move from this historic shared-out type of approach to a real shared approach, then the potential of spatial planning has to be explored for a more integrated outcome. This is clearly evidenced when you turn to particular places. One very troubled part of Belfast is the north side, an area very much cut off from the main part of the city. It's an interesting area because it shows how a good natural environment, surrounded by hills and Lough, could be potentially integrated with a very difficult built environment (see Figure 5).

Interesting things are happening in North Belfast, possibly pointing the direction of where the City ought to be going. Though small projects in themselves, they are pre-figurative of something more positive. A park in the area, Alexander Park, has a peace wall running through it, which means that only one side of the community can use each divided part of the park. In recent times, with the help of local communities, a gate has been opened in that peace wall. This allows, for most times of the

Figure 5: North Belfast



(Source: map produced by author based on Bing Maps image)

day, people to come through to both sides of the park (see Figure 6).

Another example in North Belfast, on a very difficult interface, is an old factory that has just recently been converted by two housing associations, one

Protestant, one Catholic, into an integrated housing scheme known as the Delaware Project. Tenants from both communities now live right on this peace line. This is a fascinating development when one considers this was once a difficult interface area, requiring constant CCTV cameras to monitor the violence and rioting (see Figure 6).

Figure 6: Alexandra Park & Delaware Project



(Source: Author)



These examples demonstrate the many practical and positive things that are happening. Unfortunately, the problem is that when we then try to roll these out into bigger areas and bigger projects, the political will and capacity to deliver can come unstuck. One of those is in the north side of the City known as Girdwood. Located close to the symbolically important Crumlin Road Prison, and due to the closure of army barracks, this site is now available for comprehensive redevelopment. And what is happening in Girdwood is a typical example of how the major political parties, such as the DUP and Sinn Fein, can get together, work out some kind of deal to share out 'zones of influence', while failing to appreciate the full potential for an innovative and integrative development in the city. Current planning proposals for this sensitive area are failing to envision how quality housing, in a mixed-tenure, mixed-use development, could link this area into the rest of the City, and give strong example of the feasibility of people from diverse religious and political affiliations living together.

If we legitimate this kind of politics, carving up territory for a sectarian share-out, then don't be surprised if we're back here in another 10 years looking at the same problems in a city like Belfast. Yet, in North Belfast, over the next 10 years, there's something like £1 billion of potential investment that is being talked about, with a new university campus, a new major development coming up from the cultural quarter in the city centre, Royal Exchange, and so on.

But at the moment, all of those developments are happening separately, rather than being tied into a coherent strategic plan. They're barely taking consideration of each other and this, again, is another example of where good spatial planning, based on connectivity, integration and a comprehensive approach to development, offers a preferable alternative to optimise synergies and add value.

Conclusion

To get serious about the issues of poverty and segregation in the most deprived parts of the City, policy-makers and planners need an approach that gets beyond small geographies of 'local community'. In urban interventions, government ought to be allocating resources in ways that encourage such ghettoised enclaves to link with wider areas that embrace the cross-class, cross-community potential of assets and networks, and the critical mass that offers a more effective economy of scale and scope.

To move to this more comprehensive integrated approach, and shift away from the practice of doing deals with key interests, will not be easy. For every complex problem, there can be a simple solution but, unfortunately, it's often wrong. In the case of Belfast, the situation is very complicated and layered with all sorts of nuances. And while there is no simple intervention that can be made to overturn a historical pattern of behaviour, it is increasingly clear that unless a set of relatively straightforward simple principles and values are set down under which divided cities are planned and developed, these persistent - and often reinforcing - patterns of socio-spatial partition will persist.

People are not always rational. Instead, they can operate by emotion, by intuition, by different kinds of intelligence and knowledge. We, therefore, must be sensitive to some of the visceral emotions that do underpin conflict. A starting point for Northern Ireland and the border region is the need to get a broad range of stakeholders around the table to achieve the optimum consensus about development in the widest sense - and planning is a perfect portal for this. And where consensus cannot be achieved, attention must be paid to what is sometimes referred to as 'agonism'. This means that you don't go for false conviviality's, for constructive ambiguities. You don't try to split the difference. Rather, one makes a difference by arguing candidly that there are real things that matter to everyone, that there are issues that communities and policy-makers disagree on, and that some of these disagreements are not

going to disappear quickly. Instead, an emphasis is placed on those issues/areas where agreement can be reached - while continuing to disagree over certain things. Agonism, as such, involves building on that acknowledgement of difference bit by bit, mutually respecting the integrity of the other, while trying to 'walk a mile in their shoes'. It subjects each position's argument to robust *inspection*, while inviting each to engage in self-critical *introspection*.

In essence, there must be a move away from narrow communalism. Personally speaking, I've spent decades working with local communities in various forms of development, and believe that, at its best, the solidarities generated can be indicative of productive collectivism and civic well-being. But communalism in a divided society can tend to accentuate difference and separation. Creative means must be found of holding on to the solidarities of communalism while at the same time moving to principles of common citizenship; of finding a way of saying that there are certain basic things around citizenship that everybody, as an individual, is entitled to, and that these are encapsulated in the ideas and values of human rights and reciprocal civic responsibility, and are arbitrated in the ultimate by the rule of law and, if needs be, by the police and judicial system. Instead of thinking that the solution to differences in community is building more and more walls, policy-makers and planners have to begin to think of new ways in which local government and other key stakeholders - such as the police - are brought in to areas of conflict and interface. Much provocative behaviour is committed in the name of community culture. But often, it's not really the genuine community voice that validates

these acts of narrow territorialism. It's other political, or even paramilitary, influence that benefits from continued separatism and antagonism.

The role of government must, therefore, be to operate in the public rather than sectional interest, and to recognise that common well-being has to be nurtured in a pluralist civic culture, but ultimately protected in law. It is their role to pursue civic rather than ethnic values and interests, to refuse to respond to violence by throwing money at it, and to judge all interventions by whether they will tighten or loosen the sectarian discord and social polarity. These are the challenges. They are many and daunting. But unless we are serious about shifting towards this sort of transformative agenda, we could be talking about much the same situation over many decades to come. The process of resolving conflict is very different to that of simply *managing* it.

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