Graphic degeneration/regeneration: the stark contract of graphic forms in Belfast’s interface environments.

Any city, as Lynch suggests, is a ‘construction in space, but one on a vast scale, a thing perceived only in the course of long spans of time’,\(^1\) it ‘bears traces of countless past lives’,\(^2\) evidencing the participation by many actors in the creation of its contemporary form. For the designer as researcher there is an opportunity to ‘read’ the topology of the city, its sites and buildings, signs and other visual constructs, applying interpretations grounded in a knowledge of design practice. Such a reading of the city, in accordance with Lefebvre’s\(^3\) proposal that space is socially produced, should, in Belfast, be representative of the embedded ideologies of people in long-standing communities and still prevalent hegemonic struggles. In this spirit this paper sets out to photograph, observe, analyse, document and record the many manifestations of signage in Belfast’s built environment – a symbolic landscape impregnated with meaning through its many visual representations of culture, history and myth.

The post-conflict, visually neutralised, city centre of Belfast boasts postmodern architecture and a cacophony of global brands, a carefully crafted image of place since the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, a front stage\(^4\) setting considered appropriate for global consumption. (Fig. 1 through 8) As part of the Belfast Urban Area Plan to promote the ‘cultural normality of Belfast’\(^5\) there was a ‘new city centre local plan based almost exclusively on image’\(^6\), with modern shops and businesses ‘marshalled like icons to oppose the array of images painted on the gable walls of housing areas in the city, which portray divisive identity symbols of the past’.\(^7\)

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\(^3\) Lefebvre, H. (1991) *The Production Of Space*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell. Lefebvre explains that ‘(social) space is a (social) product’ and expands on this theory throughout this body of work.
\(^6\) ibid.; 46.
\(^7\) ibid.; 47.
Figure 1 Reimaging Belfast – Castlecourt shopping centre

Figure 2 Typography embedded into pavement suggesting the Spirit Of (new) Belfast
Figure 3 Corn market pedestrian area, with shops, cafes

Figure 4 Finger posts guide tourists, Corn Market central Belfast
Figure 5 Victoria Square Shopping Centre central Belfast

Figure 6 Postmodern architecture and transparency in architecture post-Troubles
Figure 7 Reimaged Belfast attracting global brands, Apple, Victoria Square

Figure 8 House of Fraser Victoria Square
Beyond the confines of the city centre, in the arterial routes, of the city, where town planning has been less in accordance with aesthetic considerations and more in line with security dictates, a less polished city image is evident. While the main arterial routes largely concentrate on an economic agenda, with shops and businesses in continual, if sometimes broken, (Fig. 9 through 13) rows, the defensible urban spaces of social housing estates are rich with visual messages that are largely cultural in origin and nature. On the Antrim Road, Falls Road, Newtownards Road and Ormeau Road, commercial premises on the main commuter route provide an economic front to the communities located to their rear. Commercial signage dominates where traffic passes regularly, with commuters and local shoppers providing continuous activity, attracted by the many businesses, cafes, restaurants and public service facilities offered in these places. Once the main commuter route is departed from commercial signage tapers off – gradually on approach to interface areas, until, at interfaces, commercial activity and with it signage becomes absent, only to be resumed when the interface is departed and a return made towards the main arterial routes, where it resumes.

Figure 9 Sections of shop-fronts with commercial signage on Belfast's Antrim Road

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8 Neill, W.J.V. & Schedler, H. (eds) (2001:113), Urban Planning and Cultural Inclusion. Lessons from Belfast and Berlin. Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave. Neill is one of a number of contemporary voices at the time to describe how ‘the agents of town planning...were not town planners, but security services, vetting all major applications’. 
Figure 10 Section of shop-fronts with commercial signage on Belfast’s Falls Road

Figure 11 Section of shop-fronts with commercial signage on Belfast’s Ormeau Road

Figure 12 Section of shop-fronts with commercial signage on Belfast’s Newtownards Road
Despite efforts to rebrand the city, in interface areas, ‘personal meaning retains the potential to undermine efforts to induce historical amnesia’, 9 murals, graffiti, flags and flagging of related messages reinforce the territorial nature of place.

In observing the vernacular landscape 10 of the city, this paper poses a question as to the impact of interfaces 11 on the city’s signs, which are often disturbed or transformed in nature by the many visible and invisible barriers sectioning off the city into exclusion zones. The level and impact of commercial decline is accentuated where the city has become impermeable due to many commuter routes being cut off from the central business district through the creation of alternative major carriageways and physical barriers which reinforce pre-existing metaphysical or cultural barriers. The city’s still in-situ ‘peace walls’, having grown in number since 1998, slowly, on approach and then suddenly, oust commercial signage, replacing it instead with murals, graffiti and tags, which, through language, lettering, colour palettes and other codes, map out territory.  

(Fig. 14 through 19)

The encoding methods of the more primal signs in interface areas may be easily understood by one with local or societal knowledge, but perhaps not the visitor and in Belfast being able to recognise cultural codes can be a determining factor for personal safety. Daytime conflict tourism may offer tourists an opportunity to photograph murals in interface areas, but night-time incursions into these sites would be ill-advised, perhaps even not possible, should security gates, be closed. Despite the relative peace contemporarily observed, people living in the city’s interface areas still carefully choose ‘safe routes that avoid possible conflict with the “other”’, 12 and despite the fostering of a night-time culture in the city centre, caution is still wise where the two main communities, Nationalist (Catholic) and Protestant (Unionist) butt up against ‘the walls’.

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Figure 13 Mural, corner of Falls Road, Belfast

Figure 14 Mural, Donegall Pass, Ormeau area of Belfast
Figure 15 Paramilitary mural Newtownards Road
Figure 16 Irish flag (Tricolour) beside peace wall interface on Bryson Street, Newtownards Road
Figure 17 Flagging – colours of Union Jack flag, on Newtownards Road
This paper undertakes a photographic audit of signage on and departing from Belfast’s arterial routes to demonstrate how the presence of interfaces impacts on the presentation, situation, patina and character of the city’s signs. Photographs of commercial signage and activity on main arterial routes are compared with images taken in the working-class estates fronted by these routes. The signs carve out a path defined at various points by sometimes economic, but often social, historical, political and cultural underpinnings of place. The photographs evidence how the built environment of Belfast may have been shaped by planners, but has been redrawn from the ground up by the city’s inhabitants. Through qualitative observations of these photographs an image of the city, as ‘a social pattern, a kind of mental layout of the census data’, emerges.


Belfast’s built environment

Belfast, Ireland’s only industrial city, is comprised largely of low-rise red brick buildings constructed during the boom years of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in response to “a significant explosion of both the linen industry and shipbuilding”. 15 Belfast’s population grew from just under 20,000 at the beginning of the nineteenth century to around 350,000 by 1901 mainly due to the inward migration of former agrarian workers to the city, necessitating the building of new homes. These homes were traditionally built from locally produced factory bricks, using the red clay of the Lagan Valley to create the typical orange-red buildings still seen on many of the city’s arterial routes. (Fig. 19) Overcrowded networks of terraced housing became communities, which, ‘despite the often squalid conditions… provided a degree of stability and a sense of community identity for their residents’, 16 this sense of community and belonging still pervades today.

Figure 19 Orange red brick, the traditional style of Victorian Belfast, Antrim Road, North Belfast

16 ibid.; 104.
A 1960’s assessment of housing conditions identified Belfast as being ‘faced with a situation where sixty per cent of its dwellings were built before 1919 (and) a quarter of its houses were in need of development’.

Resulting modernisation programs were brutal, entire streets of terraced houses were destroyed, replaced (if they were replaced) by tower blocks and social housing developments as postwar reconstruction initiatives gave way to land clearance for major roads initiatives and social housing plans aligned with security concerns. Since the outbreak of the ‘Troubles’ in 1969, planning initiatives resulting in physical divisions have had an inbuilt agenda of dealing with socio-political-religious city divisions.

The 1980s, a time when the city-centre was undergoing a ‘renaissance’, offering a ‘neutral, non-sectarian space for those who could afford it’, saw social housing solutions centred on two storey red brick houses ‘served by “shared surface” courts’ with an emphasis on pedestrian movement, “defensible space” and limited vehicle access – further isolating communities in accordance with security concerns, as critics ‘argued that it reinforced sectarian territory and contributed to the polarisation of communities’. (Fig. 20 through 22) Pawley, referring to what he calls the ‘Belfast Effect’ asserts that, in Northern Ireland, ‘since the mid 1970s all major development projects had to be previewed and approved by the British Army’. Additional security sees closed-circuit surveillance cameras throughout the city, and various devices, from small walls, to bollards blocking wider urban pathways and metal fencing continuing from main roads through estates, in various forms and heights, in what may be described, at best, as an ‘uncongenial-sounding urban framework’.

(Fig. 23 through 25)

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18 ibid.; 107.
19 ibid.; 107.
24 ibid.; 152.
Figure 20 Walls, fencing and pillars at courtyard off Newtownards Road, East Belfast

Figure 21 Fencing and brick pillars at courtyard off Mackey Street, North Belfast

Figure 22 Bollards preventing vehicle access to the rear of walled courtyards, Cupar Way, West Belfast
Figure 23 Security Cameras, like these, Donegall Pass, can be seen throughout the city
Figure 24 Security Camera North Queen Street, Belfast
Figure 25 Security Camera Limestone Road, North Belfast
Roads initiatives and impact on arterial routes of the city

There are a number of key arterial routes into the city, the main roads being Antrim (north), Falls (west), Lisburn (south-west), Newtownards (east), and Ormeau (south-east). These arteries connect the city to surrounding towns including Antrim, Lisburn, and Newtownards. Although the core architectural features are, in the main, common across these routes, the economy of each has been directly impacted by roads initiatives, often evidenced in the manner and presentation of signage. The continuum of buildings on these commuter routes is often fractured by motorways (M1, M2, M3) that divide the north, west and east of the city from its centre – with the exception of the Lisburn, Malone, and Ormeau roads to the more affluent south. The motorways, designed to maximise traffic flow in and out of the city, also act as physical barriers (firebreaks) further segregating the city’s communities. A Belfast map reveals that only regions to the south of the city retain direct access to the city centre, uninterrupted by major roads initiatives, a motorway runs parallel to the area but does not at any point divide it from the city centre. (Fig. 26)

Figure 26 Map showing major roads separating arterial routes from city centre

The Lisburn Road, South Belfast, operates a thriving ‘upmarket’ economy surrounded by a mix of students, young professionals and middle class homeowners and retains direct and unbroken access to the city centre. Contrastingly, the ‘working class’ arterial routes of the city, the Antrim, Falls, and Newtownards roads have seen the greatest impact of division through the creation of motorways and major roads separating them from the city centre. The north and west of the city are separated from the centre by the M1 motorway and Westlink and bear some hallmarks of their exclusion.

The Newtownards Road has been significantly affected by the convergence of both the M1 and M2 motorways, a main bypass road to the northern towns of County Down, in addition to bridges over the river Lagan. A side effect (or planned effect) of major roads initiatives has been vast urban exclusion zones in the city, interspaces, spaces of ‘otherness’ undefined, unused and often unusable urban spaces. (Fig. 27 – 29)

Figure 27 Urban wasteland has been created due to roads initiatives, here on the Newtownards Road

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26 Foucault, M. Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias, (1984:4) From: Architecture /Mouvement/ Continuité. http://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/foucault1.pdf. Accessed 27/10/15. These spaces of otherness, in this instance physical spaces on the landscape of the city (although there may of course be an argument that they are ALSO metaphysical spaces) are referred to in some complexity by Foucault as ‘heterotopic spaces’. These Foucault, in what is necessarily a most basic introduction, on which he expands, are ‘different spaces, of these other places... a sort of simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space in which we live’.
Figure 28 Junction of Shore Road and Westlink, North Belfast

Figure 29 The Westlink separates communities in the North of the city
While the Lisburn Road’s buildings and signage are well-maintained this is not the case on other routes, an issue of quality in signage become apparent. Areas on other routes display signage immediately in need of maintenance, constructed in inferior materials to those on the Lisburn road and articulating the language of communities and not that of a middle class indifferent to the still underlying community tensions. Crime rates for the Lisburn Road are low perhaps in part due to its direct connectivity to the city centre it may benefit physically, culturally, and socio-economically – it also has a continuous commercial activity not enjoyed by the other routes. Expanses of urban wasteland, derelict buildings, and high vacancy rates are absent in the Lisburn Road, which is also free from peace walls, murals, graffiti, tags and other visual cultural markers observed in interface areas to the North, East and West of the city. (Fig. 30)

Figure 30 Row of shops Belfast’s middle-class and uninterrupted Lisburn Road
Peace Walls

From 1969 on, ‘the unprecedented violence and the escalation of residential segregation to new heights produced a city more deeply divided than ever before’.

Physical barriers, ‘peace lines’ were inserted into interface areas where Catholic and Protestant neighbourhoods collided. Intended to eliminate localised neighbourhood conflict, the walls were government sanctioned but not anticipated to be long-standing permanent structures, ‘no-one intends to create divided cities as a long-term solution to sectarian violence; such cities emerge from the seeming intractability of the conflicts’.

The British army constructed the first peace wall in September 1969, on Cupar Street, between the catholic Falls and protestant Shankill areas of the city. Originally homemade structures erected by residents, the walls became permanent, replaced by brick, steel, reinforced concrete, or a mixture of materials and often interspersed with road and pedestrian gates operated by the security forces or private groups. They range in length from a few hundred metres to over 5 km (3 miles) and can be up to 7.6 metres (25 ft) in height. In May 2013 the Northern Ireland Executive stated a commitment to remove them by 2023 despite contrary views from residents. A 2011 report commissioned by the Belfast Interface Project and carried out by the Institute for Conflict Research to identify and classify the known security barriers and associated forms of defensive architecture in residential areas of Belfast found that there were 99 different security barriers and forms of defensive architecture in the city. These they have separated into 13 clusters of walls standing in nearby proximity to each other in the communities of the city. (Fig. 31 through 47)

29 http://www.belfastinterfaceproject.org/, Accessed Sept-Oct 2015. Belfast Interface Project is a membership organisation developing creative approaches to the regeneration of Belfast’s interface or ‘peace line’ areas.
30 http://www.belfastinterfaceproject.org/, Accessed Sept-Oct 2015. The research also identified 10 different owners of the various structures. The largest number of barriers (58) are owned by the Department of Justice (who inherited them from the Northern Ireland Office following devolution of policing and justice powers in 2007), 19 are owned by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, 7 appear to be in private ownership, and 3 belong to the Department for Regional Development. To date it has not been possible to identify the owners of 4 of the barriers.
Figure 31 The first peace wall at Cupar Way West Belfast extends for hundreds of feet
Figure 32 Perhaps the most famous peace wall in Belfast is this on Cupar Way, West Belfast

Figure 33 Peace Wall Northumberland Street, West Belfast

Figure 34 Close up section of Northumberland Street Peace Wall, West Belfast
Figure 35 Peace Wall Lepper Street, North Belfast
Figure 36 Peace Wall Beverley Street, West Belfast, at the Shankill (Protestant) end of Northumberland Street, West Belfast

Figure 37 View further on down the Beverley Street Peace Wall

Figure 38 Peace Wall Springfield Road, West Belfast. Some of the walls are huge expansive structures, others, like this one, may be smaller and known largely only to the communities nearby
Figure 39 Mackey Street Peace Wall, North Belfast
Figure 40 Peace Wall Bryson Street, East Belfast

Figure 41 The Peace Wall on Bryson Street extends right along the interface area in East Belfast

Figure 42 A close-up view of the Bryson Street Peace Wall
Figure 43 Peace Wall Syringa Street North Belfast
Figure 44 Peace wall running alongside the Westlink, in the Divis area of Belfast’s inner ring

Figure 45 Peace Wall, Strand Walk, East Belfast

Figure 46 Inside view Strand Walk peaceline
Figure 47 Peace Wall Parkend Street, North Belfast, running behind Alexandra Park
Conflict tourism has become a major attraction for visitors to the city, ‘the Cuper Way peace wall is... one of the city's top attractions, bus and cab tours regularly stop by and encourage tourists to scrawl their own messages on it’. Significantly, at many interfaces, there are large areas of ‘blighted land’, interspaces on the landscape and/or derelict properties, which, together with the interspaces caused by roads, leave large portions of the city unused. Statistics also suggest that barriers have been constructed steadily since 1969, with many built in the 1990s – 12 were constructed prior to the 1994 ceasefires and 14 in the second half of the decade. One third have been built since the ceasefires, a number have been extended and 21 rebuilt since 2000.

In Belfast even a public park is divided, in 2011, a gate at Belfast’s Alexandra Park — Europe's only public park bisected by a wall, which was built in 1994 to stop the open space being used for sectarian clashes — opened for the first time, though only for a few hours a day’. (Fig. 48 through 50) In the same year, (2011) the gate between the Falls and Shankill, situated along the peace wall from Northumberland to Beverly Street, was also opened for a few hours daily. (Fig. 51) Redevelopment at interfaces has seen the building of commercial business parks, themselves defensive, walled and gated structures, separating residential areas. (Fig. 52 through 57) Despite promises to remove the walls by 2023 many living at them fear for their safety should they be removed. ‘If you're pushing a narrative of peace of reconciliation, walls don't fit ...if you're not part of that global conversation, they are an every day part of life.’

32 http://www.belfastinterfaceproject.org/. Accessed Sept-Oct 2015. The report includes a number of examples of blighted land which are immediately adjacent to an interface barrier. The 58 examples include 20 areas where there are 1 or more derelict properties (in some cases there are numerous such properties plus empty plots of land), 32 locations where land remains unused and 6 sites which are currently used as car parks. At best this is a conservative list of unused or underused land in the immediate vicinity of an interface.
33 In this instance, interspaces, unused and unusable 'spaces of otherness', 'heterotopic spaces' are an extension of contested space in association with their close proximities to peace walls, interfaces.
36 A report conducted by the University of Ulster [now Ulster University], Attitudes to Peace Walls, http://www.ark.ac.uk/peacewalls2012/peacewalls2012.pdf, accessed 19/10/15, revealed that 69% of residents living at the walls maintain that the peace walls are still necessary because of the potential for violence. 63% would like to know more about initiatives and discussions on the peace walls. 58% would like to see the peace walls come down now or sometime in the future. 58% were very/fairly worried about the police ability to preserve peace and maintain order if the peace wall was removed 38% can envisage a time in the future when there will be no peace walls.
Figure 48 Pace wall dividing Alexandra Park, North Belfast

Figure 49 The wall runs the entire length of the park

Figure 50 Means of construction varies in Alexandra Park, from wood, to metal, brick and barbed wire
Figure 51 A double set of metal gates separates the Falls and Shankill ends of the Northumberland Street Peace Wall
Figure 52 North City Business Park at Duncairn gardens, North Belfast, reinforces the interface

Figure 53 The business park is located at each side of the road, separating the Loyalist Tigers bay area from the Nationalist New Lodge

Figure 54 a peace all with metal fencing behind the New Lodge side of the North City Business Centre
Figure 55 Business centre located at the corner of Beverley Street an North Howard Link, at the Shankill end of the Northumberland Street Peace Wall, West Belfast

Figure 56 Business centre at North Howard Street, beside the Cupar Way Peace Wall, West Belfast

Figure 57 Security Gates at business premises North Howard Street, West Belfast
Commercial signage and other graphic marks in interface areas

As this paper discusses signage in interface areas of arterial routes of Belfast, the areas of investigation (for the Antrim Road, Falls Road, Newtownards Road and Ormeau Road), were established according to determinations made by the Belfast Interface Project locating peace walls on these routes. Commercial premises and signage on the main routes were photographed, then adjoining roads, communities, peace walls, graffiti, murals and other graphic marks, dereliction, vandalism and blighted land in the interface areas.

The commercial heart of the Lisburn Road is unaffected by peace walls and the quality of signage and limited spectrum of graphic marks reflects this. Commerce and signage on the other routes appeared to be directly affected by the location and number of interfaces present. In each instance commercial signage was largely restricted to main routes, tapering off towards interfaced areas and then disappearing, to be replaced with murals, graffiti, flags, flagging and other visual representation of culture. Commercial signage resumed only on re-approach to the main arterial route.

In comparing the nature of signage and other graphic marks in interface areas it is useful to include here examples of signage from the ‘unaffected’ Lisburn Road. A major arterial route in South Belfast, linking Belfast to Lisburn, this road is an extension of the city’s Golden Mile, the location of much of the city’s night life, bars, coffee shops and restaurants and one of the city’s most exclusive shopping destinations. Sectarian markers often observed on other routes are absent. It is a predominantly middle or upper class area and provides an aspirational address for the city’s most luxurious, lucrative and successful commercial enterprises. There are interfaces that emerge as the road nears to Belfast city centre, in the Village area bordering the Westlink and motorway, but not at the top end of the road, considered the main shopping area.

The Lisburn Road

The Lisburn Road has expensively designed signage using aspirational language, ‘Cambridge’, ‘Labels’ and ‘Synergy’ are not so much denotative of business purposes as connotative of lifestyles, expensive places, goods and states of being and focused at consumers with high disposable income. Lettering used to create signage has had thoughtful design consideration. The small and discrete sign for clothes shop ‘Labels’ uses a bespoke font configuration with lettering at contrasting sizes. A sometimes bright and rich, but often subtle or muted colour palette enhances the perceived sophisticated nature of this place. The Road presents sophisticated retail values to convey a notion of prosperity. The concept of age value, established through weathering or fading is absent, instead are notions of newness and modernity, considered paramount in the creation of road’s image. Signage is made from expensive, modern materials placed on freshly-painted fascias of well-maintained buildings. The narrow depth of the fascia areas is sympathetic to the design of buildings, signs are unobtrusive, emphasizing the empathetic relationship between buildings and signage in the built environment.

(Fig. 58 through 61)

Figure 58 Synergy hair salon, Belfast’s Lisburn Road, with a neutral colour palette and lettering following the line of the building
Figure 59 Paul Stafford, Lisburn Rd South Belfast, with discrete golden lettering on the doorway

Figure 60 Labels, Lisburn Road, exudes minimalist sophistication through its unobtrusive signage
Figure 61 Velvet Boutique, Lisburn Road, with richness exuded through language, bespoke gold lettering, good ground space ratio and regal purple background
The Antrim Road

There are, according to the Belfast Interface project, two main clusters of interfaces pertaining to this research, Cluster 6, Duncairn Gardens and Cluster 7, Limestone Road to Alexandra Park. (Fig. 62 & 63)

Figure 62 Cluster 6 – interfaces Duncairn Gardens

Figure 63 Interfaces, Limestone Road to Alexandra Park


40 http://www.belfastinterfaceproject.org/map/cluster-6-duncairn-gardens

41 http://www.belfastinterfaceproject.org/map/cluster-7-limestone-road-alexandra-park
The Antrim Road, originally Duncairn Street, runs from North Belfast to the town of Antrim, approximately 18 miles from Belfast. The road passes through the New Lodge, a working class Catholic district of the city and was originally farmland, developed in the 19th century by the city’s industrialists. The lower end of the road remains largely Catholic, but as the road moves towards Antrim the population becomes mixed. Departing from the main route to the communities behind, leading down towards the parallel Shore Road, communities become divided at either side of Duncairn Gardens.

On the Antrim Road, language used in signage is familiar and friendly, names, Angela’s, Aldo’s, Hectors, Manny’s, Ramzeys, Curley’s and Barney’s introduce the shops as though they themselves are members of the community. Language indicates that services provided are basic, lack of expendable income reduces the market for selling relaxing experiences or expensive cosmetic treatments. There are no complex connotative codes at work through the language, it is straight-forward, reflecting informal community relations and sometimes humour. Associated images, icons and symbols are often present on signs to reinforce the language. Reference to monarchy is made in Crown Barbers and Regal Furniture. Dates are often displayed as businesses indicate a pride in long-standing community service.

Letterstyles are varied, serif, sans-serif, italic and script, the latter contributing to the overall informal perception of signs on this route. A fairly high incidence of all uppercase lettering is observed. Lettering on Cassidy’s bar references Irish culture, uncial script, images of Gaelic football and dual language. The colour palette of the road is mostly blue, white, red, yellow and black, strong primary colours. Chemists and opticians use gold, cream and brown, bars and barber shops at the lower end of the route use green and gold. A limited range of materials has been used in the creation of signage on the Antrim Road, plastic, wood, vinyl and only occasionally metal lettering. (Fig. 64 through 69)

Signage on this arterial route is generally well maintained, with little indication of fading or disrepair evidenced in observations of the patina. Once departing from the main route commercial signage disappears replaced by murals, graffiti, flags and flagging at interfaces, together with expanses of vacant land and dereliction. (Fig. 70 through 74)
Figure 64 Regal furniture makes references to monarchy, red signage with all uppercase serif lettering

Figure 65 Crown barbers, with iconic barber poles, also uses all uppercase serifs

Figure 66 Aldo’s references the owner’s name in italic serifs supported by all uppercase lettering
Figure 67 Manny's references owners name in uppercase sans-serif plastic signage in blue and yellow

Figure 68, Barney's references owners name in upper and lower case sans-serif, black on yellow/red

Figure 69 Angela's references owners name in italic script, emphasising the informality of language
Figure 70 Mural commemorating the Belfast Blitz of WW II and flagging on kerbstones, at the corner of Edlingham Street, North Belfast.
Figure 71 Mural, graffiti and dereliction, Upper Meadow Street, North Belfast

Figure 72 Graffiti in an alleyway off Duncairn Gardens, North Belfast

Figure 73 Row of derelict houses backing onto peaceline, with graffiti, Mackey Street, North Belfast
Figure 74 Wasteland at interface beside Alexandra Park, North Belfast
The Falls Road

There are, according to the Belfast Interface project, two main clusters of interfaces pertaining to this research, Cluster 2, Upper Springfield Road and Cluster 3, Falls to Shankill. (Fig. 75 & 76)

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42 http://www.belfastinterfaceproject.org/map/cluster-2-upper-springfield-road
43 http://www.belfastinterfaceproject.org/map/cluster-3-falls-shankill?type[]=interface
The Falls Road gets its name from the Irish words ‘Tuath-na-bhfal’ district of the falls or hedges. Exclusively Nationalist, it is the main road through West Belfast and runs from Divis Street in the city centre to Andersonstown. One of the more famous streets in the city, it has become a tourist destination to what were once troubled places. It is separated from the neighbouring and predominantly Loyalist Shankill Road by peace walls. This area has cultural codes aligning it more to the Republic of Ireland than to the United Kingdom, evidenced by the high proportion of Irish language translations on signage.

The language on signage is largely perceived as friendly, there is a familiarity and to many of the names, Kelly’s, O’Hara’s, Michael Flanagan. Colloquialisms and humour are often used in naming signs and the informal nature of language on signage reflects broad overtones of spoken language. Hoops Barber Shop requires some cultural knowledge to realise the connotative association between the name and hoops on the socks of players for Celtic Football Club. There are healing businesses and references to faith and angels evident on signage through language and associated imagery.

This road has a rich colour palette, green, pink, black, grey, white, yellow, purple, blue, gold, red and brown. The barber’s pole on the Hoops Barber Shop replaces the traditional red and white of this iconic image with green and white, referencing local culture. Letterstyles on this route are a mixture of serif and sans-serif. The Red Bar uses Irish Language and uncial lettering, gold on a black background. Cultural references to place are made through the conventions of colour, letterstyle in the case of use of uncials and use of Irish language. There are also references to place made and to the society living in this place, the football club they support and faith. (Fig. 77 through 80)

Materials used are inexpensive, plastic, vinyl and wood and signage is generally well maintained, with little indication of fading or disrepair evidenced in observations of the patina. Once departing from the main route commercial signage disappears replaced by murals, graffiti, flags and flagging at interfaces, together with expanses of vacant land and dereliction. (Fig. 81 through 85)
Figure 77 The Red Devi Bar uses uncial lettering to execute the Irish language.

Figure 78 The Hoops Barber Shop requires cultural knowledge for understanding meaning in the sign.

Figure 79 Michael Flanagan introduces the proprietors name in all uppercase serifs.
Figure 80 Boyles Bar has many codes associating it with Irish culture
Figure 81 Mural, Shankill side of Northumberland Street peace wall, West Belfast
Figure 82 Graffiti on corrugated metal facing Cupar Way peace wall

Figure 83 Derelict bar with graffiti, Cupar Street Lower

Figure 84 Derelict land at Cupar Way peace wall
Figure 85 Flagging on lamp-post off Falls Road, West Belfast
The Newtownards Road

There is, according to the Belfast Interface project, just one cluster of interfaces pertaining to this research, Cluster 12, Short Strand to Inner East, however, within this cluster there are many interfaces, peace walls segregating communities. (Fig. 86)

Figure 86 Interfaces, Short Strand to Inner East Belfast

The Newtownards Road, in East Belfast is the main route between the city and town of Newtownards. Historically this area was a successful industry based area, but since the decline in the shipyards and other traditional industries the area has been in economic decline. The road has the greatest density of murals observed of any of the arterial routes and it is a place that still sees outbreaks of violence due to the segregated nature of its communities. Even on the main route there are many large vacant lots, an added extension of interface areas.

On the Newtownards Road the language on signage is largely factual, informal, sometimes friendly, seldom personal. Where on other routes a butchers might advertise high quality meat here there is a Freshmeat Centre, Pick’n’Pay, a hardware shop, uses the language of working class people in this place to indicate informality and taylor’s unisex hairdressing salon uses a small ‘t’ on the name.

http://www.belfastinterfaceproject.org/map/cluster-12-short-strand-inner-east
Other language used on signage references the Titanic, *The New Titanic Restaurant*. The types of good sold are utilitarian bargain-buy products, which are reflected in signage, through language, letterform, colour and materials with inexpensive materials used and design intervention minimal. There are second hand furniture and ‘junk’ shops, demonstrating the limited economic means of many living in nearby communities. Typography on signage is varied, there is no overarching theme through the letterforms alone, but through the maintenance of signage that theme might be perceived as economically deprived. Letterforms are a mixture of sans-serif, serif, italic and script, faux fonts and ornate display type. A high proportion of lettering is uppercase, more formal than the more conversational style of upper and lower case lettering, in a setting where formality hardly seems appropriate.

The colour palette was, until fairly recently, fairly totemic, red, white and blue, occasionally orange or black, however intervention by Belfast City council has replaced this palette with a more complex range of hues. Replacing vernacular signage with new modern signs, using contemporary fonts, colours and materials, may remove layers of meaning that provides rich information about the true underlying nature of the urban environment – on the Newtownards Road this has often meant removal of the patina of place. Signage (*Fig. 87 through 92*) is constructed of plastic, wood or vinyl and, on this route, but not the others observed, fake shop fronts are common. Fake fronts were designed to disguise the vacant and/or derelic properties on the route, but after remaining in situ for just a couple of years the faded photographs of windows add to the perceived degrading of the built environment they were designed to hide. Like ‘Cardboard Rome’ the fake fronts are a pretence to fool the visitor at a glance, (perhaps if travelling by vehicle through the route) but, despite having images of people sitting in the windows, they are, when examined at close proximity, an obvious ruse.

Once departing from the main route commercial signage disappears replaced by murals, graffiti, flags and flagging at interfaces, together with expanses of vacant land and dereliction – in the case of the Newtownards Road the dereliction and alternative graphic marks can often be seen from the main road. (*Fig. 93 through 98*)

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Figure 87 The Fresh Meat Centre, plain language, all serif capitals and starkly contrasting white on red.

Figure 88 More junk with James Montgomery Flagg's depiction of Uncle Sam in support of all uppercase sans-serif lettering on the left and what appears to be randomly sized bespoke letterforms on the right.

Figure 89 The New Titanic Restaurant, on the left, has abandoned what was a totemic red, white and blue colour palette, replacing it with neutral hues.
Figure 90  The yellow italic uppercase lettering of Jordan's bakery sign on the right, situated beside a 'fake' bicycle shop with a portion of the photograph of the window missing.

Figure 91  Fake record store and book shop.

Figure 92  This fake clothes shop even has an image of a man in the upstairs window.
Figure 93 Contemporary mural by Ballymacarett Arts and Cultural Society, entitled ‘Tomorrow’s Faces’, at the peace wall, Short Strand, East Belfast
Figure 94 Mural at 'Freedom Corner' Newtownards Road

Figure 95 Mural on yard wall of housing estate, as seen from the Newtownards Road

Figure 96 Conflict mural Newtownards Road
Figure 97 Mural commemorating the shipyards and Titanic, Newtownards Road
Figure 98 Wasteland at Newtownards Road
The Ormeau Road

There is, according to the Belfast Interface project, just one cluster of interfaces pertaining to this research, Cluster 13, Ormeau Road and the Markets, with an interface involving a four metre high steel fence above a brick wall at Vernon Street, but impacting on the area as a whole.

Figure 99 Interfaces, Ormeau Road

The Ormeau Road, in South Belfast, was historically known as the New Ballynafeigh Road, built in 1815 for the Marquis of Donegall, who had a residence on the road, in order that he might be able to travel with ease to and from the city centre, it took its current name from Ormeau Park. It is the site of a number of historical Victorian buildings, including the Gasworks, built around 1887, by some of the city’s leading industrialists. The beginning of the route, at Cromac square and location of the Gasworks was traditionally a working-class nationalist area, but the road has become the settling place for many of the city’s migrant communities, to include Polish and Chinese nationals. The ‘Holyland’ area of the road – with street names like Jerusalem Street, Palestine Street, Damascus Street, Cairo Street – is also densely populated by students. The diverse cultural background of residents on the road is reflected in the nature of businesses and presentation of signage.

On the Ormeau Road the language used is factual, friendly, formal and informal. This is a multi-cultural place demonstrated through names on signage, Asia Supermarket, Bangla Bazar, De Cano, and Ruchi. Stranmillis Travel has a Chinese translation on signage indicating the presence of a Chinese community, this is a unique phenomena observed on the routes. Dr Chen’s Natural Chinese Health Clinic is another unusual business type, only it and Helen’s Bakery denote a person, owner in the name. The language of the working class people in traditional communities of this route is present on The Very Thing (OO 8), a furniture shop. Language used is generally transparent, denoting business purpose on signage.

Typography on the Ormeau Road is in a mixture of sans-serif, serif, italic and display styles, rarely is an informal script used but faux fonts may be seen on the Lagan Palace and Original Istanbul signage, providing as much information as possible about the business. Ruchi is the exception to this, with only one word on the signage but colours and symbolism on the sign suggest Indian food is sold. Icons, symbols and imagery are often used to support language and letterform. A wide colour palette is used on this route, not the vibrant colours of the Falls Road, primary palette of the Antrim Road or territorial palette of the Newtownards. Asia Supermarket uses the traditional yellow and red so often observed on Chinese takeaway signage, as does the Together takeaway and the Lagan Palace stays close in hues but trades yellow in the letterform to gold, relating the notion of quality to food sold. The Bangla Bazar uses colours associated with the Bangladesh flag. Colours most commonly observed are black, white, yellow, red, orange, purple and gold and occasionally pink, cream, green, silver, brown and blue. Signage does not generally flag up colours associated with traditionally settled communities in the city, instead reflecting diversity. (Fig. 100 through 105)

Buildings and signage are generally well maintained although some may be in need of maintenance. The most commonly used material was plastic. Once departing from the main route commercial signage disappears replaced by murals, graffiti, flags and flagging at interfaces, together with expanses of vacant land and dereliction. The absence of territorial markers on the main route is more than compensated for by those in the communities away from the route, such as those in and around Donegall Pass and other areas nearing the peace wall at Vernon Street. (Fig. 106 through 110)
Figure 100 Helen’s bakery displays the owners name in uppercase lettering and larger framing capitals

Figure 101 Signage for the Bangla Bazaar flags colours of the Bangladesh flag

Figure 102 Asia Supermarket’s large capital sans-serif letters in colours significant to Chinese culture
Figure 103 Chaotic collection of signage nearing Donegall Pass

Figure 104 The Hard Core Cafe on Donegall Pass requires a fence for safety

Figure 105 Row of shops and signage on Belfast's Ormeau Road
Figure 107 Mural Vernon Street

Figure 108 Graffiti near Vernon Street interface
Figure 109 Wasteland Donegall Pass interface area

Figure 110 Graffiti in interface area of Ormeau Road
Conclusion

Through observations on graphic marks on arterial routes of Belfast, graphic degeneration/regeneration as a result of interfaces, (peace walls constructed to segregate communities) is evident. On each of the routes examined (the Antrim Road, North Belfast, Falls Road, West Belfast, Newtownards Road, East Belfast and Ormeau Road, South East) commercial signage was largely constrained to the main commuter (arterial) routes. In the communities behind these routes, where the two dominant cultural groups (Catholic/Nationalist and Protestant/Unionist) ‘butt up against the walls’ commercial activity and therefore signage was virtually absent on approach to the walls and excluded at the walls – this apart from at business parks, fortified structures reinforcing the walls themselves.

In interface areas the absence of commercial signage gave way to other types of graphic marks, murals, graffiti, flags and flagging of totemic colour palettes representative of community affiliations and culture on either side of the walls. Once the interfaces were departed and a path retraced to the main arterial route or another such main route nearby, commercial signage regenerated and, for the most part, other than on the Newtownards Road, alternate graphic cultural markers degenerated significantly.

The research could be interpreted as a kind of graphic spatial analysis of the city, with photographs clearly demonstrating the role of graphic devices in visually segregating Belfast’s communities. Despite the careful reimaging of the city centre the landscape of the built environment occupied by the city’s communities is still loaded with narratives of memory, heritage and cultural identity expressed through various forms of culturally specific graphic marks. The lack of commerce and signage on blighted spaces as an extension of interfaces adds to a sense of ‘unsafety’ experienced, especially at night in relation to these locations as contested spaces without ‘eyes on the street’, without the presence of people during the day or illumination by commercial signage at night. Once commercial signage regenerates in the built environment, whether by day or night, there is a renewed sense of ‘safety’ and reassurance that commerce is once again something of a priority; people will be present, contested spaces having been departed.

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