Graphic degeneration/regeneration:  
the stark contrast of graphic forms in Belfast’s interface areas
Introduction

- 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’,* it ‘bears traces of countless past lives’,* evidencing the participation by many actors in the creation of its contemporary form.

- The designer as researcher has an opportunity to ‘read’ the topology of the city, its sites, buildings, signs and visual constructs, applying interpretations informed by design practice.

- In accordance with Lefebvre’s* proposal that space is socially produced, this reading should be representative of the embedded ideologies of people in long-standing communities and still prevalent hegemonic struggles.

- This paper documents the many manifestations of signage in the built environment of Belfast’s arterial routes, the Antrim, Falls and Newtownards Roads.

- It examines the impact of interfaces* on signage – on arterial routes they are disturbed or transformed in nature by visible and invisible barriers sectioning off the city into exclusion zones.

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The contemporary urban structure and layout of Belfast – a starfish arrangement of arterial roads connecting the suburbs and beyond to the city centre.*

Level and impact of commercial decline – accentuated where the city has become impermeable due to commuter routes being cut off from the centre by major carriageways.

The Belfast Metropolitan Area Transport Plan (BMAP) proposes to widen these roads further.
Belfast (like Beirut, Jerusalem, Mostar and Nicosia) is a divided city. In Belfast peace walls separate working class Catholic and Protestant areas since ‘The Troubles’ began in 1968.

Their proposed removal in Belfast (optimistically set for completion by 2023), is unlikely as “once in place the barriers separating disputing groups become the mechanisms for sustaining the urban pathology of communities at war with themselves”.*

In spring of 2011 the Belfast Interface Project* commissioned research carried out by the Institute for Conflict Research to identify and classify known security barriers and associated forms of defensive architecture in residential areas of Belfast.

Their interface map and database provide a comprehensive listing of security barriers and defensive use of space throughout the city, organised geographically by cluster. There are 99 different security barriers and forms of defensive architecture in the city.

The ‘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.

* http://www.belfastinterfaceproject.org
Map showing location of clusters of interfaces across the city

- 35 barriers are made of metal fencing
- 23 a mixture of a solid wall with metal fencing above
- 14 a mixture of fences with vegetation acting as a buffer
- 12 are locations where roads are closed to vehicles while allowing pedestrian access
- 8 locations with a wall alone
- 7 locations where roads have gates which are closed occasionally
- 44 barriers are situated in North Belfast
- 30 in West Belfast
- 14 in the Central Area – defined as immediately adjacent to the Westlink and Inner Ring roads
- 10 in East Belfast
- 1 in South Belfast

* http://www.belfastinterfaceproject.org
Blighted land as a result/extension of interfaces

- The report includes examples of blighted land adjacent to an interface barrier.
- 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 as many incidences of what may be called ‘blighted land’ can be observed across the city and numbers of derelict buildings are fluid.*

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**Table: Blighted Land**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Central</th>
<th>East</th>
<th>North</th>
<th>South</th>
<th>West</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Derelict buildings</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unused land</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Car Park</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td>14</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* http://www.belfastinterfaceproject.org
Location of interfaces/commercial activity Antrim Road
Location of interfaces/commercial activity Falls Road

- Commercial activity
- Blighted spaces

Interfaces

Blighted spaces
Location of interfaces/commercial activity

Newtownards Road

Interfaces

Blighted spaces
Belfast City Centre

- Post-conflict, visually neutralised, city centre – postmodern architecture and global brands.

- Carefully crafted image of place since the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 – a front stage* setting considered appropriate for global consumption.

- Belfast Urban Area Plan – promotes the ‘cultural normality of Belfast’* a ‘new city centre local plan based almost exclusively on image’*.

- 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’.*

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* An analogy referencing Goffman’s observations on behaviour, whereby an individual ‘requests his observers to take seriously the impression that is fostered before them’, asking observers to believe that, in this case, the city, ‘actually possesses the attributes it appears to possess’. The regeneration of Belfast’s economy, in a bid to attract tourism and a portion of the global spend, has required a persona that does not hold fast to the true character of the wider city and underlying culture.


* ibid.; 46.

* ibid.; 47.
Belfast City Centre

Castlecourt shopping centre

Corn market pedestrian area, with shops, cafes
Belfast City Centre

Victoria Square Shopping Centre central Belfast

Reimaged Belfast – global brands, Apple, Victoria Square
Belfast’s Built Environment

- Largely low-rise red brick buildings constructed during the boom years of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, embued with sense of community and belonging.

Orange red brick, the traditional style of Victorian Belfast, Antrim Road, North Belfast
Belfast’s Built Environment – architecture

- **1960s modernisation programs** – streets of terraced houses destroyed or replaced.

- Postwar reconstruction initiatives gave way to land clearance for major roads initiatives and social housing plans aligned with security concerns.


- **1980s, city-centre ‘renaissance’, neutral, non-sectarian space, social housing solutions centred on two storey red brick houses ‘served by shared surface courts.**

- Emphasis on pedestrian movement, defensible space and limited vehicle access.

- Further isolation of communities in accordance with security concerns, reinforcing sectarian territory and contributing to polarisation of communities.

- Additional security: closed-circuit surveillance cameras throughout the city, walls, bollards blocking wider urban pathways, metal fencing in various forms and heights.
York Street Belfast – fences
Belfast’s Built Environment – architecture

North Street, Belfast – fences
Belfast’s Built Environment – architecture

Courtyard off Newtownards Road, East Belfast
Belfast’s Built Environment – architecture

Bollards preventing vehicle access, Cupar Way, West Belfast
Belfast’s Built Environment – security cameras

Donegall Pass

Limestone Road

North Queen Street
Belfast’s Built Environment – roads

- Key arterial routes into the city – Antrim (north), Falls (west), Lisburn (south-west), Newtownards (east), and Ormeau (south-east) – connect the city to surrounding towns.

- Core architectural features common across routes – economy of each impacted by roads initiatives.

- Continuum of buildings on commuter routes fractured by motorways (M1, M2, M3) dividing the north, west and east of the city from its centre. (Exception of the Lisburn, Malone, and Ormeau roads to the more affluent south).

- Motorways, designed to maximise traffic flow in and out of the city – act as physical barriers (firebreaks) further segregating the city’s communities.

- Antrim, Falls, and Newtownards roads – the greatest impact of division through the creation of motorways and major roads separating them from the city centre.

- Side effect (or planned effect) of major roads initiatives – vast urban exclusion zones in the city, interspaces, spaces of ‘otherness’, undefined, unused and often unusable urban spaces.
Urban wasteland, (blighted space) has been created due to roads initiatives, Newtownards Road
Belfast’s Built Environment – roads
Belfast’s Built Environment – roads

Urban wasteland Newtownards Road
Belfast’s Built Environment – roads

York Road junction with westlink
Belfast’s Built Environment – peace walls

- From 1969 ‘peace lines’ inserted into interface areas where Catholic and Protestant neighbourhoods collided.

- Intended to eliminate localised neighbourhood conflict walls were government sanctioned but not anticipated to be long-standing permanent structures.

- British army constructed the first peace wall in September 1969, on Cupar Street, between the catholic Falls and protestant Shankill areas of the city.

- Range in length from a few hundred metres to over 5 km (3 miles) and up to 7.6 metres (25 ft) in height.

- A 2011 report commissioned by the Belfast Interface Project found that there were 99 different security barriers and forms of defensive architecture in the city.

- At many interfaces, there are large areas of ‘blighted land’, ‘interspaces’ on the landscape and/or derelict properties, leaving large portions of the city unused.

- Redevelopment at interfaces has seen the building of commercial business parks, themselves defensive, walled and gated structures, separating residential areas.
Belfast’s Built Environment – peace walls

Peace Wall Cupar Way, West Belfast
Belfast’s Built Environment – peace walls

Peace Wall, Northumberland Street, West Belfast
Belfast’s Built Environment – peace walls

Peace Wall, Bryson Street, East Belfast
Belfast’s Built Environment – peace walls

Peace Wall, Alexandra Park, North Belfast
Belfast’s Built Environment – peace walls

Peace Wall, Strand Walk, East Belfast
Belfast’s Built Environment – peace walls

Peace Wall, Divis, Belfast
Belfast’s Built Environment – peace walls

Peace Wall, Syringa Street, North Belfast
Belfast’s Built Environment – peace walls
Belfast’s Built Environment – peace walls

View behind peace wall, Hallidays Road, North Belfast
Belfast’s Built Environment – business parks at peace walls

North Howard Street, West Belfast

North City Business Park, Duncairn gardens, North Belfast

Beverley Street and North Howard Link, West Belfast
Arterial routes

- Arterial routes – town planning less in accordance with aesthetic considerations and more in line with security dictates*.

- Main arterial routes largely concentrate on an economic agenda – shops and businesses in continual, if sometimes broken, rows.

- Defensible urban spaces of social housing estates rich with visual messages that are largely cultural in origin and nature.

- Antrim Road, Falls Road, and Newtownards 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 – commuters and local shoppers provide continuous activity – businesses, cafes, restaurants and public service facilities offered in these places.

- Once commuter route is departed commercial signage tapers off – gradually on approach to interface, until, at interface, commercial activity and with it signage becomes absent, resumed when the interface is departed and a return made towards the main arterial route.

* 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’.
Arterial routes – Lisburn Road

- Affluent South, uninterrupted by roads initiatives, no peace walls, cultural community markers. Continuous commercial activity not enjoyed by the other routes – connectivity to city, walkable.

- No urban wasteland, derelict buildings, and high vacancy rates.


- Lettering used to create signage has had thoughtful design consideration.

- A sometimes bright and rich, but often subtle or muted colour palette enhances the perceived sophisticated nature of place.

- Presents sophisticated retail values to convey a notion of prosperity.

- Signage is made from expensive, modern materials placed on freshly-painted fascias of well-maintained buildings.

- 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.
Arterial routes – Lisburn Road commercial signs

Row of shops Belfast's middle-class and uninterrupted Lisburn Road
Neutral colour palette and lettering sympathetic to building

Stafford: discrete golden lettering on the doorway

Minimalist sophistication through unobtrusive, discreet signage

Arterial routes – Lisburn Road commercial signs
Arterial routes – Lisburn Road commercial signs

Richness exuded through language, bespoke gold lettering, good ground space ratio and regal purple background
Arterial routes – Antrim Road

- 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.

- Language used in signage is familiar and friendly, names, Angela’s, Aldo’s, Hectors, Manny’s, Ramzeys, Curley’s and Barney’s introduce shops as though they are members of the community.

- 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.

- Letterstyles are varied, serif, sans-serif, italic and script, the latter contributing to the overall informal perception of signs on this route. A high incidence of all uppercase lettering is observed.

- 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.

- 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.
Arterial routes – Antrim Road
Arterial routes – Antrim Road commercial signs

Regal furniture makes references to monarchy, red signage with all uppercase sans-serif lettering
Arterial routes – Antrim Road commercial signs

Crown barbers, with iconic barber poles, uses all uppercase serifs
Arterial routes – Antrim Road commercial signs

Aldo’s references the owner’s name in italic serifs supported by all uppercase lettering
Arterial routes – Antrim Road commercial signs

Barney’s references owners name in upper and lower case sans-serif, black on yellow/red
Arterial routes – Antrim Road commercial signs

Manny’s references owners name in uppercase sans-serif plastic signage in blue and yellow
Arterial routes – Antrim Road murals

Mural commemorating the Belfast Blitz of WW II and flagging on kerbstones, at the corner of Edlingham Street, North Belfast.
Arterial routes – Antrim Road murals

Community Mural Newington Avenue, North Belfast
Arterial routes – Antrim Road murals

Dockers Mural, community side of Lepper Street Peace Wall, North Belfast
Arterial routes – Antrim Road graffiti

Mural, graffiti at peace wall, Lepper Street, North Belfast
Arterial routes – Antrim Road flags, flagging

Row of derelict houses backing onto peaceline, with graffiti, beside Mackey Street, North Belfast
Arterial routes – Antrim Road flags, flagging

Flagging on kerbstones, Edlingham Street, North Belfast
Arterial routes – Antrim Road flags, flagging

Flagging, Duncairn Gardens, North Belfast
Arterial routes – Antrim Road derelict land

Wasteland at interface beside Alexandra Park, North Belfast and right, off Duncairn Gardens beside peace wall
Arterial routes – Falls Road

- 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. Separated from the neighbouring and predominantly Loyalist Shankill Road by peace walls.

- Cultural codes align it more to the Republic of Ireland than to the United Kingdom. Irish language translations on signage.

- Language perceived as friendly, familiar; names, Kelly’s, O’Hara’s, Michael Flanagan.

- 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.

- Healing businesses and references to faith and angels through language and associated imagery.

- Rich colour palette, green, pink, black, grey, white, yellow, purple, blue, gold, red and brown.

- Materials used are inexpensive, plastic, vinyl and wood.

- 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.
Arterial routes – Falls Road
Arterial routes – Falls Road commercial signs

Irish Dancing shop Northumberland Street, Falls Road
Arterial routes – Falls Road commercial signs

Michael Flanagan introduces the proprietors name in all uppercase serifs
Arterial routes – Falls Road commercial signs

Red Bar with Irish language and uncials denoting cultural associations
Arterial routes – Falls Road commercial signs

Flower shop with Irish translation and Hoops Barbers with cultural coding through language and green pole
Arterial routes – Falls Road commercial signs

Humour and uncials, Falls Rolls, Falls Road, with Irish translation
Arterial routes – Falls Road commercial signs

Stark contrast of letterforms and colour on signage for Conflict Resolution Services, Falls Road
Arterial routes – Falls Road commercial signs

Updated signage, retention of cultural codes, 2012, left, 2015, right.
Arterial routes – Falls Road murals

Mural Falls Road, West Belfast
Arterial routes – Falls Road murals

Mural, Shankill end of Northumberland Street Peace Wall, Falls Road
Arterial routes – Falls Road murals

Mural Falls Road, West Belfast
Arterial routes – Falls Road posters

Mural, posters, Falls Road, West Belfast
Arterial routes – Falls Road graffiti

Derelict bar with graffiti, Cupar Street Lower
Arterial routes – Falls Road graffiti

Graffiti on corrugated metal facing Cupar Way peace wall
Arterial routes – Falls Road flags, flagging

Flagging on lamp-post off Falls Road

Flagging, memorial gardens, Falls Road
Arterial routes – Falls Road derelict land

Derelict land, beside Cupar Way peace wall, North Howard Street, West Belfast
Arterial routes – Falls Road derelict land

Derelict land, beside Cupar Way peace wall, West Belfast
Arterial routes – Newtownards Road
Arterial routes – Newtownards Road

- Main route between the city and town of Newtownards. Historically a successful industry based area, but since the decline in the shipyards and other traditional industries, in economic decline.

- Greatest density of murals observed of any of the arterial routes, still sees outbreaks of violence due to the segregated nature of communities. Even on the main route there are many large vacant lots, an added extension of interface areas.

- 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.

- Goods sold are utilitarian bargain-buy products, reflected in signage, language, letterform, colour and materials – inexpensive materials and minimal design intervention.

- Letterforms are a mixture of sans-serif, serif, italic and script, faux fonts and ornate display type. A high proportion of lettering is uppercase.

- Colour palette was, until fairly recently, totemic, red, white and blue, occasionally orange or black – intervention by Belfast City council has replaced this palette with a more complex range of hues.

- Plastic, wood or vinyl. Intervention included ‘fake’ shop fronts.
Arterial routes – Newtownards Road commercial signs

The Fresh Meat Centre, plain language, all serif capitals/small capitals and starkly contrasting white on red
Arterial routes – Newtownards Road commercial signs

James Montgomery Flagg’s Uncle Sam in support of all uppercase sans-serif lettering/randomly sized letterforms on the right
Arterial routes – Newtownards Road commercial signs

Fake record store and book shop, Newtownards Road
Arterial routes – Newtownards Road commercial signs

Fake fruit and veg shop, Newtownards Road
Arterial routes – Newtownards Road fake shop vs real shop

Fake shop Newtownards Road, East Belfast

Real shop, Springfield Road, West Belfast
Arterial routes – Newtownards Road murals

Mural by Ballymacarett Arts and Cultural Society, entitled ‘Tomorrow’s Faces’, at the peace wall, Short Strand, East Belfast
Arterial routes – Newtownards Road murals

Mural on yard wall of housing estate seen from main road
Arterial routes – Newtownards Road murals

Black and white paramilitary mural with bold sans-serif lettering
Arterial routes – Newtownards Road murals

Mural 'freedom corner' Newtownards Road
Arterial routes – Newtownards Road murals

Murals commemorating the shipyard and Titanic

Paramilitary mural, with backletter and uncials
Arterial routes – Newtownards Road murals

Mural Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) Newtownards Road
Arterial routes – Newtownards Road murals

Titanic mural, 2012, left, 2015, right, demonstrates, through observations of the patina, the affects of weather on plastic
Arterial routes – Newtownards Road flags, flagging
Arterial routes – Newtownards Road derelict land
Arterial routes – Newtownards Road derelict land

Blighted land beside murals, Newtownards Road, East Belfast
Conclusions

- Through observations on graphic marks on arterial routes of Belfast, graphic degeneration/regeneration as a result of interfaces, is evident.

- On each of the routes examined (the Antrim Road, North Belfast, Falls Road, West Belfast, Newtownards Road, East Belfast) commercial signage was largely constrained to the main route.

- 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.
Conclusions – Antrim Road/spatial analysis map
Conclusions – Falls Road/spatial analysis map
Conclusions – Newtownards Road/spatial analysis map
Final thoughts

- The research could be interpreted as a kind of graphic spatial analysis of the city, photographs clearly demonstrate 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 these locations.

- Interface areas are contested spaces without ‘eyes on the street’, without the presence of people during the day or illumination by commercial signage at night.

- The role of commercial signage becomes evident as multi-faceted – the affects of absence of commercial signage as it gives way to other graphic, cultural markers in interface areas.

- 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.