

A Space for Art in Post-agreement Environments: The Case of Belfast

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Abstract:

The boundary between the built environment and social reality in post-agreement environments is difficult to distinguish. In Belfast, Northern Ireland, now over two decades since the Good Friday Agreement, the legacy of the Troubles remains. Over time these environments transform, changing what is inscribed and erased, created and contested; public art is often an element of these spaces and can become a dominant fixture in a city's visual landscape. Such spaces are where different social groups become visible to each other, publicly proclaiming their identities, communicating and interacting. Public spaces become mirrored representations of the society in which they exist. In this, public art and space play an essential role in the symbolic perpetuation or challenging of cultures of violence. By exploring Belfast, this article examines the relationship between public space and art and how it can help further our understanding of post-agreement environments.

Keywords: Public space, public art, Northern Ireland, Belfast, post-agreement.

Introduction

The relationship between public art, space, and post-agreement environments is complex. Public art is often an element of these environments and can become a dominant fixture in a city's visual space. Public art can take many forms, such as murals or monuments or it may take no form at all, such as intervention or performance and involves individuals and communities creating art in response to a place (Moran 2010, 5).

Two teachings may serve as a starting point for exploring the debate surrounding the relationship between public art, space and post-agreement areas. First, Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory emphasizes physiological, survival needs or basic human needs before self-actualization and self-transcendence (Koltko-Rivera 2006, 303). Following this model, cultural aspirations can only be achieved after the fulfilment of physiological and security needs along with the need for belonging, love, and self-esteem (Salzburg Global Seminar 2014, 11). Cultural endeavours such as, art, are likely to be viewed as luxuries that must be forfeited until other basic needs like food, security and shelter have been obtained (Cohen 2005, 69).

Second, Theodor Adorno maintains “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” (1981, 34). This assertion appears to distil the modern dilemma of the burden of living in a world that is the legacy to regimes of violence so extreme, yet so directly associated with modernity, that these legacies overpower the human capacity to describe or understand, much less accept and move on (Stern 2014, 258). In this, after periods of suffering that generate experiences that are “beyond the limit, human expression and artistic endeavour fall short. Representation is a mirage. To pretend that culture can redeem its own failure is an absurdity. To consider art possible is to fall into a consoling but barbaric illusion” (Stern 2014, 258); to create art about suffering demeans that suffering (Salzburg Global Seminar 2014, 11).

Though these notions have merit, they arguably fail to recognize the potential significance of art in post-agreement environments. Even in situations where basic human needs have not been met, art has thrived (Salzburg Global Seminar 2014, 11-12). In some instances, art may have the capacity to express what is limited by the constraints of formal language (Milton 2014, 2). People that have survived the trauma of conflict can use art to express and give shape to their suffering and experiences that are too horrific for words. In the aftermath of violent conflict, rational deliberation may not be enough to rebuild broken societies. In the aftermath of civil war, the transformation of aggression into empathy and the desire for revenge into the desire for rebuilding relationships is an evolutionary and emotion-based process. It is not a process of purposeful rationality (Cohen 2005, 69).

Likewise, the general fields of psychology and neurobiology contribute to the knowledge of the connections between art and the inner self. Art provides the opportunity for individuals or groups to consider, participate, reflect, think and respond. Art promotes the notion of “feeling thinking” and dignifies human experience by providing a platform for voices to be heard; this triggers the recognition of personal humanity and in turn, the consideration of the collective humanity. In this, the aesthetic experience allows individuals and groups to confront the rational self, emotions, intuitions and physical perceptions (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2017, 6). Even Adorno later acknowledged, “perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream; hence it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems” (Adorno 2007, 362). It can be argued that to not create art after suffering would be to allow barbarity to remain unchallenged. As such, it is essential to recognize the role that art can have in making complicated pasts understandable, even if only partially (Milton 2014, 2). Art can also help communities critique the past and the present, the government and themselves; they offer a way to express, collaborate and remember (Carey Jr. and Little 2010, 6) and can help communities begin to rebuild selves and society (O’Rawe and Phelan 2016, 2). However, it is essential that artistic endeavours adhere to a moral obligation of critique to ensure such mediums do not fuel conflict or violence (Salzburg Global Seminar 2014, 12).

Defining Public Art and Space

As the field of public art grows and the range of creative expressions in the public sphere increases, creating a clear set of parameters for what constitutes public art becomes more difficult (Becker 2004, 5). Public art may be thought of as mediums of art that are located outside traditional art spaces like galleries or museums. However, implicit to this definition is the notion that the mainstream contemporary art practice excludes public art, or at the very least positions public art as secondary to art situated inside conventional art spaces (Shaffrey 2010, 9).

One problem in defining public art is that it includes many different forms and practices, such as political activism, socially-engaged practices, permanent or temporary art, and community-based projects. Because public art encompasses so many forms and practices, it can be argued that public art cannot be classified and that “public art is just art” (Shaffrey 2010, 9). The second problem in defining public art is determining what constitutes public and private spaces. Public art is commonly associated with outside spaces. However, art can be located outside in private spaces, such as private housing estates or shopping malls or inside public places, such as publicly funded hospitals, libraries, galleries or museums (Moran 2010, 4-7). Public space is also often defined through the classification of state or private ownership. This perspective is not sustainable because in some cases public bodies provide private spaces like social housing and in other cases, private owners can provide public places like shopping malls. Public and private spaces cannot be interpreted as black-and-white dichotomies. Instead, the boundaries between these spaces are often blurred and exist in a gray area. Because these boundaries are blurred, it is necessary to create a flexible definition (Henry, Lloyd and Ritchie 2015, 112-113). Public space should be considered a cluster concept whereby it can have many different and occasionally contradictory definitions (Kohn 2004, 9). In this, what constitutes public space and art is often unclear and shared definitions elusive (Shaffrey 2010, 9).

Three parameters may help clarify what public art is. First, public art is often commissioned and can require long-term planning, consultation, and approval, however, public art is gradually becoming more artist-led. Second, an emphasis is placed on the audience and the relationship the art will have with those for which it is created. Third, the environment in which the art will be installed must be considered. Context is an essential element in the way art is created, conceived, located and understood. The triangulation of the relationship between the artist, the situation and the public, defines how public art is produced, diluted, negotiated, and received (Shaffrey 2010, 12-14).

Public art is often commissioned and used to promote the “usefulness of art.” Art may be used to “fill the ‘social bond,’ create visual coherence of a city or transform the image of a public body” (Shaffrey 2010, 14). There is debate around how successful commissioned public art is at serving these functions. The promotion of non-controversial commissioned art that aims to create a coherency across public spaces can lead to many plain or bland pieces of art like those found along motorways or outside corporate buildings (Shaffrey 2010, 14). Here, it is also important to look at the idea of creating coherency across public spaces. This concept assumes a homogenous society and a singular public: however, public space serves different functions at different times for diverse sets

of individuals or groups. In Belfast, government policies to create coherency across public space has led to a dualistic landscape and further division (Henry, Lloyd and Ritchie 2015, 110-111); this is discussed later in the article.

The reception of public art can also prove problematic and may be unpredictable; this becomes complicated if the public believes that art has been imposed on them (Shaffrey 2010, 14). The values of public art are often thought to be independent of the difficulties of city life. A portion of public art fails to create a public, a phenomenon related to the differing interests of the artist and the public (Miles 1997, 12-13). This issue is illustrated in a program implemented by the Belfast City Council Community Service Department between 1977 and 1981. This initiative aimed to create more welcoming and inclusive environments in Northern Ireland. Many of the murals created under the scheme had public acceptability and were considered badges of local pride and identity. However, other murals were rejected by the communities for which they were intended. Local communities were often sceptical of the appropriateness or benefit of the repetitive depictions of the animal and jungle scenes, circuses and fairy tales often found in the public art (Crowley 2011, 27).

A mural that was painted on a sixty-yard-long wall in Springhill, Belfast demonstrates this point. Des Wilson, the West Belfast community priest at the time commented that the mural was painted with “brilliant flair and astounding absence of sensitivity” on the part of the artist. After the mural was painted the local population was left to contemplate the image and question if the wild animals in the jungle represented the artists’ perception of them. Local children altered the image through a series of additions and deletions. Wilson noted, “the mural may have been an outsider’s comment on the district; the emendations were the children’s comment on the artist” (Wilson 1983, 19). This image illustrates the disconnect between the government, artists’ intentions and the public. The local population did not identify with the mural and was unsure about its content. Conversely, the mural represented the official government stamp, promoted the caring side of the government and legitimized the Community Service Department of Belfast City Council (Wilson 1983, 19).

Public art like the Springhill mural can develop into conflicts over art and culture or words and images. The shared social position of offense develops when there is public disagreement over words and images (Tepper 2011, 2). In conflicts over art and culture, there is a “social construction of acceptability” of what is and what is not considered acceptable art in a specific space. The offense to the art is a construction of “social life and collective definitions;” the shared property of a collective community. How a public receives public art is determined by the demographics and the political and institutional structures of a place (Tepper 2011, 2). In this, public artworks

...often serve as lightning rods, bringing forward and giving voice to underlying tension caused by social change. When communities experience an influx of new populations, new institutions, new types of families, new patterns of leisure, and new technologies, community members fight over symbols such as art and culture as a way to assert themselves. When everything feels “up for grabs,” people grab onto

symbols as a way to make sense of change and affirm their identity and place in the world (Tepper 2011, 3).

Controversies over public art are not merely the result of varying personalities or values but are characterized by the democratic outcome of a population grappling with the consequences of social change and are representative of more profound societal struggles (Tepper 2011, 3).

The construction of public space and the creation of public art can be considered a social relational process; “public art intrinsically inhabits a socio-spatial reality beyond its reified dimension, this is a material reality” (Zabracki 2014, paragraph 13). The art is not just a physical reality, but it becomes part of the social reality of the space in which it exists. Though artists, collaborators and commissioning bodies, like the Community Service Department of Belfast City Council, may try to create art that is acceptable for specific spaces, this endeavour may not always prove successful. Instead, art may reflect personal or institutional perspectives of economic, political, social, physical aesthetic or cultural symbolic roles of public art (Zabracki 2014, paragraph 13). If public art like the Springhill mural is created for their audiences, the public, they should ideally have been involved in deciding what art was appropriate for a given space. Though this may be the case, there is tension between the “ideal discourse and the everyday experiences of social inclusionary, or exclusionary, practices of public art (Zabracki 2014, paragraph 10). Some governments even have initiatives that try to deal with issues of inclusion and exclusion in public space through socially-engaged or participatory processes. Public art that uses socially-engaged or participatory processes is regularly encouraged to increase access to the arts through social inclusion. However, governments commonly try to make up for social exclusion by implementing socially inclusive policies, while simultaneously the structural inequalities remain unquestioned (Shaffrey 2010, 14).

The Construction of Public Space and Art in Belfast

Post-agreement environments are spaces of continual transformation (O’Rawe and Phelan 2016, 2) where public space becomes an avenue for different social groups to assert positions and beliefs, interact, communicate and demand legitimacy. As such, public space becomes a place of both inclusion and exclusion, of visibility and invisibility (Poposki and Todorova 2016, 98). The constructed environment of public spaces like street patterns, buildings or territorial markings can have an intentional or unintentional influence on a population’s behaviour and perceptions and can shape or mirror social reality. The population shapes the built environment, and afterward, the population is shaped by the environment (Brand 2009, 37-38).

Difference is seemingly an inherent characteristic of all spatial relations, but it mainly manifests itself in urban spaces, like Belfast, where differences are founded in population density and lived spaces, the juxtaposition of activities and land management and the high level of interaction and interconnections. Urban spaces constitute intersecting publics and public spaces, with the population engaging in fragmented systems of activity and connections (Henry, Lloyd and Ritchie

2015, 110). In these urban environments, particularly in contested cities, the relationship between the built space and social reality becomes difficult to distinguish between (Brand 2009, 38). Much of the public art in Belfast is a visual manifestation of the political situation from which it was created. The content of the public art has shifted from representations of the resolve of war no matter the cost to representations of the human price of the conflict, culture and local community pride (Brand 2009, 47). These spaces are mirrored representations of society and have come to reflect not only the political climate but structures of perceived ownership and usage; these claims of ownership over space question its supposed publicness. Belfast and other urban spaces across Northern Ireland remain segregated and polarized and have the potential to become contested (Henry, Lloyd and Ritchie 2015, 126).

Though public space has the option of co-consumption by multiple users, equitable consumption is not guaranteed. The inequitable use of public space can potentially lead to competition or conflict over the limited resource of space; this can become more problematic in areas that constitute polarized, heterogeneous societies. Public places are spatially constructed, accounting for social and economic factors which can result in zones that are by one group perceived as inclusionary, and by another as exclusionary or places of division and inequality. Individuals and groups can create public spaces that are polarized, inequitable and sites of resistance, power, and identity. These symbolic landscapes are areas of exclusion and inclusion and refusal and entitlement. This dynamic creates a symbolic landscape that decides who will be seen, who should not be seen and who obtains the rights to public space, which is determined by a more extensive social struggle (Henry, Lloyd and Ritchie 2015, 110-113).

Public space and art play a crucial role in the symbolic persistence or defiance of a culture of violence, especially in post-agreement societies. Symbolic representation in urban spaces is as much about communicating to 'the other' as it is about speaking to the converted. The significance of symbolic representation is not only about the message being sent to 'the other' but also the message being communicated to its supporters (Jargon 2007, 97).

Since the ceasefires and formal peace agreements in Northern Ireland, attempts have been made to create shared space by removing sectarian murals and depoliticizing these spaces. These actions can be understood as the unequal distribution of the restriction on the expression of cultural identity and have generated resentment between communities; the "dislike of 'outsiders' with different identities moving into 'their communities'" (Haydon, McAlister and Scraton 2013, 9-10). In the context of young people, this has caused racist acts that can be seen as an "extension of sectarianism – the expectation that defense of one's own identity and place necessitated rejection and exclusion of 'others'" (Haydon, McAlister and Scraton 2013, 10).

Public spaces are socially and culturally constructed embodying the actions and statements carried out within them (Paeslack 2016, 38). The processes that individuals and communities use to create landscapes are never predetermined. Though the perceptions of and reactions to a landscape are contextually spatial and historical, the creation of landscapes is not predefined because those

perceptions and reactions are unpredictable. In this, communities create time and place just as they are shaped by them (Bender 2001, 4).

In these landscapes, there are systems of signs and symbols that can be interpreted. These systems become a part of the formation of the post-agreement city and those that live within that city, shaping “time, space and memory” (Paeslack 2016, 38). In Belfast, these systems and signs are present in the public representation of community separation. The public symbolic representations come in many forms like murals, banners, and flags. Public displays like these can be considered offensive, oppressive and antagonistic (Northern Ireland Foundation n.d.). The problem in Northern Ireland is not that the symbols are not understood but that two communities understand them in two distinct ways. Embedded between two communities is distrust, fear, and sectarianism (Henry, Lloyd and Ritchie 2015, 20). This phenomenon has developed over years of opposition and distorts the understanding of the expressive activities of ‘the other.’ The control over space infers power, and this can be interpreted as either oppressive or positive expression, depending on an individual’s or group’s position in Belfast (Henry, Lloyd and Ritchie 2015, 120).

Psychological and physical borders or boundaries serve as mental maps of variation and belonging. As such, these borders or boundaries cannot be understood as a “spatial fact with sociological consequences, but a sociological fact which shapes place.” Deep-rooted memories, identities, and perceptions of ‘the other’ have generated predisposed notions of ‘the other’ and intensified the mental maps of places of accessibility and places of denial. Though post-agreement environments are continually shaped and re-shaped, it is not possible to erase conflicts over identity and space. In this, the lived experiences of those in Belfast have become socially embedded, and the landscape embodies the population’s experiences and beliefs (Henry, Lloyd and Ritchie 2015, 116).

Urban spaces often experience attempts to efface the memory and history of recent conflicts. These tendencies frequently originate from motivations to eliminate the memory of the “vanquished other,” yet at the same time they may also tangibly reproduce psychological trauma because following violence there can be a collective ambition to forget; “to chase a mirage of closure” (O’Rawe and Phelan 2016, 2). In other cases, conflict transformation in the form of urban regeneration is part of broader narratives like nation building, established on “mythologised pasts” that silence the memories of marginalized groups. The desired necessity to erase history as part of urban regeneration can operate as a “politically expedient form of amnesia” (O’Rawe and Phelan 2016, 2).

Public spaces of memory are constructed by individuals or groups to help give meaning to, and shape lived experiences of absences, fears, and desires that plague modern society. Conventionally national spaces of memory were formed and understood as revering the pasts of a population. However, in the contemporary context, these spaces include troubling absences and broken accounts of violence. Landscapes and practices dedicated to the commemoration and memorialization of the past are inherently guided by criteria of inclusion and exclusion within the social fabric that is part of the broader expression of recognition that disposes claims of egalitarian

redistribution and fosters prejudice and chauvinism, separatism, authoritarianism, and patriarchalism (Graham and Whelan 2007, 479).

Marginalized or excluded groups may also find themselves erased from, and invisible in the landscape. Visibility in public space is one way for excluded groups to affirm history and physically establish their right to exist in the landscape; exclusion is partly the experience of a diminished or absent sense of identity. An essential part in the reintegration process of excluded populations is helping them regain their voice and express their experiences, confirm their traditions and histories, create a collective identity and assist them in developing self-confidence (Paddison, Pollock and Sharp 2005, 1007). Public places of memory seek to remember the past and recognize absences that may be framed as “modernity’s ghosts of a nation.” Historic sites are often considered “eyewitnesses to the past.” For some individuals visiting these sites can be cathartic and a way to work through haunting emotions of the past like guilt, anger, fear, shame, longing, unease or sadness. Through this kind of representation, space is marked by shared needs, desires and notions of the future through the past (Till 2005, 9).

From this perspective, urban spaces serve as both physical and metaphysical metaphors for post-agreement states. These sites become archives of memory, and difficult histories (O’Rawe and Phelan 2016, 2); no conflict can exist without at least two competing histories (Tidwell 2001, 123). Northern Ireland is considered a place that “simmered unhealthily in its mythological juices” or national and sectarian mythologies that arguably, at least to some extent, still exist (Janousova 2002, 162-163).

Urban spaces are socially and culturally constructed, mirroring the complexities of public space (Paeslack 2016, 38). Public spaces representing the greater society, provide many functions for different individuals or groups at various times and with different agendas. In this, the concept of a singular public becomes questionable. There is a purposeful construction of public spaces to try and minimize encounters with others that are perceived to be a threat to accepted narratives of a given space, giving rise to the contradictory state of public spaces where they are both inclusive and exclusive and more accessible but more closed off to different groups (Henry, Lloyd and Ritchie 2015, 110).

In Belfast, this has created public territories reflecting different claims of identity, which is the spatial outcome of national identity and ownership that result from societal divisions (Henry, Lloyd and Ritchie 2015, 110). Public policy that has tried to introduce a sense of order into the socially unsettled landscape of Belfast has to some degree further emphasized fragmentation and parcelled the public spaces of the city. These spaces can be understood as cosmopolitan, shared, neutral or ethnic. Cosmopolitan spaces constitute areas like the Titanic and the Cathedral Quarters, entities like integrated schools represent shared spaces, city centres are examples of neutral spaces, and ethnic spaces can be seen in segregated residential areas. The cosmopolitan areas of Belfast are generally located near the city centre with the docklands of the Titanic Quarter as the obvious exception. These zones are removed from the city’s perceivably Troubles areas and try to avoid reference to

features of Belfast that are associated with divisive ethnonational symbolic markers (Henry, Lloyd and Ritchie 2015, 111). Aspects of cities are not developed with the simple intent to make them beautiful. Instead, the development of beautiful cities is done to obscure the incompatibility of a city's development with a free society (Paddison, Pollock and Sharp 2005, 1014). In the context of Belfast, it can be argued, "There is something almost schizophrenic about a city that wipes virtually all evidence of the Troubles from its newly polished centre, even as it finds that tours of the murals, monuments and painted kerbstones of some of its residential suburbs are among its most popular and distinctive tourist attractions" (Rolston 2010, 304).

After the 1998 peace accord, Northern Ireland became a state of fluctuation and change, with the implementation of many schemes aimed at redevelopment and regeneration. Many of these projects have concentrated on urban areas like Belfast (Komarova 2008). These regeneration projects often promote division; this is demonstrated by nine-four percent of social housing in Belfast being segregated (McClements 2018) and the imposed dualistic nature of Belfast within the normalized city centre, sanitized from the conflict and away from the Troubles areas (Henry, Lloyd and Ritchie 2015, 111). Rooted in a history of division, the segregation of Northern Ireland is both facilitated and made visible by social, cultural and physical barriers like housing estates, flags, murals and architecture (Abraham and Selim 2016, 205). Though the peace process has made progress, symbols and signs of sectarian division and remnants of the conflict can still be seen throughout the city's landscape and can be interpreted as "physical scars on the landscape" (Brand 2009, 36-37).

Consequently, Belfast has become a city of dualism. On the one hand, there is the "Consumerist Belfast" which includes the retail areas of the city centre and the redeveloped Titanic Quarter. On the other hand, there are the segregated working-class communities which represent the "Troubles Belfast" (Henry, Lloyd and Ritchie 2015, 111). In 1989 the Belfast Urban Area Plan sought to make the city centre a symbol of normality; the corporate logos of newly constructed developments and retailers came to symbolize a normal Northern Ireland. The developments and retailers were touted as icons to contest the multiple images painted throughout the city's landscape which represent contentious symbols of the past (Hocking 2015, 69). The urban planning initiatives in Belfast can be used to understand the existing power structures (Brand 2009, 38), rendering the city centre a neutral space for individuals and communities that can afford it; this is maintained in the post-agreement era (Hocking 2015, 69). In this, much of the population has not experienced the benefits of a "Troubles-free city" (Bielenberg 2018).

The continuation of the ethno-sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland shows that, even in the era of globalization, the homogenization of culture and increased consumerism, the connections between ethno-sectarian separation and fear are significant factors in understanding the logic of the violence and cultural polarization enacted in these landscapes. In this, the capability of localized, nationalist and anti-pluralist policies to maintain the perpetuation of residential segregation through particularistic frameworks of the notion of truth and the recreation of history remains a regular feature of such environments (Shirlow 2003, 76). With this, public space in Belfast cannot be

understood as a “singular space within a homogeneous society” (Henry, Lloyd and Ritchie 2015, 113). Instead, it must be interpreted as “exasperating existing socio-spatial polarisation; a virtual Petri dish so as to observe and investigate the cacophony of conflicts that are played out upon the urban canvas in an attempt to attain the control and capture of the value of a given public place” (Henry, Lloyd and Ritchie 2015, 113). However, the government in Northern Ireland has continued to sanitize public spaces (Henry, Lloyd and Ritchie 2015, 113-114).

Physical and mental divisions in Northern Ireland can also be seen in the potent symbol of the peace walls that separate communities and towns. One of the most well-known peace and most substantial walls, the Cupar Way wall, divides the Loyalist Shankill area from the Catholic Falls Road. It was initially constructed as a short-term measure (Bielenberg 2018) in 1969 (BBC News 2009) and is almost twice the height of the Berlin Wall (Bielenberg 2018). There are more peace walls in post-agreement Northern Ireland than before the 1998 formal peace agreements. These walls are in areas that experience the most social deprivation and have been deeply affected by the Troubles. Seventy percent of Trouble-related killings happened within 500 yards of peace walls. The peace walls of post-agreement Northern Ireland can be considered less about security and more as ways to demarcate territory and protect identities (Bielenberg 2018).

In Northern Ireland legislation alone cannot create an inclusive environment. Sectarianism, from a cultural perspective, is a matter of attitudes that are encoded and facilitated through the indoctrination of the younger generations to understand the world through an ‘us versus them’ or ‘the other’ perspective (Janousova 2002, 167-168). Mentalities or claims of identity can be observed in localized public spaces across Northern Ireland and often manifest in the form of commemorative or memorial sites to the people who have died because of the conflict. Following the 1998 peace accords, existing commemorative and memorial sites have been maintained, and new ones constructed. These sites can be understood as enduring expressions of contested identity. The dead are being used to legitimize and perpetuate the political debate in Northern Ireland around sectarianism and ethnonationalism. In this, “there is little sense of reconciliation through shared loss” (Graham and Whelan 2007, 480).

Spaces of commemoration have become places where different groups compete for the right of hegemonic victimhood through the proclamation of opposing identities and irreconcilable differences (Graham and Whelan 2007, 480). In a sense, a hierarchy of the dead has developed (Graham and Whelan 2007, 488). The imagery of these sites can be interpreted as violent or at the very least, imply violence because the collective identities of each group are embodied in violence where collective memory becomes a place to store wounds and scars (Graham and Whelan 2007, 480). As such, it is more likely for memory to be triggered by contestation and amnesia to be activated by an aspiration for reconciliation (Rolston 2010, 285).

It can be argued that the past should not be an enduring and regressive frame of reference in democratic states (Graham and Whelan 2007, 479). Instead, the fictional lineage of heritage should be reconfigured and considered in terms of a “rhizome history of disinheritance,” where the “erasure

of heritage...the objects of the past...should be mobilized as disinheritance...in order to make the past implode into the present and across spatial scales in ways that unsettle fundamental social imaginary significations” (Graham and Whelan 2007, 279; Landzelius 2003, 195). In this, claims of the past, including sectarian claims, should be assessed and deconstructed to undermine and reject all claims of imagined unbroken lineage and entitlement to the past, to disinherit every claim (Landzelius 2003, 207-208).

In another way, there is a struggle between survivors and the sovereign powers that they oppose which revolves around memory and forgetting (Graham and Whelan 2007, 479); “the struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting” (Edkins 2003, xv). In the context of Northern Ireland remembering the past in a new way is central to transformation. There is a need for a change “from destructive remembrance to constructive amnesia – and from cynical, selective forgetting to responsible, alarming memory” (Graham and Whelan 2007, 492).

Conclusion

The boundary between the built environment and social realities in post-agreement environments are often blurred. Public space and art are important elements of this dynamic because public art and these spaces become mirror representations of the social and political climate. Two ideas that help inform the debate around public art and space in post-agreement settings. Maslow’s hierarchy of needs and Theodor Adorno’s notion that “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.” Both question the use of artistic and cultural endeavours in the aftermath of violent conflict. However, despite their objections, these endeavours can help societies negotiate the past, present, and future as well as collaborate to rebuild selves and society.

Before exploring public art and space in Belfast, what constitutes public art and space is examined. There are two primary problems in reaching a shared definition of these terms. First, because public art comes in many different forms like socially engaged practices, political activism, and temporary or permanent art, some argue that public art is simply undefinable and that public art is just art. Second, distinguishing between private and public spaces can prove problematic. Public art is typically associated with outside areas; however, it can be located inside public spaces like publicly funded galleries, hospitals or libraries or located in outdoor spaces in privately owned housing estates or shopping malls. In this, public space needs a flexible definition and should be considered a cluster concept where it can have various and sometimes contradictory interpretations.

Three main parameters that help provide insight into the constitution of public art. First, public art is often commissioned though it is becoming more artist driven. Second, emphasis needs to be placed on the relationship between the art itself and the audience for which it is created. Third, it is essential that the context that the art will be located is considered. This triangulation of relationships between the artist, the public and the situation defines how public art is created, diluted, negotiated, compromised, and received. The reception of art in public spaces is especially

critical and can prove problematic if the audience feels the art has been imposed on them; this can lead to conflicts over art and culture or words and images.

Public spaces and art in Belfast continually change, transforming what is created and erased. The constructed environment is built by society, and afterward, society is shaped by the environment. Most of the public art in Belfast is a visual representation of the political climate from which it was created. The content of the public art moved from depictions of the resolve of war at any cost to the representation of the human price of the Troubles, culture and community pride. These symbolic representations play an essential role in perpetuating or defying culture and violence.

After the ceasefire and formal peace accords in Northern Ireland, there was an emphasis placed on the removal of sectarian murals and the depolarization of space. However, these efforts have often had the opposite effect. Belfast has become a city of dualism where there is a “normal” Belfast represented by the city centre and Titanic areas that are a sanitised of the sectarian symbols of the Troubles and the Troubled areas designation by the residential suburbs that still have ethnonational symbolic markers of the conflict. These divisions are also seen in the physical and mental boundaries in Belfast like flags, mural and peace walls. In this discussion of its public art and space, it seems that Belfast is a city that may still be grappling with remnants of the conflict.

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