

Changing Places, Moving Boundaries: The Development of New Interface Areas

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The persistence of inter-community tensions, street disorder and violence in interface areas in North and East Belfast has been a notable factor of the transition from militarised conflict to a peaceful society. Interface violence involving rival groups from Protestant Unionist Loyalist communities and Catholic Nationalist Republican areas and the security forces has been a significant factor sustaining fear, mistrust, hostility and antipathy between the broad political constituencies in Northern Ireland.

There is an acknowledgement of the distinctive characteristics and problems that help to define interface areas, particularly in relation to issues of marginalisation, poverty, social exclusion and limited access to resources. However, while there has been growing interest in the complexity of interface communities, we still work with a fairly basic and limited model of the nature of interfaces themselves. This model defines interfaces as the intersection of segregated and polarised working class residential zones in areas with a strong link between territory and ethno-political identity. Although there is growing recognition that interfaces are often invisible to all but the finely tuned local eye, interfaces are still regarded as something of an anomaly, an aberration and abnormal feature of society, rather than an increasingly normative feature of Northern Irish society.

Interfaces, as zones of tension and violence, are still predominantly viewed as residential areas, situated largely within the realm of public housing. They are primarily seen a facet of working class urban life, rather than acknowledged as the most visible exemplar of the social segregation and polarisation that pervades contemporary Northern Ireland. This is not to

suggest that the established understanding of an interface is not true to a great extent. The most well known and troublesome of the interfaces do indeed conform to these stereotypes. However, it is also clear that there are a much wider variety of interfaces than those that exist at the boundaries of segregated working class residential areas.

In recent years interfaces and outbreaks of sectarian violence and disorder have occurred in a number of areas that do not easily fit the stereotypical model, but which give some indication of the potential for new interfaces. These include: the intersection of middle class and working class residential areas; the emergence of interface issues in the suburbs; violence in parks and other open spaces; segregation of shared spaces, such as town centres and shopping areas; and violence related to schools. Furthermore, forms of interfaces and examples of inter-ethnic violence have occurred beyond the inner city areas of Belfast and Derry/Londonderry in which it has to some extent come to be expected as a fact of life. Over recent years more formalised segregation and associated violence has become a feature of towns such as Antrim, Ballymena, Larne, Lurgan and Portadown, to name only the most prominent.

It is therefore useful to broaden our understanding of an interface in order to be able to analyse the developing patterns of violence. However, it is also important to retain our understanding of the specific issues that are particularly pertinent to established urban residential interfaces. In this paper the concept of an interface is broadened to be defined as the conjunction or intersection of two or more territories or social spaces, which are dominated, contested or claimed by some or all members of the differing ethno-national groups. Under this definition, it is the process of domination, contest or claim that transforms an otherwise unexceptional space or location into an interface, not simply the conjunction or intersection. The threat or fear of violence is at the heart of the concept of an interface. It is an act, threat or fear of violence that transforms otherwise peaceful locations and boundary areas into interfaces.

New interfaces will not exhibit the same characteristics as established interfaces from the outset. Initially they may only be apparent to those with local knowledge who are attuned to the threat and fear of violence at or near a specific location or in the buffer zones, the supposedly shared or neutral spaces between defined territories. Although new interfaces are likely to be

less prone to the large scale and persistent cycles of rioting and public disorder that have dominated the headlines in recent years, they do have the potential to become sites of recurrent violence, harassment and fear, if on a smaller scale than the better known and well established interfaces.

Segregation, polarisation and social division are endemic within Northern Ireland society, rather than being confined to one relatively small section of it. Furthermore, Northern Ireland is not a static society. The processes of social and economic development, redevelopment and regeneration and the growing diversity of minority ethnic and faith communities, must always interact with the facts of division and segregation. The intersection of these processes will thus inevitably create new sites and forms of intersection and conjunction, which may in turn become problematical and even violent.

Only recently has there been recognition of the importance of addressing the needs and problems of existing interface areas in a systematic and holistic manner. It is all too easy to ignore minor issues and allow them to become significant problems before initiating a response. One example will illustrate this point. In 1996 many people were surprised when the White City – Whitewell area of North Belfast erupted into violence. As a result of the crisis over Drumcree II a number of people were forced from their homes and a significant interface emerged. Furthermore, the trouble expanded to include the neighbouring Graymount and Longlands estates. These were not traditional interfaces, although the area had been subject to a number of demographic changes. The violence led to an increase in levels of segregation, a collapse of working relationships between communities and a hardening of local boundaries. In the subsequent years one of the interlinking roads has been closed by a wall, an extensive fence separates two of the areas, numerous entries have been closed and protection installed on many houses. The ‘peace line’ was erected shortly after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement. The area is now regarded as a persistently difficult interface area.

The next section of this paper looks at a number of contexts in which different spaces have become sufficiently contested to justify their consideration as forms of interfaces. The contexts include urban and suburban demographic changes, processes of regeneration and redevelopment, forms of displacement of ongoing activity and contests around the maintenance of neutral or shared spaces.

Demographic Shifts

Demographic change has been a significant factor in Belfast over the duration of the Troubles and is still a factor in the social geography of the city. In general terms demographic change in Belfast has involved a shift of communal identity from 'Orange' to 'Green'. The trend has been for Protestant areas to become more mixed as Protestants have moved out, not necessarily due to intimidation, and Catholics have moved in. As and when the process has continued previously Orange areas have become predominantly Green. The process of demographic shift has rarely occurred in the other direction, whereby predominately Catholic areas have become largely Protestant, although Catholics have been forced to leave predominately Protestant or mixed areas on numerous occasions. Some of the recent changes have been due to processes of upward social mobility as people have moved out of public housing in inner city areas and either rented private accommodation or bought their own houses. Changes in the 'Little America' area of North Belfast in recent years have seen the area become 'Greener', with Sinn Fein posters appearing at election times and nationalist commemorative marches taking place. This process has also seen the interface with the nearby Westland estate become more problematic and volatile.

The process of upward mobility has also seen some more middle class areas become more mixed, while others have become more polarised in their identity. In terms of the traditional categories of interfaces this involves changes to what have been described as 'buffer zones'. Such changes have also introduced a class element to local tensions, a factor that has not been widely acknowledged in consideration of interface issues. There have been two ways in which this process has worked within middle class areas. One has been for Catholics to buy houses in areas that were predominately Protestant and thus contribute to a general 'Greening' of an area. One example of this kind of change has been in the Mountainview area, off Crumlin Road, which was regarded as part of the broader Woodvale area, but is now seen as part of greater Ardoyne. This has had an impact in two ways. First, fences have been erected between Mountainview and Twaddell Avenue as a result of ongoing low-level violence (the first in 1997, a second in 2002) and second, loyal order parades along the Crumlin Road now pass between two nationalist areas rather than simply the Ardoyne. In South Belfast, sporadic incidents of disorder in the Rosetta area have been linked to the steady process of gentrification. In this case the problems have been linked to growing number of Catholic

families moving into streets nearer to the Cregagh estate, this has led to provocation and attacks upon or by school children who can be identified as belonging to the 'other side' by their uniforms. And while such attacks may be little different from other contexts, where children going to 'better' schools may be targeted by other local children, the sectarian element becomes a compounding factor to issues of class.

Another form of demographic change that is impacting on inter-community tensions is related to the growing size and visibility of the minority ethnic communities in Northern Ireland. There are no areas that are dominated by any of the minority communities, but even small conglomerations of non-White households have generated negative reactions from the local indigenous communities. This suggests that the hostility of Protestants and Catholics to sharing residential space is being extended to members of other, newer communities. In the late 1990s there was sustained harassment of the Chinese community in the Donegall Pass area of South Belfast, and of the small Sikh community in the Alexandra Park Avenue area of North Belfast; in 2003 there was a series of violent attacks on minority ethnic households in both Craigavon and in the Village area of South Belfast; and in early 2004 there were concerns raised against plans for a Chinese resource centre on Donegall Pass. The dominance of mono-cultural communities across Northern Ireland means that it is likely that such tensions will continue to emerge as minority communities grow larger and as they have an ever more visible impact on the landscape on more urban areas.

Suburbanisation

The 'Greening' of inner city areas of Belfast has been balanced by the movement of Protestants to towns and estates in the greater Belfast region. As the eastern part of Northern Ireland remains predominately Protestant, working class Protestants from the inner city estates had more options for moving to new estates than did Catholics. Many took up this possibility, while Catholics largely consolidated their presence in their existing communities. Although some activists have seen the scheming of central government behind this process, there is no evidence of a great desire for Protestants to return to subsequently redeveloped inner city areas. This has in turn fuelled demands among nationalists that housing developments should not be constrained by notions of ethnic territorial boundaries. This process has led to a growing

Catholic population in Glengormley, Antrim and Crumlin. And, as Catholics have begun to assert their rights to equality and have demanded respect for the newly emergent diversity of such towns, so there have been some levels of resistance and opposition to such moves and a subsequent rise in inter-communal tensions.

Demographic changes in Glengormley, for example, have coincided with protests over the presence of an Orange arch in the centre of the town since 1999, and more recently there have also been numerous clashes between rival groups of young people in the commercial centre and leisure facilities in the town. In Antrim there have been numerous and persistent clashes between residents of the neighbouring Stiles and Rathenraw estates, which spilled over into disorder and violence between school children attending neighbouring schools through the autumn of 2003. Meanwhile in Crumlin a number of protests were mounted from 1996 onwards against loyal order and loyalist parades in the village.

Redevelopment

The redevelopment and regeneration of urban brownfield sites is another process that has the potential to alter demographic balances or to impact upon established patterns of use. This in turn can have an impact upon community relations as established boundaries are revised and traditional understandings of territory are forcibly amended. Redevelopment can take the form of creating both commercial buffer zones and new, often private, housing developments. Each form of development can create different types of tensions. In some places the strategy of redevelopment has been used as a form of buffer, a means of keeping people apart while at the same time providing common resources. The recent redevelopment of Duncairn Gardens is one such example, where reduced demand for housing in Tiger's Bay has allowed for the development of numerous small businesses, community based projects, a health centre and industrial buildings.

It is not inevitable that the redevelopment of such brownfield sites will be unproblematic. The construction of the new Dunnes Stores complex on the Crumlin Road was perceived by some people as creating a potential problem as the site had been a tense location in a number of recent years. When the store was opened there was therefore some justification for concerns about the

presence of rival groups of young men wearing football colours. However, following discussions with the local communities, the potential problems have been overcome and there have been no reports of major problems at the complex. Similar concerns were expressed about the impact of private housing on the Dunmore stadium site in North Belfast. The site, on Alexandra Park Avenue, is a 'soft' boundary, but the development faces Alexandra Park on one side, which is divided by a metal fence, and backs on to the mid-Skegoneill interface area on the other side. Another corner of the development is literally a stone's throw from an Orange Hall, the starting point for local parades.

Tensions visibly emerged during 2004 in the form of protests by residents of Sandy Row towards the occupants of a recently constructed apartment development on the edge of the area. The development was clearly not intended to appeal to the existing residents of Sandy Row, but rather was orientated to students, nurses and young professionals. And, while it occupies a prominent plot, facing an Orange Hall and the site of the former Rangers Supporters Club, the entrance is as far from Sandy Row as possible, facing towards the lower Lisburn Road and Bradbury Place. The development literally has its back turned to Sandy Row. This new development opens up an interface between the traditional and the new, the Protestant working class and professionals from diverse communities, the old and the young and is indicative of the pressures that are pressing in on the inner city areas of South Belfast.

Displacement

The increased focus of community and police attention in trying to reduce violence at problematic interfaces has been a factor in trouble occurring being displaced to nearby areas. As established interfaces become subject to more intense forms of surveillance, violence and disorder has occurred at neighbouring locations, which are less readily monitored and controlled. As a result theoretically neutral or non-contentious spaces may become sites of conflict for rival groups of, in particular, young people and as a result, social boundaries become hardened and places become more clearly coloured. Open spaces also provide an opportunity for confronting the other community because they are less readily policed and monitored. Alexandra Park in North Belfast was the first such open space to be divided by a barrier in 1994, and this has since been strengthened and extended on a number of occasions.

Through the summer of 2001 clashes between young people from Westland and Little America were focused in the relatively accessible Waterworks Park. The persistent violence led Belfast City Council to draw up plans for the erection of fences around the boundaries and across a section of the park, which would have effectively divided it into Protestant and Catholic sections. However, local residents opposed the proposal and worked to reduce the recurrent disorder. One positive response to this threat was a greater interest in the park as a resource, this included stocking one of the lakes for fishing and promoting the sport among young people from both communities.

Polarising Shared Space

This last example indicates the difficulty of maintaining shared spaces and mutually accessible resources. Unless such places are actively maintained as a shared resource and a neutral space, violence or the threat of violence can lead to them being abandoned by members of one community or to one community being excluded from access. Recent research has indicated that people are prepared to travel some distance to access resources and avoid potential trouble spots. The resources may theoretically be available to both communities but feelings of safety mean they are, to all practical intent, inaccessible to one community. Some resources may be accessible for much of the year, but at times of tension, such as during the marching season, they may become out of bounds to part of the community. In other cases only some sections of a community feel unable to access certain resources. This may be a particular problem for young males who are both the main proponents and the main victims of much sectarian violence.

There are a number of examples where neutral spaces are neutral in name only and they either remain inaccessible to one community or are contested in some way. Commercial spaces may thus become subtle forms of interface. The Co-op, between Whitewell Road and Gray's Lane, was considered inaccessible by some Catholics, once loyalist flags were hung from nearby lampposts. Similarly residents of White City were reluctant to use shops or resources on Whitewell Road because of ongoing local tensions. A variety of resources, including the local campus of the Belfast Institute of Further and Higher Education, shops and a doctor's surgery in East Belfast, were regarded as out of bounds for residents of the Short Strand as a result of the violence between Cluan Place and Clandeboye Gardens and because of graffiti and

visual displays that were erected.

The commercial centres of many smaller towns are similarly divided or contested. The centre of Lurgan is divided into two distinct domains. In Ballymena the two main shopping centres have been broadly claimed by young people from one of the two main communities, one is used by Catholics the other by Protestants. Ballynahinch is another town whose central area becomes more visibly claimed by one community during the summer months, although informal patterns of segregation exist as local knowledge and impact on social movements throughout the year. Such outwardly neutral spaces are not clearly identifiable as interfaces and may not even be considered particularly problematic because people have internalised the patterns of segregation rather than challenge them. There may not be any signs saying 'stay out', but there are effective barriers to accessing local resources nonetheless.

When trouble broke out around the Donegall Road / West Link area over the summer of 2003, this was not in an area that had been recognised as a difficult interface of the traditional model. The trouble seems to have been linked to the presence of young people from rival communities, identified by their football strips, in and around the Park Centre. Although the disturbances began over a relatively minor issue, the violence re-ignited over a period of several days. This also illustrates the role of young people in helping to sustain tensions and generate disorder in interface areas and indicates how the tensions and violence can easily spread to what may be otherwise perceived as neutral spaces, such as parks and shopping centres. In such cases the tension may be experienced by wider sections of the community, and if not addressed quickly, may lead to the establishment of some form of perceived barrier.

Young People

Many of the examples cite the role of young people in generating new forms of interfaces as well as initiating and sustaining tensions between communities in established interface areas. Although there has been some recognition of the role that young people play in interface violence and forms of 'recreational rioting', it is also important to note their role in extending the presence of contested and segregated spaces. In this young people and especially young men play the roles of both perpetrators and victims. Their role as provocateurs and as defenders of communal boundaries all too readily

impacts on their ability to access common resources and shared spaces as they in turn become the victims of other groups of young males who challenge their right to utilise facilities and public space. Young men thus become more spatially constrained and more willing to constrain.

Interface violence in the Antrim area was sustained during 2003 through repeated clashes involving young people from the Rathenraw and Stiles estates who attended the neighbouring St Malachy's School and Masserene Community College. The frequent violence was only brought to an end as a result of an intensive and extensive process of mediation. Attacks on school students who could be identified by their uniforms have also been a problem in Ballymena, with certain bus stops becoming identified as particularly problematic locations. Similarly, school students have been targets for sectarian attack when waiting for buses or travelling to school in diverse parts of Belfast and elsewhere.

Conclusion

Belfast and many other urban areas of Northern Ireland are extensively segregated and polarised places in which all forms of territory have a potential to become contested and fought over. Interfaces are an important element of that segregation, and although some interfaces have been made less volatile over recent years, new types of interfaces all too readily emerge. This paper argues that it is important to acknowledge that interfaces are not a static phenomenon, nor a purely historical legacy of the Troubles, but rather they are a dynamic part of the social fabric of a community that is highly polarised and extensively segregated. The examples given indicate that the concept of an interface and of the range of forms of interfaces are perhaps more complex than has hitherto been explicitly defined and analysed. This review suggests that the development of new interface areas is affected by a number of factors including demographic change, lifestyle shifts and processes of redevelopment and regeneration. It is important to acknowledge the social dynamic in processes of segregation and the continuing pressures to further segregation in many areas. As such shared and neutral spaces come under particular types of pressure and they need positive and sustained actions to ensure that they are not abandoned and avoided, but rather that they remain shared and accessible to all sections of all communities.

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