Security and Segregation:
Interface Barriers in Belfast

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In May 2007 the NIO announced that an eight metre high fence was to be built in the playground of Hazelwood Integrated Primary School on Whitewell Road in north Belfast to protect the houses and residents of Old Throne Park from attack.[1] The announcement was notable and disturbing from a number of perspectives. First, the fence or 'peaceline' was being built in the grounds of an integrated school, which for many symbolises the future direction of education and the attempt to build a shared and integrated society in Northern Ireland. Second, the announcement was made just a few weeks after the formation of the new devolved government, the first since the signing of the Agreement in 1998 that had the willing and active participation of each of the main political parties. And third, the incident that had precipitated the decision, a petrol bomb attack on a house, had occurred some nine months previously in the summer of 2006, and no evidence was given of a sustained or ongoing series of such attacks. The decision suggested that while some changes had undoubtedly occurred in Northern Ireland, some things unfortunately remained the same: building a barrier was still regarded as an appropriate response to a sectarian incident resulting in criminal damage. And while the barrier might well provide some sense of security and safety to the residents of Old Throne Park it also served to reinforce in a very visible way the ongoing divisions and territoriality that persists in parts of Belfast.

Nevertheless, the decision to erect a new barrier did have some positive impact. It was noted that while there had been extensive regeneration in many areas of Belfast, and all of the security barriers around the city centre had long been removed (as had all the barriers along the border with the Republic), none of the interface barriers in residential areas had been taken down.[2] In contrast barrier construction and extension has been an ongoing process over the past fourteen years. Voices were thus raised about the desirability of yet another barrier, particularly at a time of positive developments in the political sphere and conversations began about the need to develop a long-term strategy

that would focus on preventing the construction of further barriers and would
begin to develop a framework and a timeframe for removing the existing
barriers. This paper is a contribution to the discussion about the future of
interface barriers and offers an overview of the situation in Belfast. It outlines
the overall number and location of various security barriers in interface areas
across the city; it provides a brief comparative review of the use of barriers as
a means of dealing with conflict; it explores the wider framework of designing
for security; and finally it summarises the findings of a survey of the attitudes
of people living in some interface areas to the barriers.

Barriers in Belfast

There has long been some uncertainty about the exact number of interface
barriers across Belfast. In part the confusion is due to different interpretations
of where one barrier stops and another starts, but in part it is due to a limited
framework for classifying and categorising the various barriers and associated
forms of security architecture that are still present around the city. The term
interface barrier or 'peaceline' is generally used to refer to those barriers that
have been authorised and built by the NIO in response to concerns for safety
and security in an interface area.[3] But this does not include all existing barriers
and security structures as some have been built by other agencies, such as the
Northern Ireland Housing Executive, in the course of regeneration or
redevelopment. Furthermore, recognition also needs to be given to the
extensive security architecture associated with police stations, as well as more
recent and less intrusive structures associated with the growing network of
CCTV cameras at many interface areas. In 2005 ICR were commissioned by
Belfast Interface Project to visit each of the sites identified by the NIO as the
location of an interface barrier that they had built and produce a definitive
record of such barriers across the city. This research indicated that there were
forty-one NIO barriers, with four barriers in southwest Belfast, twelve barriers
in west Belfast, five barriers in east Belfast and twenty barriers in north
Belfast.[4] It also noted that around one half of these barriers had been built,
extended or heightened since the ceasefires in 1994.

However, in the course of the research it was also evident that there were
many other similar barriers in or near to interface areas that were not included
on the NIO list. A small number appeared to be similar in style to NIO
structures, and it is likely that they had been left off of the NIO list in error,
while others are likely to have been built by an agency such as the Northern
Ireland Housing Executive. As a result BIP commissioned a further piece of
research (both pieces being funded by CRC and Belfast City Council) with the

aim of mapping all the remaining security barriers that might be associated with interface areas or where properties were vulnerable to sectarian attack. To date a further forty-one sites have been identified (including the Hazelwood barrier) where some form of barrier exists in association with either residential or commercial property. These sites include:

- Physical structures such as walls and fences, which serve to divide or protect residential areas or close off roads or pathways;
- Security gates designed to enable roads to be closed off;
- Fencing between residential properties and parks or public open spaces;
- Fencing to protect non-residential property near interfaces;
- Buffers of walls, fences and vegetation to residential areas that result in the houses having their orientation turned away from the main thoroughfares; and
- Buffer zones of derelict land or brownfield sites at an interface or at the boundary of a marked residential area.

Some of these barriers are in areas that are associated with some of the well-known NIO structures, but others have been identified in areas that are not associated with NIO interface barriers. These include barriers in the Village, the lower Ormeau Road, Millfield and the inner ring road area, as well as Skegoneill and the Waterworks park in the north of the city. Altogether the eighty-two security barriers include six in south-west Belfast; thirteen in west Belfast; eight in south Belfast; nine in east Belfast; six on the edge of the city centre; and forty one barriers in north Belfast.

The eighty-three barriers include fourteen parts of the city where there are identifiable clusters of barriers, that is geographical areas in which there are a number of distinct and separate structures that demark different sections of an interface, while just six of the barriers are isolated and are unrelated to any other defensive or protective security structure. The fourteen areas where there are clusters of barriers are as follows:

- Suffolk – Lenadoon, with six barriers;
- Upper Springfield Road, with four barriers;
- Falls Shankill divide, with eight barriers;
- The Village, with three barriers;
- Ormeau Road, with three barriers;
- Short Strand, with nine barriers;
- The Inner Ring area, with six barriers;
- Duncairn Gardens, with seven barriers;
- Limestone Road, with six barriers;
- Dunmore – Mid-Skegoneill, with three barriers;
- Whitewell Road area, with five barriers;

- Torrens, with three barriers;
- Crumlin Road – Ardoyne area, with eleven barriers; and
- Ligoniel, with two barriers.

In addition to the diverse forms of interface barriers, all of the PSNI stations in Belfast are still protected by a variety of defensive walls and other structures and in the case of Oldpark and York Road stations public thoroughfares remain closed due to police security fences. The Patten Report recommended that 'existing police stations should – subject to the security situation in their areas and health and safety considerations – be progressively made less forbidding in appearance'[5] but as the Oversight Commissioner noted dryly, in a recent review of implementation of Patten's recommendations, 'the major task of transforming police stations … has been a slow process with moderate accomplishment'.[6]

Although there has been some positive regeneration of some interface areas, overall while the commercial centre of Belfast has experienced extensive regeneration over the course of the political transition, many of the residential areas remain distinctively marked by diverse array of physical structures and architectural designs that serve to divide and fragment many working class communities.

A World of Barriers

Belfast is not alone in its recourse to building barriers as means of controlling and restricting the movement of people and attempting to improve levels of security and safety. A small number of interface barriers have also been constructed in other parts of Northern Ireland: with at least four NIO built barriers in Derry/Londonderry, one in Lurgan and five in Portadown. There are also undoubtedly examples of less formal interface barriers in other areas of Northern Ireland. Furthermore, barriers have increasingly been seen as a way of controlling movement in many parts of the world. These include barriers that have been built between countries and within cities, with the aim of controlling immigration, reducing crime or violence, increasing a sense of security and also to restrict movement and exclude the unwanted.[7] However, it is questionable what impact any barrier might have on any of these activities, beyond making a symbolic statement, and in many cases (including in Belfast) the barriers have become a target of violence, as they often serve to indicate the presence of a hostile, unwanted or unseen 'other' on the other side.

The Berlin Wall is probably the most famous barrier of modern times that has been used to divide sections of a city, and there were extensive celebrations when the wall was breached in 1989 as part of the process of the collapse of the Soviet Union. In similar fashion a 'separation barrier' was constructed to divide the island of Cyprus following the Turkish invasion and occupation of the northern half of the island in 1974 and also divide the capital city Nicosia into Greek and Turkish sections. The recent decision to open the main Ledra Street crossing has been seen by some as a positive step in the discussions towards re-unification of the island.[8] The widespread criticism of the use of walls since the erection of the Berlin Wall in 1961 has not prevented numerous administrations from turning to barrier construction in an attempt to solve a variety of social problems. The most high profile and controversial barriers currently under construction are probably those being built by the US government along sections of the border with Mexico, and the structure being erected by the Israeli government around the West Bank to restrict and control the movements of Palestinians. Other lesser known barriers exist in many other locations, for example between Saudi Arabia and Yemen, between Morocco and Algeria and between the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla and Morocco.

In urban areas barriers have become widely used as a means of protecting middle class areas in many cities. Although the construction of gated communities have been critically evaluated[9], they are no longer regarded as particularly controversial and have become a common feature of urban regeneration, even in parts of contemporary Belfast. However, attempts to build barriers that segregate along racial or ethnic lines in urban settings have regularly proved to be controversial. Among recent examples was a barrier in the Czech town of Usti Nad Labem which was built in early 1999 to segregate local Roma and Czech communities (and which was dismantled a few months after protests); a similar structure was proposed to surround a Roma area in Piatra Neamt in Romania; and in 2006 a metal wall was built around an estate which was home to several hundred African immigrants in the northern Italian city of Padua.[10] An example with a clearer parallel with Belfast was the decision by the American administration to use soldiers to construct a three-mile long wall to divide a Sunni enclave from a wider Shi'ite neighbourhood in Baghdad in early 2007. Although the wall generated protests among Iraqi residents of the area who claimed that it would 'separate family from family' and would be a first step in the partitioning of Iraq, the decision received support from PSNI ACC Duncan McCausland who was quoted as saying that walls would enable the provision of 'security first and then we can normalise and build'.[11] Even closer to home there is evidence of the use of fences and

walls being constructed to close through access along roads in the Summerhill area of Dublin, although the exact reason for their erection is not clear.[12]

In general constructing a barrier is a way of marking intent. It acknowledges a problem and indicates some desire to respond to it, albeit in a limited and conservative manner. While physical structures may provide some short term palliative to a social or political problem, they also provide a challenge to human ingenuity and persistence. Thus in the long term the problems will have to be addressed by other means, through debate, dialogue, negotiation and some form of political process. Unfortunately once they are erected barriers tend to be enveloped by a sense of inertia and caution and they are difficult to get rid of.

Permanent Structures?

Although walls that have been constructed at established or de facto international frontiers are generally considered to be permanent structures, many of the walls that have been built in urban areas are either regarded as a necessary short-term evil to enhance security and safety, or as a temporary quick-fix solution to a particular crisis. Few administrations appear to be willing to promote the formal division of an urban area as a permanent feature of the environment. In fact when the British Army created the first 'peaceline' during the Troubles (there is evidence of a 'peaceline' being constructed in the Sailortown area in the 1930s [13]), by rolling out barbed wire between the Falls and Shankill, it was considered to be a very short term response. However, in practice when walls or fences are erected they tend to stay up longer might have been anticipated; they are solid structures and negotiating their presence all too readily becomes accepted as part of the routine of daily life.

The experience of Belfast indicates how an emergency response can become a long-term reality. The first peaceline was constructed from rolls of barbed wire; later metal fencing or steel sheeting was used, while low gates were used to close off roads on a temporary basis. But over the years more elaborate structures have been constructed, although there are still many examples of green steel sheet or galvanised steel fencing being used to divide areas and segregate communities. Many of the interface barriers are now built of brick, sometimes with designs incorporated into them, with coloured steel fencing on top and with buffers of trees and bushes planted in front to disguise the harshness of the wall. Such structures are clearly not conceived as temporary measures; rather they are obviously regarded from the outset as a permanent intervention on the landscape. But while the barriers whose

construction is authorised by the NIO are built in response to an evident security problem, on the advice of the police and, increasingly following consultation with local communities[14], many other similar structures have been built in a more discrete manner. In fact the previously unacknowledged presence of the full diversity of segregation barriers across Belfast is suggestive of a wider official acceptance of the long-term need for segregation and security measures as part of the built environment.

Many of the non-NIO barriers have been constructed in the process of regeneration and the reality of segregation, division and territoriality has obviously been incorporated into the thinking and design of the architects, and their designs in turn have served to consolidate and extend the levels of division and segregation. For example, if you travel along the Crumlin Road you will notice that the houses on both the Ardoyne side and the Woodvale side face inwards rather than out onto the main road, while the Crumlin Road itself is a bland succession of brick walls. Similar architectural design can be seen at Millfield-Brown Square on the inner ring, Brougham Street in the north of the city and Glenmachan Street in the south. Elsewhere, the Albertbridge Road in front of Short Strand is an extra-wide dual carriageway with sheltered pathways for residents; the redevelopment of Carrick Hill also has a buffer of multi-layered fencing and second footpath access for residents for those properties facing onto the main road. In north Belfast the redevelopment of the Dunmore Stadium avoided having interconnecting roads with the mid-Skegoneill area and instead walls were built around the new development, with only one way in and out. None of these structures and designs is an official 'peaceline', even though they are built to provide safety, security and social distance between neighbouring residential communities. In practice whilst they may provide some sense of reassurance to residents, they also effectively create barriers to movement and interaction, demarcate territory and further segregate and divide people and communities.

Removing Barriers

Over the duration of the period since the ceasefires were declared in 1994 many of the formal security structures and barriers have been removed: all previously closed crossing points on the Irish border have been opened; the ring of steel around Belfast city centre has been removed; the military watch-towers along the border and army bases in Belfast have been demolished. The interface barriers however, remain, and in fact have increased in scale, size and number. This is not to deny that there have been positive changes in many interface areas and in some areas other means of regenerating the interface,

without the use of walls, has been explored. For example, parts of Duncairn Gardens have been regenerated through the construction of a business centre and a variety of community resources, while the Suffolk Lenadoon interface on Stewartstown Road has been regenerated through a community-owned development of offices, shops and childcare facilities. But it is also notable that in each area a number of barriers also remain.

In the late summer of 2007 Trina Vargo of the US-Ireland Alliance held a series of discussions to explore the potential interest in removing one or more interface barriers. Following on from these she commissioned a survey in a number of interface communities in Belfast to explore the views of residents to the barriers and their response to the possibility of their removal. The survey involved polling 1,037 people who lived near to an interface barrier in six areas of Belfast: the Falls and Shankill in west Belfast; Antrim Road and Tigers Bay in north Belfast; and Short Strand and Templemore Avenue in east Belfast.[15]

One series of questions explored people's understanding of why the walls had been erected and the purpose they served: 51% of people thought it was 'to stop the troubles, fighting etc', while 15% said it was 'to stop rioting'. However, a large minority of 39% of those surveyed believed they were built 'to keep the two sides apart / segregation', while 10% believed the walls were built for 'protection / keep people safe / feel more secure'. However, only 2% believed that the walls were not needed or should never have been put up. Following on from this 67% of people strongly agreed that the walls were there 'to help people feel safer', while 64% said it was 'to keep communities segregated from each other' and slightly lower percentages agreed that the walls were to stop various forms of violence and intimidation.

The survey also explored people's attitudes towards the possible removal of the walls in each area. Overall 21% of respondents were in favour of the wall coming down right away, while 60% said that the wall 'should come down whenever it is safe to do so', and just 16% said they did not care if the wall never came down. In each case there was slightly more support for the removal of a wall at some time in the nationalist community than the unionist community. However, although a large percentage (76%) were opposed to the immediate removal of the wall, in response to another question just 10% of people said they would be inclined to move house if the wall was removed, although the percentages varied from 17% of people in the Shankill to just 6% of people in Short Strand.

The reasons that were given for not wanting to have the wall removed were as follows:

Reason	Percentage
Don't feel safe enough / wouldn't feel safe without it	33
Too soon / people not yet ready / still tension across divide	31
Trouble would start again / would cause more trouble taking wall down	23
Segregation / wall still needed / still problems	15
Things are OK the way they are / the wall works / it stops trouble	6
Children / young ones would cause trouble	4
Not enough policing in area	2
Don't trust police or other side	2

People were also asked what they thought might happen if the wall was removed. Just 11% thought that it would have no real impact and things would remain as they were, while most people believed it would lead to an increase in some level of violence:
- 32% thought it would involve minor violence that could be handled by the police and community leaders;
- 23% thought it would lead to significant incidents requiring a heavy police presence, but only on particular dates, anniversaries or when marches took place;
- 17% thought it would lead to some significant incidents requiring a heavy police presence; and
- 15% thought it would lead to constant problems of a serious nature.

People were then asked how confident they were in the ability of the police to preserve peace and maintain order if the wall was removed. Overall just 25% said they were very confident or fairly confident in the ability of the police, while 58% said they would be fairly worried or very worried about their capacity to maintain peace and order. Perhaps rather surprisingly in each paired area people in the nationalist community expressed higher levels of confidence in the police than did people in the unionist community.

Those people who were opposed to the wall coming down were also asked to indicate what types of actions might change their minds and make them more receptive to the idea of its removal. This produced the following responses:

Factor	Would change mind (percentages)
Regular contact between community leaders on both sides of the interface	37
Special jobs training programmes for the interface areas	27
Construction of more new housing in the area	22
Construction of new leisure centres to keep young people occupied	21
Statement from the police that they would increase police presence	15
CCTV cameras installed in the area	14

Finally, people were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with a series of more general statements related to the continued presence of the wall. In total 62% of people felt that the wall was still necessary because of violent factions within the communities, but on the other hand 43% believed that the wall served to maintain tensions and antagonism between the communities and 45% believed that removing the wall would encourage better community relations while 52% believed that the two communities were already growing in confidence with each other. Overall 61% of respondents felt that local politicians should be doing more to create the conditions for the walls to come down. But 49% of respondents believed that some local politicians used the wall to play on the fears of the community and 41% stated that the politicians were not interested in whether the walls come down or stay up.

Overall, the general impression gained from the survey in six interface areas was that local residents would be willing to have the walls removed, but not necessarily immediately. There was a belief that the wall did serve some purpose in reducing acts of violence, and although most people believed that removing the wall would not result in anything more than minor or occasional acts of violence, there was limited confidence in the ability of the PSNI to preserve the peace without a physical barriers as a last resort. Many people felt that the walls did provide some degree of security for people living near them and it was still too soon to remove the barriers.

People also noted that while the walls provided some security, they also served to maintain tensions and antagonism between the communities, and some local politicians use the walls to play on people's fears. A majority felt that the politicians should do more to create the conditions for the walls to come down, and the removal of the barriers would also lead to an improvement in community relations. Although the majority were not

convinced by any of the ideas that were suggested to remove their opposition to the removal of the wall, a substantial minority identified contacts between community leaders and regeneration, in terms of jobs, houses and resources, as the factors that might lead them to change their minds.

The surveys, although limited in scope, are extremely useful in beginning to explore the context in which it would be possible to begin to remove some of the interface barriers. They identify people's concerns, but also highlight possible ways to take the debate forward. The key factors would include: more positive efforts from local politicians, more diverse and effective regeneration of interface areas and more cross- community dialogue.

Conclusion

Interface barriers, 'peacelines' and other elements of a security architecture have been established as a distinctive element of the urban fabric of Belfast over the past forty years. However, ten years after the signing of the Agreement not one of the interface barriers have yet been removed and building a fence or a wall is still considered an appropriate response to even an isolated act of sectarian violence. Now that we have established what appears to be a relatively stable devolved administration, and with the main paramilitary groups disarmed and demobilised, surely it is time to place a moratorium on the construction of walls and barriers, and instead look to other means of managing threats of violence.

There is a need to build on the work initiated by Trina Vargo and to begin a more wide ranging conversation (or series of conversations) about how to remove some of the existing barriers. The research by ICR and BIP has indicated that a number of the barriers actually serve no real security purpose and could be taken down, while others could be removed or replaced in the process of regeneration. While it must be accepted that many barriers do provide a sense of reassurance and safety for many people, they also serve to separate and divide and they also remain as a reminder of how far we still have to go in the process of establishing a 'normal' society. There is thus an urgent need to begin the process of engaging with the residents of interface communities in dialogue and discussion to identify how, when and in what circumstances the barriers can finally start to be removed.

Notes

1 *Belfast Telegraph*, 23 May 2007.
2 It should be noted that a security barrier at the junction of Donore Court and Antrim Road, which obscured the line of site towards Girdwood Barracks, was removed some years ago; a security gate at the junction of Dunboyne Park and Springfield Road was removed within the past year; and security fencing between Alexandra Park and the Dunmore stadium development was removed in April 2008.

3 Jarman, 2007.
4 See http://www.belfastinterfaceproject.org/otherpub.asp for the annotated list of NIO barriers and see http://www.belfastinterfaceproject.org/interfacemap.asp# for the barriers on a map of the city with photographs of each barrier.
5 Independent Commission on Policing for Northern Ireland , 1999, p. 47.
6 Office of the Oversight Commissioner, 2007, p. 66.
7 Marcuse, 1994.
8 See http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/7327866.stm
9 Caldeira 2001; Davis 1990.
10 See BBC website: http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/world/europe/534383.stm (24 November 1990); http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/1593534.stm (11 October 2001); and http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/5385372.stm (28 September 2006).
11 *The Guardian*, 14 September 2007.
12 http://www.archiseek.com/content/showthread.php?t=6714
13 Smyth, 1991, p. 26.
14 Jarman, 2007.
15 See http://www.us-irelandalliance.org/wmspage.cfm?parm1=779 for details of the survey, questions posed and full results.

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