Developing Good Practice in Promoting Shared Space at Interfaces

Roz Goldie and Brid Ruddy

In January 2010 we were engaged by the Belfast Interface Project[1](BIP) to research and document effective practice in developing shared space in neighbourhoods close to an interface. "*Crossing the Line*" is our report on this research. Its findings are based on extensive desk research and twenty seven interviews with key people from the statutory, voluntary, community, and academic sectors, and independent agencies. The report was launched in September 2010 at Belfast City Hall and copies are available from BIP or available to download from their website (www.belfastinterfaceproject.org). This article summarises and elaborates on issues in that document.

A working definition

Our working definition of 'interface' is that it may be a visible and recognised site in urban settings like Belfast, but in other places tends to be defined as contested space. Often these areas are associated with parades-related disputes, territory marking with flags and symbols, and/or youth-led, locality-specific violence. The unique contribution of "*Crossing the Line*" is that it goes beyond describing interfaces and counting 'peace walls' to explore effective practice in transforming these areas over the last decade.

A changing policy context

That practice is considered against a background of a changing policy context, including the Northern Ireland Assembly strategic policy in the "*Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration*" (CSI) (which was out to consultation at the time of writing), and the Assembly "*Good Relations Action Plan for 2010-2011*". O'Halloran *et al* (2004) have highlighted the need for improved policy-making as regards interfaces. Importantly, the now delayed[2] Review of Public Administration (RPA) offers opportunities for interface

stakeholders to influence regeneration and the process of community planning which may also set challenges to practitioners who are unfamiliar with the intricacies of planning.

The Community Relations Council (CRC) has acknowledged that the legacy of physical segregation, perceptions that people living near to interfaces have of safety and security, and interface barriers must be the priority. However, they also have said that "*we should aspire to the removal of all interface barriers across the city of Belfast over time … on the basis of sustainable regeneration as part of a process towards building a shared city for all the people of Belfast*"[3]. CRC has led in facilitating the cross-sectoral multi-agency Interface Working Group and the Interface Community Partnership which supports it.

What is shared space?

Respondents were asked to explain their understanding of the concept of Shared space and their answers covered a range of responses. For some the emphasis is primarily on physical space. For others it is about social and psychological space. While it is relatively easy to share shopping and leisure facilities, shared housing is more difficult at or near interfaces. However, there is a general consensus that 'shared-ness'– both physical and metaphorical – exists on a continuum. This continuum has changed and developed over time and is likely to continue to change within the context of a post conflict society. Although some found the language of shared space difficult, it is commonly used by practitioners, policy-makers and some politicians, and amounts to a workable description of what is safe, common, civic space for all.

Notions of sharing are complex and, as Cantle (2002) has noted, it is not helpful to simply counter-pose 'integration' and 'segregation' as separate and opposite.

> "*These concepts are often posed as alternatives and can therefore hinder a sensible debate. In fact, there are many different layers which need to be separated and considered. For example, communities can often be divided into distinct housing areas and many schools (including the existing faith schools – mainly Christian) can appear to foster separation.*
> *Such divisions are unlikely to be problematic in themselves and will reflect individual preferences in some cases. However, difficulties are more apparent when the separation is multi-faceted – e.g. when geographic, educational, cultural, social and religious divisions*

reinforce each other to the extent that there is little or no contact with other communities at any level. This appears to allow ignorance about each community to develop into fear, particularly when fostered by extremists attempting to demonise a minority community.

Of course, some minorities choose to live within their own communities. For example, some would choose to live in a distinct area dominated by one culture and to ensure that there is a sufficient critical mass to support facilities such as shops and places of worship – and to try to ensure safety of community members. Some choices are not, however, always freely made and may simply reflect housing policies or the real constraints imposed by the deprivation of some groups or individuals.

This gives rise to two problems. Firstly, those choices constrained by negative factors such as poverty and from threats of violence and intimidation, could mean that particular communities are frustrated and resentful by being concentrated in areas with the worst housing conditions. In real terms, they do not have equal access to better areas. Secondly, as suggested above, the legitimate choices to be separate in some respects may lead to complete isolation from other communities, because of the combined impact of such choices, whether they are constrained or not."

We return to this complex subject in a later discussion.

The benefits of shared space

The benefits are freedom of movement and easy, welcome access to goods, amenities, and services for everyone, without fear, hostility or threat. These are key post-conflict issues, given the high levels of violence and residential segregation that have been experienced in many districts of Belfast in particular.

Analysis shows that social and employment inequalities are not simply the result of discrimination as "*the variable of space and how it regulates behaviour and restricts choice is crucial*"[4]. So a benefit of transforming interface areas is promoting equality.

Social and economic regeneration are the greatest potential benefit of developing shared space. As one respondent noted, "*Regenerating interfaces is crucial to peace building and normalisation*". Regeneration is an immediate incentive when profits from enterprise are returned to the community.

Segregation and social division have a financial as well as a social cost. Duplication of public services and facilities costs an extra £1.5 billion each year.[5] Replacing division with shared space produces economic benefits. The social benefits are clear as conflict transformation creates a greater sense of safety and better relationships both between and inside communities.

Factors preventing shared space

We found that the greatest impediment is the chill factor that comes from fear, distrust, and reluctance to used space that is identified as 'belonging to the other side'. Poor inter-community relationships characterise many interface communities, although these are improving. Other challenges to shared space are youth-led thrill-seeking behaviour and parades-related disputes.

The built environment has been designed to prevent connectivity[6] and free access in Belfast, reinforcing rather than challenging segregation[7]. Sectarian interface rioting over many years necessitated building security gates and walls. These physical barriers were reinforced by the symbolism of territory marking, with hostile sectarian displays of graffiti, flags and emblems. And yet, for some residents, the key safety issues around removing interface walls and barriers are about unwelcome road traffic rather than simply fear of violence.

Lack of educational qualifications and skills were cited as important issues for people living in or near interfaces. Given the absence of employment in these areas the only option is to travel for work and yet the necessary mobility is restricted. These areas are the most deprived and offer few employment and training opportunities. The experience of the Suffolk and Lenadoon Interface Group who legally own inter-community facilities is a rare (and financially profitable) exception. The lack of such ownership and control is a barrier to promoting shared space. Knowing that there are advantages in shared space is an incentive for local people.

Community ownership of the process of building shared space and succession in interface/community work were significant themes in interview responses. Despite very positive opinion, there was an underlying suspicion that some community leaders acted as gatekeepers, manipulating views about removing barriers for example. This compounds already poor communication between the community and statutory agencies, and a possible lack of new interface workers.

Another obstacle is that for some shared space is potentially losing space, and understood as relinquishing territory that was owned exclusively by them, usually the Protestant-Unionist-Loyalist (PUL) community. Also, there is not a consensus on the language of sharing. Where parading is contested, using terms like sharing is complex as some nationalists see sharing as meaning permission for unwelcome parades and some unionists see sharing as the right to parade with or without the consent of nationalist residents.

Factors promoting shared space

To promote shared space there must be declining levels of violence and murder (and the reduction of the 'chill factor'), building trust in collaborative cross-community working (including meaningful and sustained inter-community dialogue), effective youth work, incentives for inter-community creation of shared space, the engagement of both public and private sectors, and policy and political enablers (with appropriate involvement of politicians). Creating visible improvements to the physical environment is also a key factor.

Dialogue can serve several purposes. It can serve as an immediate conflict resolution tool that is often visible. It can also be a long-term in-depth process of building trust, which is frequently invisible. At times dialogue must be private (not secret) to initiate and sustain good working relationships.

Strategic long-term youth work is regarded as an essential aspect of promoting shared space because many interface communities still experience high levels of youth-led sectarian violence, and this acts as an inhibitor to shared space (At the same time there was acknowledgement of the alarming rate of youth suicide and young people's sense of powerlessness). It is the sectarian nature of this thrill-seeking behaviour that distinguishes interface violence from violence in other large urban settings.

Economic development is viewed by all as a lever for positive change in interface communities, and practitioners laid great emphasis on 'social enterprise'. Economic development is seen as a quality-of-life issue since it is believed that developing the economy and providing jobs promotes local social cohesion (although this may also have the potential to reinforce segregation and possibly limit work mobility even further). Developing high-value sustainable social enterprise, beyond the current childcare and catering business, may provide some realistic solutions.

Planning for regeneration is widely regarded as a central incentive to create shared space. Opinion is unanimous that there must be community involvement and equal ownership in that process[8], and that the best opportunity comes in community planning. It was also said that the focus of community planning must be on creating a vision of an interconnected city. "*The disconnectedness of Belfast is at the root of problems in planning shared space. Community planning offers great opportunities to address the obstacles to improving what are deemed 'dysfunctional communities'*".

Some past attempts at creating shared space failed because decisions were made by statutory agencies without dialogue, engagement, participation and ownership by local people. Community planning strategies offer opportunities for inclusive decision-making and a strategic (and 'joined-up') approach to promoting shared space – moving from the current situation where statutory agencies have an inconsistent history of consulting and engaging local communities.

Most respondents wanted both politicians and statutory agencies to become more involved with them in finding ways to promote shared space. There were consistent reports of the lack of political support in tackling factors preventing the development of shared space, particularly in PUL areas of Belfast, but there was also some optimism that the political process is providing new opportunities for the regeneration of deprived interface communities. Practitioners felt that there was an increasingly important role for politicians as the changed funding and political climate requires greater co-operation and collective lobbying. So politicians might now reappraise their public role in supporting endeavours to create shared space.

Specific policy was rarely mentioned in interviews. However, CSI might prove sufficient to lever change that promotes shared space, and planned regeneration at or near interfaces. As a seasoned community activist working across interfaces said, "*Dealing with parading and interface issues are the only two outstanding issues now that policing and justice is resolved*." Parading requires an appropriate policy response and agreed arrangements for dealing with parades-related disputes.[9] New proposals coming from the St Andrews Agreement may have the potential to generate substantial progress.

The alternative to shared space

The alternative is that interface communities will continue to experience polarisation and segregation. This will exacerbate existing division, distrust and fear both among and between communities. It will, by default, encourage youth-led violence and thrill-seeking behaviour leaving these areas unsafe space. Failing to address these issues will be detrimental to regeneration and economic development – even at the level of small social economy enterprise. This will lead to greater inequality and will not tackle the skills deficit in these deprived communities nor provide answers to the obstacles to training and employment. The alternative is to collude with the lack of urban connectivity and deny the need for a vision of post-conflict space. It is also to accept the huge financial and social cost of division and duplication of services. It is to agree to an additional annual expenditure of £1.5 billion and refuse to create safe, civic space for all people.

Who benefits from this 'benign apartheid'? Some would say that those with the largest stake in sectarian politics are the main beneficiaries.

Initial conclusions

The conclusions we reached from this research were that core ingredients in promoting shared space, of a physical, social or organisational nature, include:
• successful use of mobile phone networks;
• effective long-term (cross-community) dialogue;
• strong local/community leadership (and political support for this);
• 'joined-up' interagency and cross-sectoral work; and,
• shared knowledge of good practice.

Over a decade what was conflict management and 'fire fighting' is now becoming conflict transformation. Effective practice requires cross-community trust at local level to tackle community-based problems, with a common agenda resting on critical dialogue. That was the foundation of the success of the mobile phone networks, and a vital element in defusing community fear and tension when violence and unrest threatened.

More needs to be done to embed trust and long-term relationships among community leaders. Cross-sectoral relationships must be effectively forged so that the community sector works in strategic partnership with the statutory agencies – and includes a place at the table for the private sector. This is the

minimum requirement as the skills and educational deficit in areas of high-level, multiple deprivation pose a serious challenge for the future. And this must happen in a wider strategic policy arena, where policy implementation has a vision of shared space that is focused on connectivity, participative decision making and meaningful consultation.

There are three approaches to promoting shared space, which can usefully be implemented together. These include a community-based conflict transformation approach, strategic multi-agency working and decision-making with local communities in an inclusive, participative process, and the development and use of a sound evidence-base for future practice and policy.

Further discussion

Although the language of shared space is commonly used by practitioners, policy-makers and some politicians it is not without its problems. Much like 'reconciliation', 'shared space' and the lexicon of 'the shared society' are rooted in European Union funding that has underpinned the bulk of community-based work over decades[10] and continues to shape both the language and conceptualisation of peace-building. Asked to describe 'the key indicators of shared space' a practitioner-academic expert was emphatic.

> " '*Sharing' is based on the fiction of blamelessness and false history. …
> Bad things did happen. People did do wrong. It is not shared but public
> space, paid for by taxes and public money. It is space that belongs to
> citizens. It is civic. The idea that we 'share' it as a new or good thing is
> not helpful*."

In developing the "*Crossing The Line*", we were aware of the many major issues that needed to be further developed from their preliminary analysis of the situation. Chief amongst these are the concepts of A Shared Space Continuum, and integrations and segregation.

The link between community planning and integrated local strategies might have come with the implementation of RPA when local government would have had a central role in planning. This offered the chance of increased connectivity throughout Belfast and other urban areas. It could have made a fundamental impact on life at or near interfaces, and facilitated the move from managing conflict to transformation. For this reason the concepts of community planning and development of local strategies should be a priority

for those concerned with the development of shared space in areas close to an interface. There is also an important place for the private sector in local regeneration strategies.

Referring to the divisions in Oldham and Manchester Cantle (2002) proposed that:

> "*Programmes therefore need to be devised to counter, on the one hand, enforced choices and to ensure equality of opportunity in practical terms and, on the other, to counter the ignorance which may be associated with completely divided or segregated communities. We would emphasise that such programmes should be devised to inform the different black, asian and other ethnic minority communities about each other, as well as about the majority white community and vice versa.*
>
> *Further, the development of potentially more segregated communities – for example through more mono-cultural schools, or the creation of housing areas, which are likely to be dominated by a particular community – should be balanced by action which fosters understanding of other communities. This should represent a very significant commitment and must be proportionate to the extent to which a community is separated at different levels. In other words, a new housing area or school which reinforces the pre-existing separation by employment, social, cultural, religious, geographic and other factors, will require a major programme to foster understanding of other communities on an ongoing basis".*

These issues were referred to as part of a UK analysis, but some elements may be transferred directly to our local situation. We know that there are varying degrees of segregation and sharing, yet there is no objective measurement and we believe the development of a model is long overdue.

The need for such joined-up holistic programme is flagged up in CSI, and this is clearly an area of importance for future work.

Conclusions

Our research found that practice at interfaces has progressed from 'fire-fighting' to a more transformational approach. However, this work cannot

develop or progress unless there is a continued reduction in levels of violence and the riots and violence in Belfast in summer 2010 demonstrate that this cannot be taken for granted. Hope for optimism lies in the fact that many years' experience may now be consolidated in an interface practitioners' forum, where a collective voice will bring informed opinion to influence policy on community planning and regeneration.

And, while we found a general consensus that 'shared-ness'– both physical and metaphorical – exists on a continuum, thinking on this complex phenomenon is embryonic. This continuum has changed and developed over time and is likely to continue to change within the context of a post conflict society.

The CSI proposes that we support 'Shared and Safe Places for working, shopping, socialising and playing'. Our "*Crossing the Line*" report stresses the need to develop more cohesion and tackle the issues of physical interfaces proactively. Cantle's research in English cities highlights the perils of segregation for future social cohesion. However, these aims are most often articulated in abstract terms such as to: "*Build on Shared values of human rights and equality to build a society which honours rights and accepts our civic responsibility to one another*". (CSI)

A more definitive analysis is necessary, and one that documents exactly how segregated space develops and continues. The concept of shared space must be seen as a 'continuum' and requires more specific ways of describing it.

Given the will to move towards shared space and away from segregation and interfaces, there appears to be the public and political will for this. It will not happen however, unless we create pathways for development that are attainable, progressive and measurable. Some of this work has begun. The NIHE 'Shared Neighbourhood' programme is one example of physical planning that works to create shared housing areas. The proposals contained in 'Crossing the Line' to create new 'Shared Space' can be considered part of creating pathways as well. Co-ordinated, interagency approaches developed at the most local level will assist. Creating practical pathways from segregation to integration is a major next step in putting policy into practice!

Notes

1   The research was funded by Belfast City Council and the European Union Regional Development Fund.

2   Implementing RPA is to be postponed until 2014, as the Minister, Edwin Poots, announced on 15th June 2010.

3   CRC, 2009.

4   Murtagh and Shirlow, 2006; Shirlow and Murtagh, 2007.

5   Deloitte, 2007.

6   Boujenko et al, 2008.

7   Belfast City Council, 2003 and 2008; Murtagh, 2008 and 2002; Bradley and Murtagh, 2007; Donnelly, 2006; Gaffikin et al, 2008; Heatley, 2004; Jarman, 2008, 2006, 2005a, 2005b,2004 and 2002.

8   Murtagh, 1999.

9   Jarman et al, 2009.

10 Hughes et al, 1998.

References

Belfast City Council (2003), *Building our future together*, Belfast, online at http//www.belfast.gov.uk

Belfast City Council (January 2008), *Peace and Reconciliation Action Plan* (Revised), Belfast (available at www.belfastcity.gov.uk).

Boujenko, N., Buchanan, C. and Jones, P. (June 2008), Discussion Paper vi, *Improving Connectivity and Mobility in Belfast*, Belfast City Council.

Bradley, Colm and Murtagh, Brendan (December 2007), *Good Practice in Local Area Planning in the Context of Promoting Good Relations: Final Report*, Belfast, Belfast City Council, Good Relations Research Programme.

Cantle, Ted (2002), *Community Cohesion: A Report of the Independent Review Team,* London, Home Office.

Community Relations Council (2009), *The Business of Peace: Working for a better future: Community Relations, Stability and the Economy*, Policy Development Conference Report, Belfast.

Deloitte (April 2007), *Research into the financial cost of the Northern Ireland divide,* Belfast.

Donnelly, Paul, 'Interfaces' in *Sharing over Separation: Actions towards a shared future, 115-128,* Belfast, Community Relations Council, 2006.

Gaffikin, Frank, McEldowney, Malachy, Rafferty, Gavan and Sterrett, Ken (January 2008), *Public Space For A Shared Belfast: A research report for Belfast City Council,* Belfast.

Goldie, Roz and Ruddy, Brid (2010), *Crossing the Line: Key features of effective practice in the development of shared space in areas close to an interface,* Belfast, Belfast Interface Project.

Heatley, C. (2004), *Interface: Flashpoints in Northern Ireland,* Belfast, Lagan Books Publishing.

Hughes, Joanne, Knox, Colin, Murray, Michael and Greer, Jonathan (1998), *Partnership Governance in Northern Ireland: the path to peace,* Dublin, Oak Tree Press.

Jarman, Neil, Bell, John and Rallings, Mary Kathryn, 'Dialogue or Disengagement: Responding to Disputes over Parades' in *Shared Space*, Issue 8, 17-30, October 2009, Belfast, Community Relations Council.

Jarman, Neil, 'Security and Segregation: Interface Barriers in Belfast' in *Shared Space*, Issue 6, 21-33, June 2008, Belfast, Community Relations Council.

Jarman, Neil (May 2006), *Working at the Interface: Good Practice in Reducing Tension and Violence,* Belfast, Institute for Conflict Research.

Jarman, Neil (2005a), 'Changing Places, Moving Boundaries: The Development of New Interface Areas', in *Shared Space*, Issue 1, 9-20, August 2005, Belfast, Community Relations Council.

Jarman, Neil (2005b), *BIP Interface Mapping Project*, Belfast, Belfast Interface Project, August 2005.

Jarman, Neil (2004), *Demography, Development and Disorder: Changing Patterns of Interface Areas,* Belfast, Institute for Conflict Research/Commissioned by Community Relations Council.

Jarman, Neil (2002), *Managing Disorder: Responding to Interface Violence in North Belfast,* Belfast, Community Development Centre North Belfast.

Murtagh, Brendan *New Spaces and Old in 'Post-Conflict' Belfast* Divided Cities/Contested States, Working Paper No.5, 2008, School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work, Queens University Belfast (available on www.conflictincities.org)

Murtagh, Brendan and Shirlow, Peter, 'Spatial segregation and labour market processes in Belfast' in *Policy and Politics*, Vol. 35, No. 3: 361-375, 2007.

Murtagh, Brendan (2002), *The Politics of Territory,* London, Pagrave.

Murtagh, Brendan, 'Listening to communities: locality research and planning' in *Urban Studies*, Vol. 36, No. 7, 1185-1199, 1999.

O'Halloran, Chris, Shirlow, Peter and Murtagh, Brendan (2004), *A policy agenda for the Interface,* Belfast, Belfast Interface Project.

Shirlow, Peter and Murtagh, Brendan (2006), *Belfast: Segregation, Violence and the City,* London, Pluto Press.