

Polarisation takes place

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The title of this essay intends to indicate that polarisation and even radicalisation is not an a-spatial or a-material phenomenon. The opposite is also true. De-polarisation or community cohesion *takes place* and has a material and spatial dimension. These findings are based on a project at the Manchester Architecture Research Centre (University of Manchester) with the title “The urban environment – Mirror and mediator or radicalisation?” The term urban environment is deliberately broad and represents anything from a cobble stone, bicycle rack, the design of a building to the layout of whole street patterns. The expression ‘mirror’ represents the idea that the urban environment *mirrors* or is an expression of socio-political conditions. Conversely, the urban environment also has the potential to influence or *mediate* socio-political conditions such as polarisation or radicalisation to a limited but not insignificant degree.

The project was funded under the New Security Challenges Programme, which in turn is funded by the ESRC, AHRC and Foreign and Commonwealth Office. It ran from September 2007 to June 2010 with a total volume of £217K and with the help of co-investigator Prof. Jon Coaffee (now University of Birmingham) and research assistant Sara Fregonese (now Royal Holloway University). We compared the situation in Belfast, Berlin, Amsterdam and Beirut and conducted over 100 interviews. We were also managed to recruit around 50 volunteers who agreed to help gather data with disposable cameras by documenting anything in their everyday environment that struck them as relevant in the context of this project. We systematically engaged with stakeholders, users, and potential beneficiaries of our research findings such as planners, architects, community workers, police officers etc. It was recently short-listed for the RIBA¹ President’s Award for Outstanding University-located Research. Further information about the project is available at www.sed.manchester.ac.uk/architecture/research/radicalisation/ and www.urbanpolarisation.org.

We operated with four research questions: Firstly: *(How) does polarisation/ radicalisation become materially imprinted in cities?* This question is directly mapped against the understanding of the urban

environment as a ‘mirror’ of socio-political conditions. Secondly, we also wanted to investigate the ‘mediating’ effect of the urban environment and therefore asked *whether and how certain material conditions influence polarisation / radicalisation trends?* But we did not only want to pursue purely academic questions; we also wanted to make a positive difference by enabling all kinds of urban practitioners to improve the situation on the ground. Hence the third research question: *Are certain design features conducive to facilitating friendly encounters?* What we did not investigate was whether friendly encounters are actually effective in quelling radicalisation. This would have required a completely different setup and research design. The existing literature contains many strong opinions in favour of this assumption but it is extremely difficult to prove it. Hence we simply adopted this assumption.

The project started with a very thorough review of the existing literature on related topic. This lead to strong evidence that work on radicalisation is predominately conducted in only a few disciplines such as political science, sociology, psychology or public administration (see Figure 1). Disciplines that deal with material or spatial aspects such as area studies or geography are not typically concerned with issues like radicalisation or polarisation. Therefore, it seems justified to diagnose a ‘materiality gap’ in the study and public discourse of these issues.

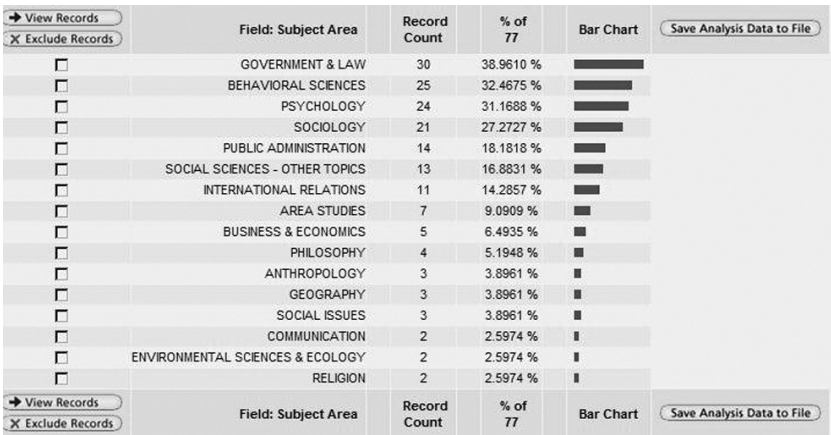


Fig 1

The urban environment as mirror

Throughout the project we gathered overwhelming evidence that the urban environment does indeed mirror socio-political conditions. However, the interpretation to ‘read’ the urban environment for such signs requires local knowledge. The meaning of



Fig 2

kerb-stones in Northern Ireland painted red white and blue (Figure 2), for example, might not be obvious for many people outside the United Kingdom. Most visitors to Belfast would probably need an explanation that their purpose is to demarcate loyalist / unionist / protestant territory against the nationalist / republican / catholic ‘others’. This challenges an assumption the project team had at the early stages according to which a thorough analysis of the built environment might provide hints about social dynamics in a community, even about polarisation and radicalisation trends. But those who are able to read the urban environment in that sense would obviously already possess a sufficient degree of local knowledge so that the urban environment would not tell them anything new. We therefore do not consider the urban environment as a suitable instrument to diagnose social developments or even as seismograph.

Related to the idea of ‘reading’ the urban environment there is a massive danger of over-interpretation as Figure 3 illustrates. It shows simply a set of German flags outside a flat in Berlin. This is nothing suspicious per se. The potential meaning of the flags shifts, however, in light of some



Fig 3

additional information: The image was taken at the flat’s rear entry in the Weitlingstrasse in Lichtenberg, which suffers from a reputation as one of the most important hotspots for neo-Nazis in Germany and where the majority of people actually makes an effort *not* to be seen right-wing. In this context it becomes plausible to interpret the flags as a political statement. The visibility of polarisation trends is, on the one hand, clearly reason for concern. On the other hand, it might be taken as a signal that extremists have not (yet) reached a point where they prepare major clandestine operations. While we found no direct evidence for the following mechanism, it seems plausible that the spatial and material needs of radical groups depend on the situation within which they are. For some purposes, for example, for recruiting new members,

they might seek a strategic kind of visibility. This is certainly the case among many neo-Nazis who display their affiliation with clothes of a certain brand which, in turn, requires a certain retail infrastructure (Figure 4). If extremists were to plan clandestine operations they would most certainly want to avoid public attention.



Fig 4

Another key point to make is that polarisation is – as the origin of the word indicates – a relational phenomenon. It is essentially about the relation between two (or more) poles and a situation is said to be polarised when *either* pole increases the distance from the other. Typically, the ‘normal’ or ‘nativ’ population in a certain area is considered fixed but this is not necessarily always the case. Figure 5 illustrates that the shift towards the right end of the political spectrum among ‘native’ Dutch also leads to visible expressions in the urban environment; in this case through a poster accusing Geert Wilders, a right-wing politician with explicit antipathies against Muslims, as extremist. This trend can also have much more tangible effects on the urban environment. In a number of cases, we came across almost fortress-like, gated developments whose architecture bluntly signals anyone on the outside to back off. This mainly paranoid need for protection can turn into a self-fulfilling fear because it has the potential to annoy and offend those who cannot afford or do not want to live in such developments.



Fig 5

Almost all interviewees in all four cities agreed on the importance to remove inflammatory symbols, stickers and graffiti. This should, however, not just happen as a unilateral municipal act. In ideal cases, this should happen in cooperation with those

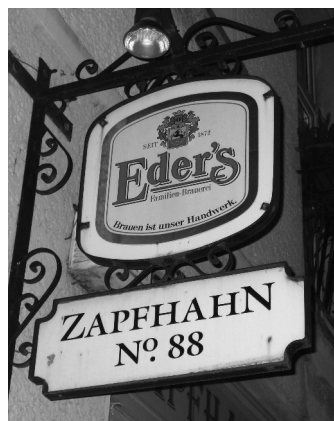


Fig 6

who prefer a harmonious co-existence, which is, in most cases, the otherwise silent majority. This recommendation, however, should be seen in light of some evidence that a very tough approach to symbols of radical groups can trigger evasion strategies. In Germany, for example, where it is illegal to display the swastika, neo-Nazis developed a insidious game with words and even numbers: The number 8 represents the 8th letter of the alphabet 'H'. 88 therefore represents HH which stands for 'Heil Hitler' (Figure 6). Such games seem to make it actually attractive – especially for teenagers – to keep up with the development of such secret representations.

The urban environment as mediator

The urban environment is, of course, never the single cause of radicalisation. It can only accentuate or, in ideal cases, alleviate the situation – but it *can* do that. The reason for this is that urban environment features are hardly ever neutral. Engineers of a pedestrian bridge in Belfast (figure 7), for example, simply wanted to provide a pedestrian link between the Royal Victoria Hospital and the rest of the city. But they triggered, inadvertently, a sharp rise in community tensions between the protestant community (behind the trees seen on the left) and the catholic community at the other side of the Westlink motorway. The wheel chair ramp (seen on the right) acts as perfect spot from which to launch stones, paint- or petrol-bomb attacks at the perceived enemy territory. A new fence, de-facto a new peace wall, had to be erected after the opening of the new bridge to prevent the worst. Cases like these underline the importance of consultation with community workers, the police, cross-community organisations etc. during the very early planning stage of even very mundane urban material interventions. It is also important to strengthen these organisations' capacity to get involved in planning and design processes.



Fig 7

Another concrete spatial and material argument in the debate on community cohesion and radicalisation is that segregation causes or at least facilitates polarisation. We did not come across anything close to a proof for this hypothesis in the existing literature. In light of much evidence we gathered this idea appears at least plausible because it deepens the habit of avoiding 'others' as in this case in Amsterdam where a six-lane highway through a particular community (Figure 8) makes it physically very hard to

encounter ‘others’ because a rather uninviting tunnel makes it quite unappealing to venture into territories other than one’s own.

Most interviewees agreed that in certain cases ‘target hardening’ and surveillance measures are sometimes required. Such interventions, however, should be chosen with utmost care because they often attract new trouble because they challenge restless young males’ strength and audacity. In basically all cases they signal distrust, stigmatisation and defeatism and visibly declare the presence of a threat which thus can appear bigger than it really is. Figure 9 shows a related case, a heavily fortified police station which was built right next to a mosque in Slotervaart, a district of Amsterdam. Although the police representative claimed that the siting and design of this police station is not part of a surveillance strategy – and the interior architecture lends credit to this claim – the rumour effect on the local Muslim community could actually have been significant. The key point here is *perceived observation* and must be taken into account much more in urban design strategies with and without CCTV.

Another reason why protective interventions in the urban environment have to be chosen with maximum care is their material and social obduracy. While certain features (fences, CCTV etc.) might be necessary initially to prevent harm one has to acknowledge that people always tend to embed these objects into their daily life in the sense of appropriation or normalisation. This makes it difficult to alter, soften or even remove such kinds of objects after the fact. In addition, artefacts built from concrete, bricks and steel are, in a very literal sense, difficult to change. To use a concrete example: Once a peace wall in Northern Ireland has gone up it is physically impossible to have a friendly, neighbourly chat with people on the ‘other’ side, even in peaceful times. Where elements of the built environment result from a condition of community distrust or even conflict they thus act as silent socialisers, as non-verbal clues to children and adolescents about what is to be considered a normal situation and appropriate behaviour. In this sense, the urban environment plays a role in perpetuating or reinforcing community divisions.



Fig 8



Fig 9

The detrimental effect of demonstratively defensive residential developments was already mentioned above. What should be emphasised again in the ‘mediator’ rubric is the effect of, even entirely benign, urban renewal or urban regeneration projects in ethnically somewhat homogeneous neighbourhoods. While their original intention might have included a desire to introduce a higher degree of diversity, they can also have exactly the opposite effect if they trigger envy, worsen perceived grievances and reify the distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’; especially if their (non-) affordability reproduces existing economic inequalities. In some cases, the break-up of segregation at the macro-level is simply transferred into segregation at the meso- or micro-level where people from different backgrounds might share the same neighbourhood – in a technical sense – but withdraw into completely separate streets, shops, playgrounds etc. A hypothetical idea to counter such effects could be to build a deliberate flexibility and malleability into, for example, the demarcation artefacts around a new development. It could start with a metal fence which could be replaced after a few years of professional community engagement work by a wooden one which could be removed altogether a few years later.

Facilitating friendly encounters

If the highly plausible but admittedly unproven assumption that segregation, that is, a lack of opportunities for personal encounter, is correct, then spaces where such interactions can take place might play a humble role in efforts to improve community cohesion and to reduce polarisation. If the latter can be a stepping stone towards radicalisation then the attempt to facilitate friendly encounters between communities that might otherwise diverge could actually be part of the PREVENT strategy. This was the motivation why our project contained a related research question. We did not find any evidence that the attempt to create such shared spaces or spaces for friendly encounters worsens the situation. But this is no guarantee for success either and it can absolutely not be interpreted as a recommendation to manipulate our way to community cohesion in a social engineering sense.



Fig 10



Fig 11

Basically everyone we spoke to agreed that participation is absolutely crucial in the development of such spaces. Participation is costly and takes time but it is more than worthwhile. It can produce results such as the conversion of the building seen in Figure 10 into a community asset. Technically speaking, it was part of a peace wall at the Stewartstown Road in outer west Belfast with a history of rather violent clashes between Protestants and Catholics. Bottom-up, or grassroots, negotiations over almost eight years – interestingly mainly by women – resulted in an agreement to replace the old building with a new one (Figure 11) which contains a small supermarket, pharmacists, community café and other facilities catering to people's everyday needs. Nothing like this could have been achieved through a top-down or supply side intervention. There is massive anecdotal evidence from all four cities in favour of community participation. A key rationale for community involvement is that it allows designers to learn about the concerns, preferences and needs of the future users and to get their buy-in and commitment. In addition, non-participatory interventions are of questionable ethical quality and might simply not work in a very practical sense.

But attempts to supply facilities for friendly encounters in a benign way are not necessarily doomed either as the example of a set of stairs in Beirut illustrates (Figure 12). To our knowledge, it was built without significant degrees of community involvement across Damascus Road, the former front line between the main factions during the civil war. It now allows, in a very literal sense, to venture across the road for very mundane purposes; even just to check whether the oranges are cheaper or juicier on the other side which might become the seed for interaction and for breaking down stereotypes.



Fig 12

But despite some example of successful 'shared spaces' it is extremely difficult to extract some universal lessons for their creation because we encountered only three necessary conditions for such spaces. One is perceived safety such as in the case of some Kiezgardens (neighbourhood gardens, figure 13)



Fig 13

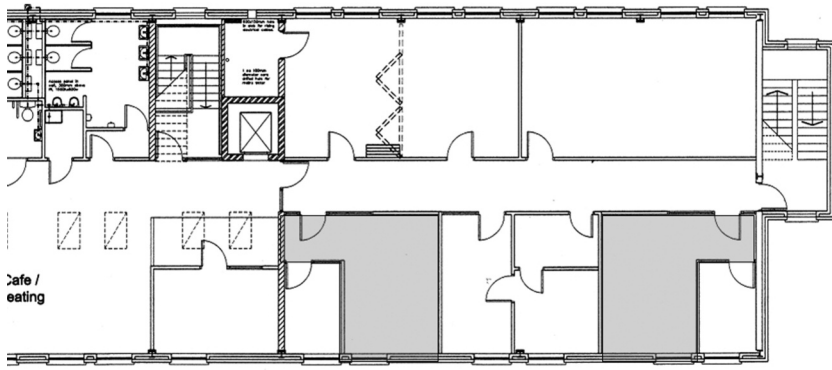


Fig 14

in Berlin where the municipality decided to provide a space which is fenced off, not against right-wing extremists but against the aggressive breed of dogs with which some neo-Nazis like to display their fierceness. Now children from various backgrounds can play safely behind this fence. Another key ingredient of successful shared spaces is equal treatment. The aforementioned project on Stewartstown Road in Belfast demonstrates this point nicely. The idea was to provide office space for both the catholic and protestant community groups on the first floor. But when the architect presented the initial drawings one group quickly pointed out that they got a smaller office than the other group. The architect had to redraw her plans which now contains two identical L-shaped offices (figure 14). A third necessary element of shared spaces is the absence of potentially offending objects and especially symbols. This explains, for example, why the designers of a shopping mall right at an intersection between a Christian and a Shi'a Muslim neighbourhood in Beirut had to spend a lot of time and thought to come up with a colour scheme to indicate the various levels in the parking garage. The reason was that most basic colours were affiliated with either of the many political factions in Lebanon. The chosen solution (Figure 15) operates with hues like turquoise and claret. A fourth parameter of successful shared spaces seems like a desirable but not necessarily indispensable element: Ideally, shared spaces are practical in an economic sense and provide convenience benefits. The 'Intercultural Garden' shown in Figure 16, for example, allows people to grow their own flowers and vegetables in some densely built-up districts of Berlin. People from various ethnic backgrounds might start chatting with their allotment neighbours almost as a side-effect of their attempt to grow tasty onions. Other motivations that draw people together across different identities often have to do with entertainment, sports and consumerism.

The possibility to identify such suitably shared activities and some design elements of successfully shared spaces should not distract from maybe the strongest opinion of all our interviewees: that the design process of such spaces is at least as important as the design content and that their management, once they've been built, is absolutely crucial to their success.



Fig 15

Contributions to PREVENT

We would like to differentiate between a radicalised situation and radicalising situation. In the former, urban environment interventions can only try to prevent against premeditated acts of aggression or to minimise the harm of such events. This is not what the project 'The urban environment – Mirror and mediator of radicalisation?' was focussing on. The main concern of our project is radicalising situations and in this sense we are convinced that it is able to make some contributions to the UK counter-terrorism strategy PREVENT. Clearly, we do not claim that the urban environment is a silver bullet to all such problems but we do believe that the urban environment can condition, accentuate but also alleviate what has been called the 'breeding ground' of polarisation and potential radicalisation. To prevent the accentuation of such a situation basically means to avoid mistakes; to alleviate a situation is to do good. In the first category, there are two things to avoid: Direct triggers of community tensions such as the pedestrian bridge in Belfast but also indirect ones such as gated, defensive and repellent developments because they introduce segregation through the back door. The more ambitious approach crystallises to the attempt of providing, stimulating or sponsoring shared spaces. Both approaches require heightened awareness amongst all kinds of professions: not just architects, planners and engineers but also community workers, local politicians, police officers etc. They all should learn to appreciate the role and mediating agency of the urban environment which requires training, good information from credible sources, workshops, websites, exhibitions and much more. Most importantly, however, we all need to learn to make better use of local experience and wisdom.



Fig 16

The project has already resulted in a number of outputs such as an article in the journal *Urban Studies* and one double special issue of the *Journal of Urban Technology* on ‘The architecture of war and peace’. It contains, among others, a paper about ‘Urban Artifacts and Social Practices in a Contested City’ and the results of the aforementioned literature review. The project’s Principal Investigator, Dr. Ralf Brand, gave almost 20 presentations on this topic and developed, in collaboration with two Vienna-based artists a touring exhibition as key device of the project’s dissemination strategy. It is available in English, German, Dutch and Arabic and has been travelling to all four case study cities plus Manchester, Exeter and London. The exhibition is also available for self-assembly to increase its reach even further. For more information visit <www.urbanpolarisation.org> and <www.youtube.com/brandrg>.

Notes

- 1 Royal Institute of British Architects.