

Belfast and Beyond: Local and international narratives of physical segregation

Jonny Byrne

When a city is redeveloped a pattern of life is laid down for at least a century...I find myself in disagreement on the proposals that the divisions in the community should be accepted as a feature of life for a hundred years or more. This seems a counsel of despair. A despair, which it is proposed, should be expressed in terms of bricks and mortar.¹

Introduction

This passage was taken from a written exchange between civil servants in 1971 about the issue of peace lines² and security fences in Belfast. They were debating the impact and merits of physical division as a response to the increase in communal violence and disorder. It is obvious from the above extract that there were concerns as to the long-term implications of the peace lines on the population of the city. Forty years on, much of Belfast's identity has become synonymous with ethnic division through physical lines of demarcation. Although, Northern Ireland has entered into a period of political stability and significant progress has been achieved through the peace process, the peace walls remain a visible reminder of the violence of the past, and the differences which continue to exist between communities. Recently, a series of initiatives³ have been engineered at both statutory and community levels to consider the issue of peace lines in Belfast, and to examine methods, which could lead to the transformation and removal of peace lines across Loyalist and Republican communities. Furthermore, a brief review of recent local and national strategies and action plans provides additional evidence of the increased attention currently being placed on the issue of peace lines. The 'Cohesion, Sharing and Integration' (2010) consultation document published through the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister; the Department for Justice's 'Building Safer, Shared, and Confident

Communities' (2011) document; and the Belfast City Council's 'Investment Programme: 2012-2015' consultation document place emphases, both directly and indirectly, on the regeneration of interface communities, and the transformation and removal of peace lines.

The purpose of this paper is to explore in detail the factors which have contributed to the rise in popularity of peace lines as a policy issue at both local and national government. While Belfast and Northern Ireland is often seen as 'a place apart',⁴ it is important to emphasize that many other cities and countries have implemented policies which have resulted in forced segregation and division through the construction of walls, barriers and fences. Therefore, it is important to introduce the reader to the use of walls and barriers in an international context, before drilling down to the specificities of Northern Ireland in general, and Belfast, in particular. The focus then shifts to an explanation of the actual significance of these peace lines within the current peace and political process.

Conflicted cities, walls and public policy

There is a large body of literature, which has considered the range of cities and countries which have been characterised by division and notions of contested space.⁵ Collectively the literature highlights the importance which different ethnic, social and religious groups within urban settings place on territory and space, and the subsequent intergroup polarisation which manifests itself as a direct result of the differing dynamics and positions. Academics and scholars⁶ have also noted that cities are constantly dividing geographically by ethnicity, race, religion, income and age. However, when that division and segregation transforms into violence it becomes urban polarisation, which is viewed as a deep, intractable form of urban conflict experienced when ethnic and nationalist assertions come together and impact on the administration of the city at a local level.⁷ It has also been suggested⁸ that a contested city denotes a place where diversity is not viewed as an asset but as a source of competing territorial claims, segregation, intimidation and more often than not, violence and disorder. For example, in cities such as Belfast, Beirut, Nicosia, Jerusalem, and Mostar,⁹ group ethnicity is often tied to: political affiliation; a history of institutional discrimination; issues and concerns around physical security; questions regarding the legitimacy of policing; and shifting relationships between the majority and minority ethnic communities. More often than not, these micro-level disputes are played out in the geography of the city and are reflective of the larger macro-level issues which, in turn, dominate issues of governance, politics and policy.

The subject of walls in partitioned and divided cities has been well documented, with specific attention placed on the social, economic and political segregation that is a direct outcome of the physical lines of demarcation.¹⁰ From a theoretical perspective the idea of a 'wall' assumes very different meaning and assumptions depending on one's discipline and field. However, there is a clear consensus that the term 'wall' alludes to an element of separation, a border or boundary, whether it is in a tangible or intangible form.¹¹ The use of walls by cities and countries to demarcate territory and provide defensible structures is not a new concept. Scholars¹² have consistently highlighted the relationship between walls and cities, and the significant role walls play in, not only defining territory, but also shaping identity and generating civic spirit. The literature also maintains that walls and barriers are, for the most part, short-term policy fixes that have been designed as a response to specific emergencies. And in most cases there is reluctance from policy makers and local administrators to address the subject of physical barriers because they are a reflection of a failed policy and their own inability to address communal differences. In their defence, there is a consensus among advocates of partition that, although the barricades are aesthetically unpleasing, they address intercommunal violence quickly, and are more cost effective when compared to regular policing responses.

Walls as a policy response

Physical segregation has emerged over the last fifty years as one of the most popular and myopic solutions to intergroup violence in the urban environment¹³. What follows is a series of examples from a range of cities and countries which have adopted policies that have resulted the building of physical lines of demarcation. Regardless of the rationale, the construction of barriers and walls appears to instill a sense of safety and confidence within communities and governments, and is furthermore a visible and tangible response to a specific issue or problem. In recent years these issues have more often than not centred on concerns around terrorism, ethnic communal violence, and immigration.

There are several examples of cities which have undergone significant structural changes because of the construction of barriers to separate different community and ethnic groups. These include Beirut, the capital of Lebanon, where widespread violence, and an ensuing civil war in 1975 involving Christians and Muslims, resulted in the construction of a fortified path approximately 9km long, known as the Green Line through the capital city.¹⁴ The division followed the main North-South traffic corridor within the city,

and it was not until 1990, after constitutional reforms, that the civil war was concluded and the Green Line dividing Beirut was dismantled. Mostar, a city and municipality in Bosnia-Herzegovina, experienced deep division as a result of the construction of physical barricades, built in response to ethnic cleansing by Croatian paramilitary units against local Muslim residents in the early 1990s. A partition line was created, which followed the path of the river along with the main thoroughfare in the city, which separated the various ethnic groups. The barricades consisted of asphalt, concrete, sandbags, barbed wire, and derelict houses.¹⁵ Since March 1994, upon the unification of the state, the partition line fortifications and checkpoints have been dismantled.

The city of Jerusalem, positioned in Israel and Palestine, has a history of physical partition between the different religious and ethnic groups.¹⁶ In 1962 the Green Line constituted a physical barricade through the city consisting of barbed wire, defensive ramparts, corrugated iron fencing and land mines. These barricades were removed in 1967 following the conclusion of the Six-Day War and brought the unification of Jerusalem after nineteen years of division. However, since 2006 the Israeli government has been constructing a separation barrier along its border with Palestine, which has resulted in parts of Jerusalem once again being divided along ethno-religious lines.

Other cities that are considered divided and contested include Nicosia, the capital of Cyprus, which has been divided along ethnic lines since 1964 when an International Peacekeeping Force established a ceasefire line (known as the Green Line) which separated the island into two distinct sides. By 1974 this barrier had become impassable and the country was governed separately in the North by Turkish Cypriot authorities and in the South by the Greek Cypriot government.¹⁷ Since 2004 it has been possible for people to walk across the Green Line at five different points across the island. More recently, Baghdad has witnessed an expansive construction of walls throughout the different ethnic neighbourhoods. A report by the Independent Commission on the Security Forces of Iraq (2007), established by the US Congress, indicated that Belfast should be used as a policing model in the battle to secure Baghdad from communal disorder and sectarian violence.¹⁸ The US army responded by constructing several miles of concrete walls throughout the city in an attempt to reduce the paramilitary violence and to provide opportunities for political discussions to take place. Interestingly, the Iraqi Prime Minister, upon taking full control of the city in 2009, ordered the removal of all US-built barricades which lined shop fronts and ringed neighbourhoods. However, it should be noted that although a number of walls and barricades were dismantled, an upsurge in paramilitary bombings resulted in those same barriers being subsequently re-erected.¹⁹

Less well known cities within Europe have also constructed barriers in response to communal disorder and ethnic violence. These have included Usti Nad Labem in the Czech Republic,²⁰ where in 1999 local authorities implemented a barrier to separate gypsy tenant dwellers from Czechs living in private homes. The barrier was subsequently removed after criticism from the EU and the Czech parliament. In Padua, Northern Italy in 2006 the local government officials constructed a barrier around the Agnelli estate in response to violent confrontations between rival gangs.²¹ Furthermore, there is a growing debate among residents of Rio de Janeiro around the motives behind government constructed walls surrounding the shanty towns. The locally dubbed 'eco-walls' are intended to restrict the expansion of the shanty towns and address growing concerns of deforestation at the outskirts of the city. However, local residents maintain that the walls are a form of segregation to isolate the poorer communities and protect the more affluent neighbourhoods in the city.²² Similarly, in Argentina the government has been calling on local authorities to halt the construction of a separation wall intended to divide a middle-class neighbourhood from the poorer districts in the outskirts of Buenos Aires. From the outset, the government and policy-makers employed issues of crime and security as the rationale for building the walls. However, for many within the communities most affected, it was viewed as social apartheid based on a premise of elitism.²³

It is not only cities where one can observe the implementation of policies on division and segregation through the construction of physical barricades. Over the last decade several governments and state administrations have chosen to construct fences and walls along their borders. For example, Thailand has recently begun the construction of a 50-mile barrier with Malaysia in response to increased terrorist activity.²⁴ India has begun building a 1,800-mile fence surrounded by barbed wire and mines along its border with Pakistan, and is also constructing a 1,950-mile barrier alongside its border with Bangladesh in response to issues of illegal immigration.²⁵ Beijing in China is also constructing a number of barricades alongside its border with North Korea, amidst growing concerns regarding the influx of refugees into China. The Western Sahara is a further area, which has become sealed off by Morocco through the construction of high sand and stone barricades, wire fences, mines and artillery bases. Other countries engaged in the construction of barriers include Pakistan and their 1,500-mile fence along the border with Afghanistan; Uzbekistan and their newly developed barrier along its border with Tajikistan; the United Arab Emirates, which has constructed a fence along its frontier with Oman, and Kuwait, which continues to expand its physical walls against the border of Iraq.²⁶ Saudi Arabia is also driving forward policies regarding division and segregation, with the country currently

engaged in an \$8.5 billion project to fence off its entire border with Yemen and Iraq. The USA have also commenced building a 700-mile fence alongside its border with Mexico in response to growing concerns of cross-border immigration and drug smuggling.²⁷ There are less visible examples of barricades and fences being used in Europe, with the exception of the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla on the Moroccan coast, which have fences to limit illegal immigration.²⁸ Finally, although not currently defined by barriers and other forms of physical segregation, academics have identified several cities that had the potential for polarisation and partition. These cities include Montreal, Monrovia, Dagestan, Dili, Bunia, Novi Sad, Kigali, Singapore, Cincinnati, Kirkuk, and Oakland.²⁹

This brief international synopsis of walls, fences and other forms of physical segregation suggests that policies of separation and division implemented through the construction of physical barricades are often justified in terms of addressing security concerns and providing protection. Policies that advocate the building of walls have been pursued internationally at an increasing rate, with a growing sense that physical partition is an acceptable and normal response to security concerns. Interestingly, from the examples presented, the design and implementation of barriers and walls appears to be positioned within a security-policy framework, which lends support to the accusation that civil society and non-governmental organisations have limited opportunities to participate, consult or shape these policies. Attention now turns to Belfast, where the physical lines of demarcation, initially employed as a security response to the communal violence, remain a tangible as well as a symbolic manifestation of division.

Belfast: a city of contradictions

Prior to an exploration of the factors, which have contributed to the increased attention on Belfast's peace lines, it is necessary to provide a contextual background to the issue. The first peace wall was constructed in Belfast in late 1969 by the British army, in response to sectarian violence and disorder involving Catholic and Protestant communities³⁰. These barriers were initially considered a short-term policy response to issues relating to security and community safety. However, for the duration of the conflict the British government, through the Northern Ireland Office (NIO), continued with policies of division and segregation through the construction of physical barriers. Despite their physical presence within the city, there is a minimal amount of information available on the peace lines. In fact, one could go as far as to suggest that there remains a lack of political knowledge and societal

understanding and ambiguity about them. This is clearly evidenced by the lack of clarity on the actual numbers that exist, or even what constitutes a peace line. In 2008 the Northern Ireland Office indicated that there were 53 peace lines in Northern Ireland.³¹ However, in 2011 Prime Minister David Cameron in his speech to the Northern Ireland Assembly referred to the 48 peace walls in Northern Ireland.³² Furthermore, research conducted for the Belfast Interface Project in 2012 concluded that there were 99 security barriers and forms of defensive architecture across Belfast.³³

In recent years, Belfast has emerged as a city of contradictions and anomalies. There are those that maintain the peace process has operated at two distinct levels. One view³⁴ contends that across Belfast specific communities have benefited more from the peace process than others, pointing to the growth in housing and commercial businesses in parts of South Belfast (where there are no peace lines) as opposed to the high levels of social deprivation that continue to exist within communities in North and West Belfast. This raises the question as to what type of city Belfast has become? According to one property developer, the city can be described as:

Belfast! A vibrant and modern European city re-inventing itself as it develops its unique culture. A capital city offering a cosmopolitan mix of award winning restaurants, stylish shops and high quality hotels. A city which is confidently reflecting a new social and economic prosperity. It is a city of contrasts.³⁵

However, a journalist reflecting on the physical changes within neighbourhoods only one mile from the city centre concluded that:

In Berlin they have been marking 20 years without their wall, in North and West Belfast the division of the city remains set in concrete, wire and fencing.³⁶

There are parts of Belfast, which have expanded and developed new identities, such as the Titanic Quarter and Cathedral Square, creating a cosmopolitan environment and a new cultural and dynamic vision for Belfast. However, a note of caution is required, for there are large of parts of the city which claim to have been largely ignored in relation to the resource packages, employment opportunities and physical regeneration schemes that emerged in the late 1990s under the peace process banner. These inner-city Loyalist and Republican communities remain trapped in an environment and mindset characterised by suspicion, fear, hatred and distrust of anything that disrupts the status quo within these neighbourhoods.³⁷ It is within these areas that peace

lines have been constructed, effectively dividing and segregating the dominant working-class communities across the city.

The significance of peace walls

Prior to the devolution of Policing and Justice powers to the Northern Ireland Assembly in 2010, peace walls as a policy issue had been absent from the formal peace process. Policy responsibility had been situated within the NIO, and local politicians had largely a consultative role in any decision-making processes surrounding the peace lines. However, under devolution, local politicians for the first time had responsibility for formulation and implementation for policies pertaining to peace lines. Since the restoration of the political institutions in 2008 there has been a significant increase in attention placed on the issue of peace lines. However, attributing a single cause for this increased attention is difficult, as there have been several incidents and factors which have focused people's attention onto the peace lines.

The significance of Belfast's peace walls traverses a number of key thematic areas including: structural; security; community/good relations; financial; and now international, due to the holding up of Northern Ireland as a model of best practice for other peace processes.³⁸ To elaborate further, peace walls are structurally significant because their presence contradicts the British governments' post-ceasefire attempts to introduce a range of security and community safety normalisation policies. In 2007 the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Peter Hain, through the NIO, commissioned the construction of the forty-second peace wall in Belfast. This twenty-five-foot high structure aimed to divide neighbouring Nationalist and Unionist communities that had experienced severe incidents of inter-communal violence and disorder. The structure was built within the grounds of an integrated primary school in the north of the city, despite serious concerns from the school authorities.³⁹ The building of the peace wall as a structure to divide and separate communities was in stark contrast to the government's earlier attempts to redress the physical manifestations of its security policies. In a statement to the Commons on the 24 October 2001, Dr Reid the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland stated that:

We will undertake a progressive rolling programme of security normalisation, reducing levels of troops and installations in Northern Ireland as the security situation improves...our aim is to secure as early a return as possible to normal security arrangements.⁴⁰

Since 1994 the government has phased out permanent police checkpoints, army patrols and the ring of steel that aimed to prevent terrorist attacks on Belfast city centre.⁴¹ There was also a concerted attempt to significantly reduce troop numbers within Northern Ireland, in line with the reduced level of threat. The removal of the last military watch tower along the border was symbolic of the return to security normalisation.⁴² Furthermore, the dismantling of the large police and army base in Crossmaglen in South Armagh was further evidence of the ending of the British military campaign in Northern Ireland. Therefore, the re-emergence of conflict architecture in 2008 appeared to contradict the government's attempts to implement normalisation policies in relation to security and community safety.

Secondly, the construction of the peace wall in an integrated primary school in North Belfast is significant from a security perspective. The peace wall has raised further questions regarding government responses to sectarian violence and communal disorder. Throughout the conflict, there was a necessity for building walls to address security concerns. The complexities of the conflict, combined with community attitudes towards policing structures, meant that both communities and the state viewed division through walls and barriers as an acceptable response to the violence. However, as the military and violent aspects of the conflict came to a conclusion, it became apparent that the government had no other policy response to address on-going inter-communal violence, other than through the construction of barriers and walls.⁴³ The significant reduction of co-ordinated paramilitary violence removed the legitimacy previously attached to the construction of peace walls. Yet, as communities and politicians openly campaigned for new walls to be built, the NIO were unable to suggest or implement security policies that did not constitute the construction of a physical partition.

Thirdly, peace walls are significant within the context of delivering policies and strategies underpinned by a good relations strategy at a local level. In 2007 Belfast City Council (BCC) identified 'promoting good relations' as a corporate objective, central to all of its policy-making processes,⁴⁴ which committed the council to working alongside public and private agencies to address public policy issues that related to division and exclusion within the city. Through the council's Conflict Transformation Project, a series of scoping exercises and reports were commissioned, which specifically examined the issues that related to separation within Belfast. A number of themes were addressed, such as the provision of shared services;⁴⁵ good practice in planning;⁴⁶ creating shared space;⁴⁷ and the promotion of shared residential space.⁴⁸ These studies significantly enhanced understanding of historical policy responses to the division and segregation within the city,

generated a body of evidence, and supported the formulation and implementation of good relations policies.

Fourthly, from an economic position, peace walls have proved to be highly significant for local communities and service providers. A number of academics and statutory organisations⁴⁹ have focused on the legacy of the conflict and its impact across urban working-class Loyalist and Republican communities. The evidence indicates that social exclusion and deprivation continue to impact on those communities that experienced the highest levels of violence and disorder throughout the conflict. Those communities are defined in part by their close proximity to the peace walls. Furthermore, out of the 100 most deprived wards in Northern Ireland, 56 of them are located in Belfast.⁵⁰ It is no coincidence that all of the peace walls in Belfast are also located within those same wards. The research has also highlighted the high levels of unemployment, low levels of educational attainment, along with the minimal opportunities for business investment that characterise communities closest to the peace walls. It was also noted that issues surrounding community safety and access to facilities and services placed undue financial pressures on local authorities.⁵¹ Prime Minister Cameron recently reinforced this position in an address to the Northern Ireland Assembly, when he referred to the financial cost of delivering services within a society where too many Protestant and Catholic communities remained segregated. The Prime Minister also challenged the local politicians to begin the process of addressing the legacies of the past and move the political discourse beyond constitutional questions to one focused on social and economic issues.

Fifthly, the peace walls continue to define and shape the territory which hosts communal violence and disorder and which has the potential to, at best, stagnate the political and peace processes and, at worst, lead Northern Ireland back into heightened periods of sectarian violence and disorder. Recent violence in East Belfast serves to reinforce this danger. Communities in East Belfast experienced two nights of extreme sectarian violence and disorder on the 22 and 23 of June 2011, involving up to 500 youths from both Catholic and Protestant communities throwing paint and petrol bombs, rocks, bricks and firing guns across the interface between neighbouring homes. This was the worst communal violence and disorder in over a decade, and according to the Chief Constable of the Police Service for Northern Ireland (PSNI) the riots were a wake-up call for Northern Ireland, and that there were communities that required renewed political support and focus.⁵²

Finally, peace walls have recently taken on international significance, in light of the global recognition the Northern Ireland peace process has received. There has been a great deal of interest in the mechanics and negotiations which have underpinned the conflict transformation process, yet the physical lines of demarcation may lead some to question the validity of these initiatives. The twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall,⁵³ and the comments from the Mayor of New York, who indicated that the removal of the peace walls was linked to renewed economic investment in the more deprived parts of the city,⁵⁴ have focused attention on the continued rationale for physical barriers and continues to keep the peace process in the global spotlight for the wrong reasons.

It is difficult to assume that one specific incident is responsible for the focus and attention on peace lines. However, overall one can conclude that the peace lines have become a highly significant issue both locally and internationally, especially where progress in the Northern Ireland transition from conflict to peace may well be negated by a failure from politicians and communities to address the issue. They are the most obvious visible manifestations of the conflict, and at a time when Northern Ireland is being applauded as a success story, they are a daily reminder that fundamental issues relating to community identity, integration and sectarianism remain unresolved.

Summary

Alongside the two shipbuilding cranes, Samson and Goliath, which dominate the city's skyline, the peace lines and interfaces have recently become iconic emblems of Belfast and the conflict.⁵⁵ This initial exploration into the significance of peace lines suggests that they have emerged as an important policy issue for the devolved administration, although there is still an absence of legislation or a policy framework which deals specifically with the issue. Furthermore, the international review of walls, barriers and segregation has not only illustrated the growth of physical division as a policy response to security concerns, but also shown that Belfast, and Northern Ireland, are not alone in employing walls and fences as a response to communal tensions and security threats. Interestingly, although the international perspective highlighted the increased frequency that physical barriers were being adopted, there was minimal evidence to suggest that authorities were putting in place mechanisms to support the removal of these barriers in the future.

Notes

- 1 Working Group, 1971.
- 2 The term peace line incorporates all kinds of interface barriers that keep communities apart, including walls, gates and security barriers.
- 3 Community Relations Council's Interagency Working Group & Community Partners Working Group.
- 4 Murphy, 1978.
- 5 Sassen, 1994; Logan et al, 1994; MacGregor, 1994; Benvenisiti, 1986; Calame, 2005; Anderson, 2008.
- 6 Goldsmith and Blakely, 1992.
- 7 Bollens, 2000.
- 8 Brand, 2009.
- 9 Calame, 2005.
- 10 Klein, 2005; Papadakis, 1998; Marcuse, 2002; Dunn, 1994; Boal, 1987; Bollens, 1999.
- 11 Atun, et al, 2009.
- 12 Marcuse, 1997.
- 13 Calame and Charlesworth, 2008.
- 14 Nasr, 1996.
- 15 See 13.
- 17 Dumper, 2008.
- 18 Diez, 2002.
- 19 Borger, 2007.
- 20 Chulov, 2009.
- 21 Connolly, 1999.
- 22 Musiani, 2007.
- 23 Phillips, 2009.
- 24 Beaumont, 2009.
- 25 Dyer, 2007.
- 26 Waldman, 2004.
- 27 Dyer, 2007.
- 28 Glaister, 2008.
- 29 Bailey, 2005.

- 30 See 13.
- 31 Dixon, 2001.
- 32 NIO, 2007.
- 33 Cameron, 2011.
- 34 Belfast Interface Project, 2012.
- 35 Murtagh 2006.
- 36 St. Anne's Square Advertisement, 2009.
- 37 Strain, 2009.
- 38 Gallagher, 2008.
- 39 O'Kane, 2010.
- 40 Torney, 2007.
- 41 Reid J, Statement in the House of Commons 24 October 2001.
- 42 Switzer and McDowell, 2009.
- 43 Sharrock, 2006.
- 44 Jarman, 2007.
- 45 BCC, 2007.
- 46 Deloitte, 2008.
- 47 Bradley and Murtagh, 2007.
- 48 Gaffikin et al, 2008.
- 49 Trademark, 2008.
- 50 Roche, 2008; Murtagh and Shirlow, 2006; Hewstone, et al 2005; CRC, 2009.
- 51 NISRA, 2005.
- 52 Shirlow and Murtagh, 2004.
- 53 Baggott, 2011.
- 54 Berlin Tourist Board. Promoting the city, 2009.
- 55 Graham, 2008.
- 56 Jarman 2008.

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