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HIDDEN BARRIERS AND DIVISIVE ARCHITECTURE: THE CASE OF BELFAST

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INTRODUCTION

The conflict in and about Northern Ireland (often referred to as 'the Troubles') has profoundly impacted the social, political and economic structures of Northern Ireland. Less recognised, is the wider architectural legacy that the conflict has left behind. In this respect, the peace walls and associated residential interfaces constructed between largely Catholic and Protestant communities in a number of Northern Ireland's most contentious residential areas, have become the preeminent representation of this architectural legacy. This research presents original findings from a three-year multi-disciplinary academic research project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) that challenges and extends this current understanding of physical and social division. In doing so the research reveals new evidence of a distinct and important, yet largely unrecognised, body of divisive conflict-era architecture. This architecture is an extensive range of 'hidden barriers' embedded in various forms across Belfast's residential communities created during a little-known process of security planning that accompanied the Comprehensive Redevelopment of inner-city Belfast between 1976 and 1985. Quite distinct from the recognised peace walls and associated interfaces, these 'hidden barriers' take the form of everyday elements of the built environment. They vary in both type and scale, and include the use of infrastructure such as footpaths and roads, as well as the use of retail, office and industrial buildings, to control vehicular and pedestrian movement and to physically separate residential areas. This research has focused on six distinctive case-study areas where these 'hidden barriers' have been documented and where evidence of their contemporary effects has been gathered. Residing now as deeply embedded and normalised parts of the contemporary city, this seemingly benign 'everyday architecture' functions as a 'hidden' legacy of the conflict. The research findings therefore raise important questions about what it means in a so-called 'post-Troubles' era for communities to live within areas where the built environment has been designed to deal with 'Troubles-era' security issues.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The peace walls remain as the most conspicuously visible architectural legacy of 'the Troubles'.[1] However, at one time the conflict imposed a wide range of defensive architectural structures across the Northern Ireland landscape. The vast majority of these remained in place until the 1998 Belfast or Good Friday Agreement made specific provision for the 'normalisation of security arrangements and practices'.[2] This would see highly militarised installations such as the heavily fortified police stations installed across the country, and the roof-top army observation posts atop residential tower-blocks in areas such as in the Divis and Newlodge in the west of Belfast, being phased out, demolished and eventually largely removed. Although these main forms of military installation are now gone or diminishing, to understand the ways in which architecture continues to promote divisions it is important to consider this in historical perspective.

From the late 19th century through to the 1970s the urban structure of Belfast was characterised by a dense network of Victorian terraced houses which had been built to house the workforce associated with Belfast's rapid industrial expansion. In common with many industrialised cities across the United Kingdom, the condition of this housing stock deteriorated rapidly from the 1930s in tandem with the sweeping economic decline of the various heavy industries that had once supported employment and economic stability. The lack of a comprehensive public house building programme in Northern Ireland during the inter-war period ensured that Belfast lagged far behind comparator British cities in terms of housing conditions and shortages by the late 1930s. A 1943 housing survey revealed that 100,000 new houses would be required to tackle the problem of urban slums alone.[3] Despite a significant post-war public house building programme, the situation had reached a crisis point in Belfast by 1976 when government surveys deemed the supply of dwellings in the city to be the 'worst housing stock in the UK and possibly in Western Europe'.[4] At that time only 48% of Belfast's then 123,120 houses were deemed to be 'sound'.[5] A total of 30,940 houses needing to be 'replaced', with a further 17,400 houses needing to be 'repaired' and 15,360 houses needing to be 'improved'.[6] In response to this a government press release in February 1977 announced the establishment of a Ministerial Steering Group that would oversee a major urban regeneration programme which would involve the 'Comprehensive Redevelopment' of this depilated housing stock.

> *Belfast faces acute problems. In common with places like Liverpool and Glasgow the inner city has fallen into decay. In many inner areas people live in deplorable housing conditions. This plus the depressing nature of the environment undermines the quality of life for ordinary people. In addition, the Troubles have affected living conditions throughout the City. The job of the Steering Group will be to mount an attack to improve housing and environmental conditions in Belfast.[7]*

The reference to 'the Troubles' made within this statement reflected a longstanding attempt by government authorities to keep housing policy and security policy quite separate in the public eye. However, the tenuous security situation developing alongside this steady deterioration of the built environment was well known. Patterns of sectarian violence, population movement and civil unrest within residential areas in Belfast were historically common.[8] However, the onset of 'the Troubles' in 1969 enacted a mass movement of the population on a scale which had not been seen before. Confidential government accounts from 1976 estimated that between 1969 and 1976, more than 60,000 people were thought to have fled their homes as a result of sectarian violence. A total of 12,136 people had been registered on the 'Emergency Housing List' having been forced from their homes.[9] The ethnic dynamics of these movements were particularly acute during the early years of the conflict. Between 1969 and 1971, 83% of population movements were attributed to the Catholic population and 17% to the Protestant population, shifting to 60% Catholic and 40% Protestant by late 1971. Catholic population movements tended to reflect the widespread movement of Catholic tenants from 'mixed' Northern Ireland Housing Trust estates such as Cregagh in East Belfast and Rathcoole in outer North Belfast.[10] Protestant population movements tended to fit a pattern of 'flight' from the beleaguered inner-city to towns such as Craigavon, Antrim, Bangor, Newtownards and Carrickfergus or to abandoned properties in the formerly 'mixed' estates. Officials from the Department of the Environment described how large numbers of Catholic 'refugee families poured into already over-crowded Catholic areas' such as Short Strand in the east of Belfast and the Falls Road in the west of the city, presenting the threat of 'these areas expanding and creating confrontation with the larger adjacent Protestant communities'.[11] Of the dwellings that were to be targeted by the Comprehensive Redevelopment programme, it was estimated that approximately 32,000 had been damaged as a result of the conflict and some 10,000 remained unoccupied due to the threat of paramilitary violence.[12] The 'direct intimidation' or 'fear of intimidation' was cited as the primary causation for residents leaving their homes and moving to what were now increasingly viewed as single-identity areas.[13] In many cases, paramilitary forces would use this illegal eviction of tenants to put in place new tenants that they themselves had selected, further consolidating ethnic identity.[14]

Despite the very public presence of military and paramilitary activity in social-housing areas, the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) believed that 'for security and policing reasons the balance of advantage lies against provoking widespread discussion on sectarianism in housing'.[15] This reluctance to openly challenge the sectarian segregation that dominated inner-city social-housing was underpinned by a contention that any such discussion would be 'unlikely to be actively supported by the army and the police who seem to find it easier to control violence in areas where community boundaries are clearly defined'.[16] The ultimate conclusion that it would be better to 'get on with the rebuilding of dilapidated areas...while trying to weaken sectarian boundary lines by stealth' would be germane to the undisclosed and security-focused management of Comprehensive Redevelopment programmes in areas where these boundaries were contested. To this end, the *Standing Committee on the Security Implications of Housing Problems in Belfast* was established in June 1977. Operating alongside the Comprehensive Redevelopment process, this confidential committee brought together officials from the highest ranks of the British Army and Royal Ulster Constabulary (commonly at Brigadier and Assistant Chief Constable level respectively), alongside department heads from the NIO and Department of the Environment, to assess the security ramifications of redevelopment proposals in contentious areas.[17] These two processes worked hand-in-hand to use 'hidden barriers' to help establish a pattern of isolated single-identity residential

communities that continues to define Belfast today. These 'hidden barriers' remain largely unrecognised and the ways in which the promote division represent an important, but crucially undervalued, aspect of conflict-transformation planning.

Policy Context
Although the history of how the conflict has shaped social division is extensive, and deeply rooted in the social fabric, current policy largely focuses on the most visible manifestations of this division, namely, peace walls. The *Together: Building a United Community Strategy* aims to remove all 'peace walls' and interfaces by 2023,[18] and a range of initiatives in this area are currently being delivered through the Department of Justice Interface Programme.[19] Other researchers have noted that 'communities are also kept apart in less obvious ways, where motorways, shopping centres, dense foliage and/or vacant and derelict landscapes have been used to define the perimeters of particular communities'.[20] However, there is currently no specific policy provision that addresses the ongoing legacy of the 'hidden barriers' which are outlined below. Significant opportunity exists to address the issue, as meeting the challenges posed by these 'hidden barriers' aligns with the ambition of a range of current conflict-transformation initiatives which have a vested interest in architecture, space and the wider built-environment.

The *Together: Building a United Community Strategy* acknowledges the challenge posed by 'segregation in housing and our education system, physical divisions and invisible lines of separation that exist in both urban and rural settings',[21] however these 'invisible lines' are not defined. *Building Safer, Shared and Confident Communities: a community safety strategy for Northern Ireland 2012-2017*, also supports an approach to 'create spaces that are for the community as a whole and which the community feel safe using or passing through',[22] an aspiration which highlights the need to catalogue and identify the full range of barriers, both visible and hidden. Moreover, this need to improve connectivity is reinforced by the *Urban Regeneration and Community Development Policy Framework,* which aims to 'improve linkages between areas of need and areas of opportunity'[23] and the *Regional Development Strategy 2035: Building a better future*, which aims to 'improve connectivity to enhance the movement of people, goods, energy and information between places'.[24] The Northern Ireland Housing Executive's *Community Cohesion Strategy 2015-2020*, recognises the need to improve connections within individual residential areas and 'promote participation in community development and peacebuilding and encourage greater community cohesion within Housing Executive estates'.[25] The positive role that the built environment can play is specifically recognised by the *Strategic Planning Policy Statement for Northern Ireland,* which notes how the 'the planning system can assist in the removal of barriers to shared space'.[26] Moreover, the *Department of Environment Living Places: An Urban Stewardship and Design Guide for Northern Ireland 2014*, acknowledges the implications that specific residential design typologies can have on movement and connectivity, using the example of 'cul-de-sac' designs (which are discussed later in this document) to highlight how they 'impose long journeys on people needing to travel short distances, leading to increased usage of the car'.[27] Whilst these alignments provide a strong basis in policy, the less visible barriers that promote division cut across a range of policy areas and as a consequence are not clearly defined, and tend to fall under broad catch-all policy statements rather than a specific set of actions geared toward specific types of 'hidden barriers'. At the same time, the broad policy statements present an opportunity to expand the scope of these policy initiatives in a manner that clearly recognises the continued role played by the 'hidden barriers' evidenced in this research.

3

METHODOLOGY

The *Together: Building a United Community Strategy* acknowledges that dealing with the past and building a united community involves 'developing local approaches…involving community representatives and local residents' as 'interface barriers will only be reduced and removed with local agreement and support'. This research placed communities at the heart of a series of collaborative steps developed between academic and community partners:

1) Archival research was first undertaken to identify the range of locations where 'hidden barriers' were put in place through the Comprehensive Redevelopment of social-housing between 1976-1985.
2) Six case-study areas were selected and initially investigated through architectural-photographic analysis to document and illustrate the contemporary situation of the 'hidden barriers'.
3) Focus groups, interviews and questionnaires were then conducted in each of the six case-study areas.
4) Community engagement workshops were held with local residents in each of the six case-study areas to gather evidence of what it is like to live with these 'hidden barriers' today.
5) Findings will then be reconciled and evaluated through a series of structured symposia and outputs with consideration to community, policy and academic audiences.

FINDINGS

The evidence suggests three typologies of 'hidden barriers' which act at different scales and in different ways to promote division. At the first level, there are Inter-Community Barriers. These are instances of the built environment being used on a larger scale to separate two communities that were formerly connected, effectively isolating them as single-identity areas. At the second level, Intra-Community Barriers are instances where the Comprehensive Redevelopment proposals within these single-identity communities have created a patchwork of small, disconnected housing clusters, creating a spatial environment that is extremely fragmented and difficult to navigate. The third level of 'hidden barriers' are Invisible Boundaries. These barriers are not a direct consequence of the Comprehensive Redevelopment programme or input from the Security Forces, but elements of public space on the periphery of Inter-Community Barrier areas that are identified locally as a recognised 'boundary' between communities that has evolved at a local level and become entrenched over time.

Inter-community Hidden Barriers

These 'hidden barriers' represent the most direct impact of the confidential actions of the *Standing Committee on the Security Implications of Housing Problems in Belfast.* The tended to be put in place to mitigate against the perceived security threat that was posed by residential areas with high levels of sectarian confrontation.
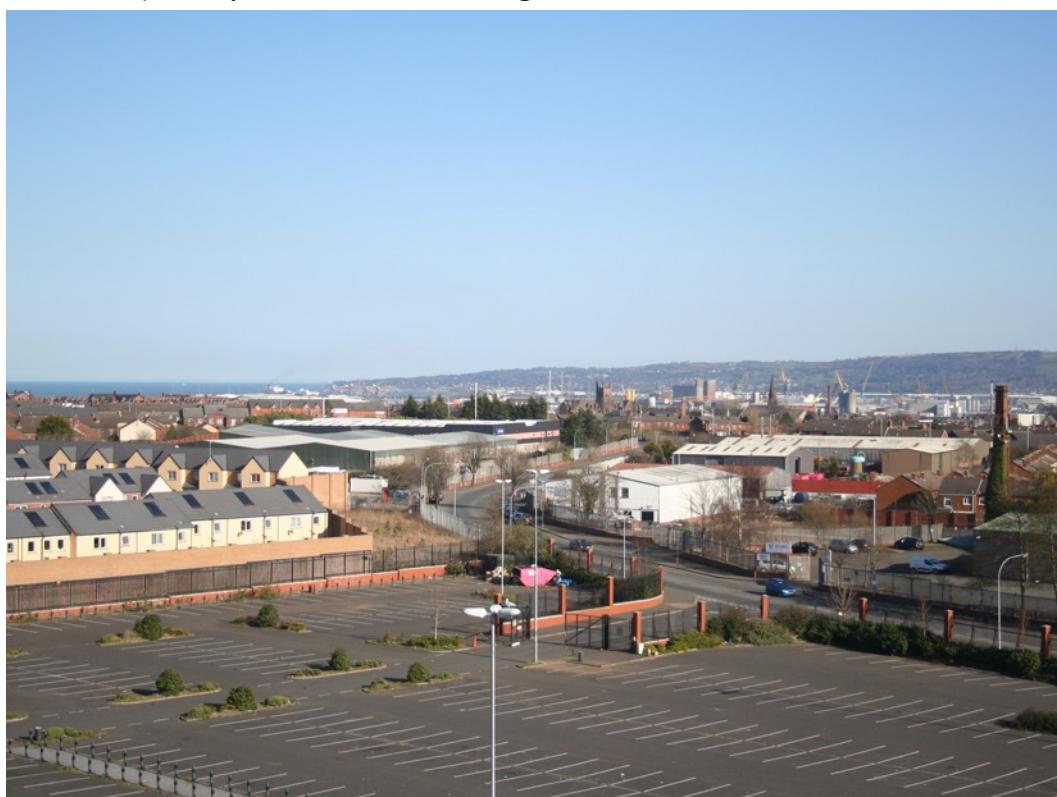

Figure 1: Industrial estate separating Ardoyne (top left) and Lower Oldpark (top right)

As evidenced in the minutes of meetings and memos from these cases and others, the primary security concerns held by the authorities were that the redevelopment proposals could facilitate the growth of perceived Catholic territory, and the corresponding decline of perceived Protestant territory, that was considered detrimental to long-term security planning. This led to Inter-Community Barriers such as shopping centres, industrial estates, office developments, and dual carriageways being used to establish fixed boundaries to these perceived territorial areas. In one such example in the Lower Oldpark / Cliftonville area in the north of the city, by late 1976 large numbers of houses had been vacated by residents who had fled and sought accommodation elsewhere. Notwithstanding the shortage of housing available for the Catholic population, these houses could not be readily let to displaced residents now arriving into the adjacent and expanding Catholic Cliftonville area. This occurred because these vacated dwellings resided in what was still perceived as Protestant territory. The ultimate response in this instance was to remove over 17 acres of contentious housing and rezone the area for industrial use and construction of an industrial estate, thus forming a definitive barrier between the two areas. This halted any expansion of the Cliftonville area and corresponding decline of the Lower Oldpark area. In another example, the Twinbrook area in the southwest of Belfast had, by 1976, undergone a transformation from being a recognised 'mixed estate' to a Catholic one where squatting was so prevalent that the Northern Ireland Housing Executive had lost control of housing management and allocation. This created a perceived security threat that such squatting would spread across the playing fields and green-space shared with the adjacent, and largely Protestant, Areema estate. A dual-carriageway, completed in the early 1980s, now permanently separates these two communities.

Figure 2: Dual carriageway on the site of a former shared space between Areema and Twinbrook

Intra-community Hidden Barriers
These 'hidden barriers' are a more complex consequence of actions taken during the Comprehensive Redevelopment period. They are not the large, blatant initiatives undertaken through the Inter-Community Barriers, but rather the combined consequences of an intricate mosaic of residential designs put in place by numerous independent teams of social-housing architects and planners within the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. These neighbourhoods, formerly containing large swathes of terraced housing in existence since the 1870s, were broken-up into a patchwork of small 'redevelopment areas' within which different teams progressed redevelopment proposals typified by a mixture of cul-de-sacs, residential courtyards and dead-end streets.

Figure 3: A new dwelling divides the former Templemore Street through-route, into two separate spaces

Figure 4: Courtyard closed to vehicles with single pedestrian entry / exit point

It is important to note that the design strategies implemented in these areas echoed the dominant residential design trends found across Western Europe during that period. The Dutch 'Woonerf' movement, (literally translated as 'living street'),[28] Essex Design Guide,[29] and Defensive Planning work of Oscar Newman,[30] ushered forth new ideas establishing pedestrian priority in residential areas, and creating shared spaces where residents felt a sense of ownership. Examples of these influences are clearly evident in the designs that were realised during the Comprehensive Redevelopment period. Yet, given that the network of interconnected terraced streets and ancillary alleyways offered a multitude of potential escape routes for paramilitary agents travelling by car and by foot, the elimination of through traffic and limited pedestrian permeability also had obvious benefits to security planning.

The research has established that this has resulted in the perception being held by many local residents that the restrictions on vehicular through flow and pedestrian circulation were part of a wider government security strategy.[31] Moreover, the research has also established that the move toward such enclave-orientated residential designs was indeed part of an undisclosed design concept to 'represent a better and safer basis for the future'[32] and not merely reflective of wider design strategies of the time. This is supported by interviews that have been conducted with a range of architects and planners who were working on the Comprehensive Redevelopment proposals. Some of the reflections offered in these interviews include:

> *The houses were deliberately difficult to find. You need to know it's there and I think that was the plan, that it is only residents who would know the route.*

> *If you had an area where you can go 'that way, that way and that way' there were a lot of terrorist incidents. I think that was partly why the Northern Ireland Office tried to tighten up on that.*

> *It was to try and keep these areas more as residential areas so you only went in there really if you lived there.*

> *The design thinking around these redevelopment areas was how do you move back to something that gives local people control, and I suppose, keeps those that aren't from the area out.*

> *The government didn't only use the terrorist thing. There was also the fact that the streets were a short cut for people to get from one road to the other in busy traffic times. You didn't want that either.*

The research has evidenced various ways in which these design aspirations have resulted in the closing off of former thoroughfares, the dividing of through-streets into cul-de-sacs, and a proliferation of dead-end alleyways and courtyards with a single entry-exit point. The findings suggest that for some, these changes offer perceptions of safety, privacy and promote feelings of community cohesion. To others, they encourage feelings of isolation or being constantly watched by neighbours. Both outcomes are shaped by a dense environment of 'hidden barriers' that mitigates against the free movement of these residents and limits connectivity with other areas, and ultimately promotes a sense of insularity.

Hidden Boundaries

The 'hidden boundaries' identified in this research are, in part, an indirect consequence of physical divisions promoted by Inter-Community Barriers. They tend to emerge in public spaces between two single-identity communities which have various forms of long-established physical barriers in place along the majority of their peripheries. The research has established three types of 'hidden boundary':

1) Everyday elements of the built environment recognised at local level as defining the inter-community boundary;
2) Streets which residents will not travel on as they are perceived to belong to another community and not considered safe to use; and
3) Bus routes that are not used as they are perceived to belong to another community and not considered safe to use.

The research has indicated that these 'hidden boundaries' appear to promote everyday behaviours and attitudes amongst residents which serve to reinforce the idea that freedom of movement and access to goods and services in the associated areas is not always possible. Examples that have been evidenced through the research include cases where residents will not use a local public park because it is on the boundary with another area and held to belong to that area. Other examples include cases where local residents will travel an extra 15 to 20 minutes on foot to access services in a neighbouring area to avoid travelling to the local service because it is accessed by a public route that is regarded as unsafe for their community. The research has also identified areas of the city where local residents will avoid using a public bus route and incur the expense of a taxi because the bus route is not perceived as being safe for use by their particular community.

Figure 5: Traffic intersection recognised locally as the interface between Ligoniel and Ballysillan

Figure 6: Acess to shops along Lower Oldpark avoided by many local residnets

References made to 'hidden boundaries' by residents in research interviews include:

> *...the bus service is very poor in the community. [It is better] if you go down the Falls, Black's Road down the Falls, and a lot of ones feel intimidated if they take [that] bus (Suffolk resident)*

> *No shops and you have to go on to the Shankill for everything (Oldpark resident)*

> *Well the park down the bottom of the road, as I told you, I have ten grandkids. I don't think any of them has ever been in it (Ligoniel resident)*

What is significant in regard to these 'hidden boundaries' is that the research suggests that the incidents occurring at these locations are not the result of direct sectarian confrontation per se, but more often instances of petty crime and anti-social behaviour with sectarian undercurrents. Due to the fact that there is a long-established history of confrontation in these locations, for many residents these activities nonetheless tend to reinforce existing perceptions and attitudes along political lines.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1

Engage with local communities to identify all 'hidden barriers' and develop locally-led initiatives to promote their removal or transformation

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Across the range of current conflict-transformation policy initiatives, including the *Together: Building a United Community Strategy*, there is a strong emphasis on addressing the attitudes and behaviours that keep people segregated. This suggests that trust building and good community relations will be fundamental to achieve the ultimate removal of all physical barriers. As the *Together: Building a United Community Strategy* notes:

> *Taking down interface barriers is not something that can be achieved without engagement with, consent and support of the people who live there. We must be sensitive to the views and perceptions of residents and balance this against the responsibility on us to create the conditions within which division and segregation can become resigned to the past.*

The fact that there is some recognition of the impact of 'physical environment' and social movement in particular in some existing policy documents offers an opportunity to develop work on 'hidden barriers'. However, there is no direct acknowledgment or catalogue of such physical divisions, the result has been policy aimed at the most visible forms of separation such as peace walls. Documenting and cataloguing 'hidden barriers' is the first step toward realising more concrete regeneration plans. The acknowledgement that community engagement and consultation is central to community-led design is a positive base to move from. Such consultations can only be led by local communities and leaders sensitive to different viewpoints. Planners, architects and government bodies however also need to provide design solutions and examples for how local 'hidden barriers' can be transformed to aid such discussions.

Recommendation 2

Establish a 10-year 'connectivity programme' for the removal or transformation of 10 'hidden barriers' and re-establish physical connections between the community spaces that they currently separate

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This ambitious programme, under-pinned by a jointly owned policy statement at the Assembly level, would directly engage the communities most adversely affected by the 'inter-community hidden barriers' and 'intra-community hidden barriers' put in place during the 1976-1985 Comprehensive Redevelopment programme. This 'connectivity programme' would involve the development of 'design-led' solutions where physical linkages would be used to re-establish connections between areas and spaces that are currently divided by 'hidden barriers'. This will involve both re-establishing physical connections within a single-identity community area, and between two single-identity communities. This focus on 'hidden barriers' would not preclude the work being carried out under the Department of Justice Interface Programme and where applicable could work with other policy initiatives geared towards breaking down physical barriers and creating shared spaces.

This programme should be steered by a Working Group (drawing membership from the Department of Communities, Department of Environment, Department of Justice, Northern Ireland Housing Executive, Belfast Area Partnerships and the Ulster University research team) tasked with the following high-level objectives:

- It is quite common for an area significantly affected by redevelopment to have a range of 'hidden barrier' types. The group would work with all stakeholders (local community organisations, residents, statutory bodies) to carry

9

out a detailed city-wide feasibility study in order to assess where removal or transformation of barriers can take place and to prioritise key locations where new physical connections such as footpaths, bridges, or recreational space can be achieved. Connectivity needs to be the watch word for considering such plans moving forward;

- Survey best-practice examples from local initiatives such as the Comber Greenway, to international examples such as Bilbao Ría 2000 in the Basque Country,[33] to develop a series of bespoke and community-led design proposals to create new physical connections between formerly disconnected areas;

- Connect these plans with existing government policy initiatives (including potential strategies to remove peace walls or aimed at urban regeneration) or statements documented above, as well as connecting their implementation with local partnerships, development plans, and the public and private sector;

- Develop a plan to join connections together so as to establish a new high-quality and amenity rich 'pedestrian corridor' (or corridors) that would create potential for new shared spaces between disconnected areas and encourage free movement between and within newly connected areas.

Notes.

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[27] *Living Places: An Urban Stewardship and Design Guide for Northern Ireland 2014* (Belfast: Department of the Environment, 2014).

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