URBAN REGENERATION IN BELFAST:
LANDSCAPE AND MEMORY

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Recent research in urban studies has pointed out that while "for decades" it had been assumed that "globalisation was eclipsing communities" and "mobility" was "liberating people from locality," "the significance of place is being rediscovered" (Gaffikin & Morrissey, "Understanding" 25). Place, indeed, is where individuals live, where they become involved in social patterns and networks while simultaneously shaping their personal and collective identities, where they can plan their future, but also where they have their roots. For E.S. Casey, place "is necessary for its power to direct and stabilize us, to memorialize and identify us, to tell us who we are in terms of where we are as well as where we are not" (xv). On the basis of the above-mentioned statements one may assume that place, as a keeper of roots and memory, and globalisation, as a booster of mobility and standardisation, mutually challenge each other.

To check this hypothesis this paper considers the case of Belfast, a city which has been successively transformed by industrialisation, conflict, and, since the early 1990s, the effects of a particularly noticeable economic recovery largely due to favourable global perspectives and their consequences in terms of investment and capital mobility with a view to seizing new business opportunities. It is a city where past and present are entangled.

This paper therefore focuses on the regeneration of Belfast City Centre since the late 1980s, analyses the objectives which have prevailed in the implementation of public policies, and attempts to assess the impact of such policies on individual and collective memory as well as their limits.

Urban Regeneration Programmes and Economic Recovery

At the turn of the nineteenth century, Belfast was the "industrial heartland" of Ireland. Commentators recognised, among other virtues, her "eminent status in the modern world, her high commercial and industrial distinction, her wealth and influence" (Crawford 35). The consequences of this economic wealth on the landscape were materialised by the transformation of the previously decaying Georgian town into a "buoyant Victorian and Edwardian city." By 1900, the population of Belfast had reached nearly 350.000 inhabitants, five times as much as the 1800 figure (Walker & Dixon 70). Consequently, next to the elegant middle-class buildings, this demographic boom had also induced the development of large areas of poor-quality terraced housing (Gaffikin & Morrissey, "Urban Economy" 43-45).

The next major change occurred in the early 1960s, which were marked by buoyant office and commercial development within and around the City Centre. Then in the 1970s, the combined effects of the economic crisis and the continuous de-industrial-isation process led to a massive population decline in the City Centre, which was ac-celerated with conflict.

Between 1971 and 1991, the population of Belfast declined by a third, from 416.700 to 279.230, particularly in the inner city (*Draft Strategy* § 3.2). Indeed, in the 1970s, Belfast's inner city lost 42% of its population and in the 1980s another 23%: the wealthiest share of those who left the inner city migrated to more peaceful and wel-coming quarters or suburbs, while the poorest clustered in the peripheral areas. Ac-cording to the Department for Social Development, DSD, the disaffection for the inner city, together with economic difficulties and weakened social structures all con-tributed to the dereliction of the city centre. "This out migration left those who stayed behind in the top of urban decay exemplified by high rates of unemployment, poor housing and a weakened social structure which offered little protection from a range of problems associated with urban decline" (*Draft Strategy* § 3.2). Furthermore, the outbursts of violence not only played a part in this damaging process but also justi-fied the multiplication of visible signs of social division. If the walls erected to sepa-rate Protestant from Catholic neighbourhoods in the suburbs could not be perceived in the inner city landscape, the blind iron curtains on shop-windows or the proximity of barbed-wire fences on the very outskirts of the city centre (the security cordon), were constant visual reminders of the persistent conflict.

A turning-point occurred in the late 1980s. The shift from the industrial to the service sector contributed to the transformation of the landscape, with an emphasis on office and retailing expansion. The renovated area extended to the river shores with the de-velopment of the Waterfront Project engineered in the Waterfront Laganside Scheme.[1] "As of March 2000, investment in the Laganside area was $ 570 million, which was distributed through 214.500 square feet of office space, 425 apartments and an additional 600 jobs" (*Washington Times*). The Government's programmes for the relocation of jobs in the city centre also played a part in the economic recovery of central Belfast. The inflow of employees fostered demand for local service and re-tailing facilities, whose suppliers in turn became attracted by the availability of po-tential consumers and low occupancy costs (in particular in the case of non-local in-vestors[2]), while they were no longer deterred by security threats. As Frank Gaffikin and Mike Morrissey have underlined, "such prestigious developments signalled not just an economic revival but also a political recovery of a city subject to years of de-

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1   The Laganside Corporation was set up by the Government in 1989 to secure the re-generation of Belfast riverside and waterfront areas.

2   In an interview in 2001, Laganside Development Corporation Chief Executive, Mike Smith, explained that the corporation usually pre-rented buildings before they were even built. He also quoted British Telecom and Hilton Hotel, who had received their site for free but had then put 75% of their own equity in their properties.

liberate destruction" ("Role of Culture" 167). The development and revamping of Castle Court bore witness to this business confidence, further fostered by the removal of the security cordon in the early 1990s, as confirmed by the Department for Social development: "The excellent trading performance of Belfast branches of major multiples and the perceived growth in retail demand have encouraged a high level of developer interest in Belfast City Centre leaving it poised for growth" (*Draft Strategy* § 3.4).

Capitalising on the bullish economic trend, a number of major urban renovation and environmental schemes of the City Centre were implemented by organisations like Making Belfast Work founded in 1988 to "strengthen and target more effectively the efforts being made by the community, the private sector and the government in addressing the economic, educational, health and environmental problems facing people living in the most disadvantaged areas of Belfast" ("Making Belfast Work" website). Since 1997, the Belfast Regeneration Office (BRO) have directed and co-ordinated the implementation of a regeneration strategy aimed at the most deprived areas in and around Belfast, drawing funding from the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund, complemented by programmes like Making Belfast Work (Gasworks, The Diamond Rathcoole, Engage with Age, Farset), Urban Development Grants, Area Project Teams, Comprehensive Development Schemes, Environmental Improvement Schemes. The Belfast Regeneration Office also acts as the Managing Authority for European Funding streams under the PEACE programmes.[3]

As far as governmental programmes are concerned, the Department for Social Development is the supervising authority. Its most relevant publication regarding the renovation of Belfast City Centre is the *Regeneration Policy Statement* published as a follow-up to the *Belfast City Regeneration Policy Framework* of July 5, 2003. The objectives of the Framework as stated in the introduction of the executive summary, are to "provide the direction needed to guide and maximise the regeneration potential of this investment in the City Centre for the benefit of Belfast and the province as a whole" (1). The Belfast City Council also participates in the consultation and decision-making process, and The Royal Town Planning Institute in Ireland have been asked to issue recommendations in the field of heritage conservation.

Urban Regeneration as a Tool

The terminological analysis of some of the major framework documents issued by the Belfast Regeneration Office, the Department for Social Development, the Royal Town Planning Institute, and Laganside Corporation provides a useful insight into the objectives underlying the regeneration of Belfast City Centre and raises the following

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3   The PEACE I and PEACE II programmes as well as the URBAN programme are European funding programmes meant to support economic and social development in Northern Ireland as a contribution to peace.

question: Has the change in Belfast City Centre townscape been merely dictated by economic considerations or has any space been left to conservation, references to the past, and if so, which past?

On the one hand, the renovated modern (contemporary) Belfast townscape is meant to reflect economic recovery and business confidence. First of all, the City's appearance is important. While the Belfast Regeneration Office insists on the necessity to "encourage […] physical regeneration" (*Draft Strategy* § 5.4), the Department for Social Development points out that "the public realm should be the shop window for the City, presenting a strong and positive message as a first and last impression" (*People and Place* 11 § 3.6). The link between aesthetics, attractiveness, and economic recovery is underlined: "The quality of the public realm of the City should provide an aesthetically inviting image and fundamentally should prime and support economic and social development" (*Belfast City Centre* § 5.5). The ultimate objective of this regeneration process is to make Belfast a competitive location for international investment, opening it up to larger business relations: "There is a need to strategically position Belfast in the international marketplace, defining the characteristics that would entice a company or individual to invest in or visit the City rather than go elsewhere" (§ 3.6). One of the major aspects of this new policy is to enhance trading facilities to foster exchange and encourage people to actually come and visit downtown Belfast, "to support and strengthen the City Centre as the premier regional shopping destination" (§ 1.3). Such a policy is part of a long-term strategy, in which the economic recovery of the City seems to be playing a key part "to provide opportunities within the City Centre to help establish a twenty-first-century economy placed to compete with other European cities" (§ 1.3).

On the other hand, the urban regeneration of Belfast City Centre must meet conservation objectives and enhance the past. One of the seventeen principles listed in the *Belfast City Centre Regeneration Policy Framework* is to "build upon the City Centre's rich historic character through complementary and contemporary design" (§ 1.3). For the Department for Social Development, nineteenth-century Belfast is to be considered as the core of historical heritage: "In spite of much new development, the City still retains a substantial Victorian and Edwardian landscape" (§ 1.3).

The Royal Town Planning Institute in Ireland takes a wider view of the historical heritage of Belfast and lays the emphasis on the gap between the modern and historical spaces of the city:

> The Area's strong architectural, industrial and marine heritage has been undermined by insensitive development, dereliction, pollution and community conflict […] There is enormous potential to develop partnerships to conserve and promote a confident identity using its built capital, townscape and history. (*Priority Issues* § 5)

The historical heritage of Belfast is not only supposed to attract visitors, tourists, and investors, it also plays a part in reinforcing the roots of the locals by offering "a vision

that encapsulates this distinctive place and its rich complex history will be an important contribution to the definition of common identity" (Priority Issues § 4).

This analysis of the terms used in some fundamental framework documents from various sources reveals two possible approaches to urban regeneration strategies in Belfast City Centre. The first approach lays a particular emphasis on economic development and "highlights Northern Ireland's integration with social and economic processes common to other peripheral regions" (Gaffikin & Morrissey, "Understanding" 27). The renovation of Belfast's urban landscape thus aims at presenting the City as taking an active part in the global economic development process. Concomitantly, this economic revival contributes to the elimination of the traces of dereliction and conflict and, furthermore, creates a neutral space accessible to all. Frank Gaffikin and Mike Morrissey have suggested that such a development was deliberately advocated in urban public policies: "To offset the segregation of the ethnic spaces (West Belfast etc.) government has tried to emphasise common accessibility to the 'neutral spaces' of the downtown and waterfront" ("Role of Culture" 178). The second approach lays more emphasis on the area's specific history and cultural heritage, implying that regeneration should thus be coupled with the conservation of historical buildings whose importance is to be enhanced in the urban landscape.

Consequently, at first sight, there seem to be two contrastive views of the possible relation between urban regeneration and the evocation of the past: one which deliberately tends to obliterate the immediate past of dereliction and conflict and another one which openly refers to a more distant Victorian and Edwardian past. However, both approaches converge towards a process of selective regeneration which simultaneously points to the future and to a distant past, while obliterating more recent periods of troubled history. Under the vibrant declarations in favour of urban regeneration, the partly hidden agenda also has to do with peace and community relations in Northern Ireland. Place is to be used as the catalyst of a non-divisive memory, that of the nineteenth-century Victorian heritage, or as a crucible for future developments. Hence the traces of a more recent painful past must disappear. But to what extent can this strategic combination influence the shaping of memory and the behaviour of Belfast's residents and visitors?

In his essay entitled "The False Urban Memory Syndrome," Austin Williams presents history as a tool which can be used to embellish current reality:

> Abstractions such as memories, historical events or folklore from a previous generation can be captured, reinterpreted and given a role in redefining the sense of what the place was and is. The purpose is to hold onto the past and to create added colour to the contemporary urban lived experience. (1)

Such a statement indeed pleads in favour of the historical approach for Belfast urban regeneration schemes. However, the impact of such a diversion of history to the benefit of the present is questionable. In his book *The Image of the City*, published in 1960, Karl Lynch had expressed the opinion that people held in their minds an image

of the city essential to their experience and interaction with it (60). Echoing these words in his comparative study of Belfast and Berlin, William J.V. Neill underlines that "in society, memory is not abstract like history, it cannot exist outside the people who do the remembering" (5). From his point of view, the consequence is that "in the city which, as theatre for social action, depends on memories, signifying practices are constantly involved in the making and changing of meaning" (7).

This "making and changing of meaning" is all the more important as individual experience (and memory) is part of a larger collective experience of the urban environment and simultaneously participates in the shaping of, and is shaped by, collective memory, which can be described as a common story, not necessarily personally experienced, and transmitted from one generation to the next. In their research paper "The Just City, Place and Community Planning: From Politicised Places to Lived Spaces," Birgitte Mazanti and John Pløger conclude that "places represent individual experiences: but the meaning of the particular place can be made of collective schemes of signification, collective memory as well as collective amnesia."

Urban Regeneration, Memory, and Conflict

At this point, one could conclude that if the renovated townscape in Belfast has to do with fostering exclusively positive and/or neutral memory, then the policy which consists in making appropriate use of the brightest parts of history and in supporting economic development to foster a favourable and enticing experience of the City can indeed participate in the making of both a positive collective memory and a positive individual one. But this may sound too optimistic, and contradicting theories underline the limits of this process.

First of all, the rehabilitation of the Victorian and Edwardian past of Belfast, considered as a pillar of positive common identity, seems to have been, so far at least, less extended and successful than expected. In his comparative work on Belfast and Berlin, William J.V. Neill expresses the view that instead of the enhancement of historical buildings "third-rate market led neutral post-modern architecture has prevailed" (18), thus eclipsing the visible traces of historical heritage. The target which consisted in fostering positive memory by capitalising on the historical townscape has been missed to the benefit of a renovated but neutral landscape deprived of its identity.

The trouble is that neutrality, which also largely underlies Belfast regeneration policies and which can be considered as a way to favour the collective amnesia of a troubled past, is also difficult to handle. According to Lefebvre's analysis in *The Production of Space*, published in 1991, "the modernisation of western industrial society has resulted in an artificial and abstract form of spatiality," implying that "what is understood in modern society as 'real space' is an abstract construction, an abstract space, which gives privilege to mental space, marginalises social space and sup-

presses the lived space of daily life" (55). The conclusion one may draw from Lefebvre's analysis is that a neutral townscape enables imagination to escape beyond control. This is a double-edged sword. In the particular case of Belfast, the imagination of the City Centre visitor is thus set free to memorise the current neutral renovated urban environment either positively or negatively. In the second case, the emotion derived "either from conflict-related accounts of the past or from experienced events" may well prevail in the building up of memory, thus obliterating the desired positive effects of the neutral townscape. Indeed, as Austin Williams has explained in his theoretical analysis of what he has called "the false urban memory syndrome," one's approach to the urban environment is also largely subjective and emotion-driven: "While there may be an element of psychosomatic neurosis about these feelings, it is understandably true that place and memory can have an emotional reality for many of us" (1).

The impact of Belfast City Centre regeneration policies on positive and consensual memory is also challenged both by the strong cultural, political, and denominational marking of close neighbourhoods like West Belfast and North Belfast and by the dereliction which prevails in some poverty-stricken areas of suburban Belfast. The visual markers of segregation are the symbols of resistance to neutrality. Neil Jarman, the author of extensive research into mural paintings and other cultural markers in Northern Ireland, has acknowledged that "on any journey, real or virtual, through the working-class areas of Belfast, one is bombarded by a panoply of visual statements" (81) and that in particular "it has been widely noted how murals and other displays are sometimes situated as territorial indicators or as boundary markers – as a warning or a challenge to the 'other'" (83). These territorial markers are clear references to "particular groups and historical activity" (*Belfast's Peacelines)*. As for socially-deprived areas, a large share of the regeneration strategies advocated by the Belfast Regeneration Office and the Department of Social Development is dedicated to these areas where social deprivation prevails and where the meaning of regeneration extends far beyond the mere renovation of the urban space: it also means education, employment, safety. The *Draft Strategy* also addresses this issue as part of the Belfast Regeneration Office's contribution to Belfast City Vision for 2025: "We want to see run-down areas converted into attractive, safe and well-designed neighbourhoods that meet residents' expectations. Residents will be able to say that they have reasonable income, good housing, the opportunity of employment and access to social and leisure services" (§5.1).

For the time being, however, a visit to the neutral, economically booming, and aesthetically more pleasant downtown Belfast may well foster a better perception of society in Northern Ireland for people from the segregated and economically deprived parts of Belfast, while their roots still remain in their own quarters. As long as urban and social policies have not totally blurred the contrast between the City Centre and its more deprived and segregated neighbourhoods, the impact of downtown urban regeneration on visitors' minds can be questioned. And it will take even longer to erase

their individual and collective memories of recent conflict and deprivation than to eradicate the reality of the conflict itself.

Conclusion

Beside its business-driven development, the public realm of Belfast City Centre is indeed meant to be a world of its own, at the crossroads of all political, cultural, and religious allegiances, or socio-economic classifications, a place for all, "the shop window of Belfast, the first and last impression for those who live and work in the City, and those who visit" (*People and Place* 11). The City Centre spaces are supposed to "provide common ground where people of all backgrounds can meet and participate in the life of the regional capital" (*People and Place* 12). But one can, indeed, question the capacity of occasional and brief visits to the neutral city centre to offset the effects and consequences of segregation and dereliction elsewhere and to concur to the making of a sense of "common" place. William J.V. Neill, for instance, doubts "the capacity of the shared cultural spaces on Belfast's waterfront emphasising youth culture and a cosmopolitan outlook to dispel cultural and ethnic tensions" (19). In his study of memory in context, Robert Samuel has expressed the view that "memory is historically conditioned, changing colour and shape according to the emergencies of the moment" (12). In fact, the use which can be made of urban regeneration and economic prosperity in the City Centre as a support for improved community relations among Belfast residents remains very vulnerable and closely related to the daily events and context.

The renovation of the City Centre cannot convey the expected strong and positive message of a post-conflict era on its own: it is, of course, part of a much wider political, economic, and social process that also has to do with equal opportunities and economic and social progress for all. Neither will any urban renovation process provide the answer to the political future of Northern Ireland. A cleaner, better-looking, busier and more cosmopolitan City Centre can contribute to the slow process of erasing the "darker side of memory," to leave more space for a common cultural heritage and for brighter prospects. But for the City Centre to actually participate in such a process, there must also be an appropriation by all across the political, economic, and social spectrum of that "neutral" part of town as a piece of evidence that the city can become what people make of it and not what they remember of it. As underlined by Frank Gaffikin and Mike Morrissey, "without a greater sense of common ownership and stake-holding in the City by the two sides of the community, there will not be the civic pride necessary to market the city to its full potential for tourism and investment" (Hall 70).

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