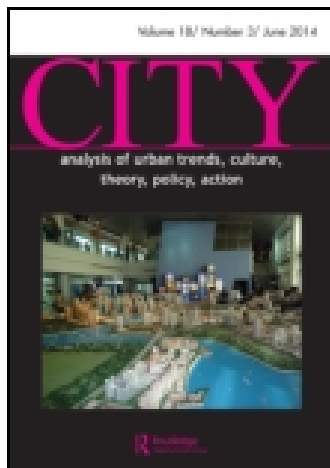


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## City: analysis of urban trends, culture, theory, policy, action

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ccit20>

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Published online: 12 Aug 2013.

To cite this article: Liam O'Dowd & Milena Komarova (2013) Three narratives in search of a city, *City: analysis of urban trends, culture, theory, policy, action*, 17:4, 526-546, DOI: [10.1080/13604813.2013.812366](https://doi.org/10.1080/13604813.2013.812366)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13604813.2013.812366>

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# Three narratives in search of a city

## Researching Belfast's 'post-conflict' transitions

Liam O'Dowd and Milena Komarova

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*This paper highlights the role of narratives in expressing, shaping and ordering urban life, and as tools for analysing urban conflicts. The paper distinguishes analytically between two prominent epistemological meta-narratives in contemporary urban studies and multiple ontological narratives in a given city—in this case Belfast. The first meta-narrative represents cities as sites of deepening coercion, violence and inequality and the second sees them as engines of new forms of transnational capitalism. Both are marked by the strategy of specifying 'exemplar' or 'paradigm' cities. The core of the paper addresses how these two meta-narratives map onto and interact with, three contemporary ontological narratives of urban regeneration in Belfast. We conceive of narratives—epistemological and ontological—as analytical tools and objects of analysis but also as tools for social action for competing political and economic interests and coalitions. While in the urban studies literature Belfast is typically studied as an exemplar 'conflict city', it is now being promoted as a 'new capitalist city'. In the context of post-Agreement Belfast, we explore not only the 'pull' of exemplar narratives but also resistances to them that are linked to multiple and hybrid senses of place in the city. We conclude that any significant move beyond the exigencies of rampant commodification or recurring inter-communal antagonism must firstly, encourage new forms of grassroots place-making and, secondly, reform of Belfast's (and Northern Ireland's) fragmented governance structures.*

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**Key words:** narratives, urban theory, Belfast, ethno-national conflict, regeneration

### Introduction

**N**arratives are a necessary means of making sense of social life (Harling Stalker 2009; Sommers and Gibson 1994). Indeed, social scientific analyses of cities are influenced by two kinds of narratives that are necessarily in dialogue with each other. The first

encompasses epistemological/analytical narratives that are prominent in the urban studies literature generally. The second includes multiple ontological narratives in any given city, that is, those that residents, policymakers, community activists or businesses use to make sense of their professional, personal and everyday life experiences.<sup>1</sup> These competing and

interweaving ontological narratives also reflect attempts by organised groups to impose order and coherence on a fluid and often incoherent urban reality. As such, they bring into focus the changing relationship between the economic, political and cultural dimensions of urban life in ways that are often obscured by dominant epistemological narratives in urban studies.

Many contemporary urban studies coalesce around two poles. The first concentrates on cities as sites of coercion, violence and inequality. Here the focus varies from micro-level forms of coercion and criminality, to intractable ethno-national and religious conflicts, to seeing cities as 'battlespaces' (Graham 2010; Savitch 2008; World Bank 2010). Thus, cities appear as sources and targets of crime, terrorism, ethnic, religious and racial antagonisms, as victims of state-organised violence or as marking the limits of effective state control (Beall and Fox 2009; Graham 2006, 2010). For example, Beall, Goodfellow, and Rodgers (2011, 3) emphasise how cities manifest themselves both as crucibles of state-making and as primary sites of state erosion. This approach foregrounds city-state relationships, particularly in their political, cultural and military dimensions.

The second narrative represents cities as engines of new forms of capital accumulation inspired by the globalisation of neo-liberal capitalism. Here advocacy of the supremacy of 'markets' in neo-liberal ideology renders state-city relationships far more indirect, even opaque (Therborn 2011). For some analysts, cities have replaced states as drivers of new forms of capitalist globalisation and are caught up in a global 'space of flows' through the mobility of capital, people and information (Logan and Molotch 2007; Sassen 2001; Taylor 2007). 'New capitalist' cities are seen as entrepreneurial centres of the new knowledge/information economy—nodes in dense transnational networks, competing for mobile corporate investment, migrants and tourists while searching for

iconic branding strategies. While at one level more critical to the economic dynamism of their states/regions, at another level cities' economic success is increasingly linked to the characteristics which distinguish them from their national hinterlands (Florida 2000; Sassen 2001; Van Winden 2010)—that is, their cultural diversity, innovation, creativity, greater tolerance of difference, and more outward and forward-looking policies (e.g. URBACT 2007).

This crude characterisation of two epistemological meta-narratives in urban studies spans the practice of designating 'paradigm' or 'exemplar' cities (Beauregard 2003). Here cities may be regarded as exemplars because they are stereotypical or generic, archetypal or prototypical—a trendsetter (Brenner 2003, 208). This approach helps to give a degree of coherence to a highly diverse collection of historical and contemporary cities. It tends to work with implicit or explicit typologies of cities while using a small number as exemplars. Examples include 'world cities', 'global cities', the capitalist city, the industrial city, the '(post) modern city', the 'fundamentalist city', the 'Islamic city', the 'post-secular city', 'contested cities', 'conflict cities', 'cities of the Global South/North'.

These paradigms form the basis for epistemological narratives which frequently imprison cities within paradigmatic silos limiting cross-category perspectives and implicitly devaluing dimensions of 'ordinariness' within exemplar cities. One consequence is that the links between the economic dimensions of cities and their political and cultural characteristics may be obscured.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Till (2012, 5) argues that many '[W]estern-based models of urban development either "tame" or "romanticize" the messiness that is so central to the mobilities, spatial practices and connectivities of the lived city.' Therefore, she sees a challenge in developing urban theories that conceptualise and account for this messiness without drowning it into paradigmatic or exemplar silos.

## Belfast: no longer a paradigm ‘conflict’ city?

Belfast, the subject of this paper, has been long recognised as a paradigm case of a ‘conflict’ or ‘contested city’, that is, a city divided by deep-rooted ethno-national conflict. This is what has made it particularly interesting in the meta-narratives of the international urban studies literature. More recently, it has been studied comparatively as part of a relatively new sub-category of ‘contested cities’ riven by ethno-national conflict (Boal 1994; Hepburn 2004; Bollens 2007; Calame and Charlesworth 2009; Davis and Libertun de Duren 2011). This ‘exemplar’ approach risks obscuring the dimensions of urban life that Belfast shares with what Robinson (2006) calls ‘ordinary cities’, that is, cities not divided on ethno-national grounds. This is all the more problematical in so far as Belfast is now widely portrayed as having moved from a ‘violently contested’ city to a ‘post-conflict’ city preoccupied by economic development, thus joining the ranks of ‘entrepreneurial cities’ seen as putative engines of transnational capitalism. Indeed, the recasting of Belfast as a new capitalist city is frequently represented not just as a means of moving beyond violent conflict but as proof that the transition has actually been accomplished.

We argue below that the nature of Belfast’s transitions can be more usefully understood in the light of the multiple ontological narratives infusing its urban regeneration projects. Prefaced by a note on methodology, we discuss three of the more prominent examples: the ‘new capitalist’, the ‘contested’ and the ‘shared’ city narratives outlining their provenance, contradictions and interconnections. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of our approach for theory and practice.

### Methodology

The delineation of these three ontological narratives is based on an ongoing Economic

and Social Research Council (ESRC) research project, entitled *Conflict in Cities and the Contested State*.<sup>3</sup> It draws on interviews and discussions on the future of Belfast (involving planners, urban and regional civil servants, community activists and academics), photographs and case studies of major urban regeneration schemes, key documents associated with the regeneration of Belfast, and participation of the authors in conferences and seminars devoted to the restructuring of the city. These narratives are largely derived from one module of the overall research project dealing with the intersection of ethno-national conflict and the evolution of Belfast’s built environment since the 1998 Peace Agreement. However, we were able to also draw on a rich collection of data and methodological approaches used in the other modules of the project. These include the significance of conflict management practices in the city and of mundane activities performed in public space (shopping, leisure or religious practices and public celebrations) by a variety of groups (e.g. mothers of under school-age children and young people). While, due to word constraints, we are not using specific examples from all these parts of our research in the description of our narratives, they inform our understanding of the multi-dimensionality of urban life. Thus our collection of data contains stories—or narratives—that represent the city as a complex, contradictory and incoherent assemblage of meanings, practices and materialities, while at the same time seeking to impose a certain order or coherence on a refractory urban reality.<sup>4</sup>

We understand these ontological narratives as ‘spatial stories’. They are constructed within and with reference to specific places and through associated spatial practices. In Simonsen’s (2004, 53) terms they are to be understood as ‘performed telling’ rather than ‘decontextualised texts with purely cognitive import’. As representations of events, experiences and identities, narratives are told through verbal and written discourse but they are also performed through spatial

practices and are given form by the material and visual city. Each narrative then has discursive, performative and material (urban environment) elements manifested in a 'gathering' of ideas and practices. While a lot of these practices are rooted in formal institutions—physical regeneration being chief among those that we set out to study—many are simply mundane forms of urban life, or specific, locally organised responses to conflict by urban residents. In considering these practices as integral to our narratives we re-iterate the need for 'a deeper appreciation of the lived, place-based experiences of inhabitants of most cities' which 'animate the city and make it liveable' (Till 2012, 3).

While our narratives can be seen as representations, when articulated they themselves begin to constitute places, practices and meanings. Once in existence and 'circulation' narratives become tools for action and for the articulation of wider discourses of power that aim to promote or resist socio-spatial change.<sup>5</sup>

### The 'new capitalist city' narrative

Underlying what we have labelled the 'new capitalist city' narrative is a contemporary discourse of neo-liberal economic development adapted to Belfast's particular circumstances. In the words of one interviewee:

'All that stuff about conflict transformation—the driver here is in a sense the normalisation that comes with the neo-liberal project.'<sup>6</sup>

While the broader discourse is not Belfast-specific, the narrative which builds on it is manifested and performed through the dramatic physical transformation of parts of the city. It is put forth by property developers, bankers, public-private partnerships, businessmen and politicians in interviews, public policies, regeneration consultation documents and media reports. To understand the significance of this narrative, we stress that economic development is discursively

central to the projects of conflict management and transformation laid down in the Peace Agreement of 1998. It was promoted as having the potential to change the substance of zero-sum nationalist politics and to replace it with politics focused on wealth creation. Thus, Nagle (2009a, 174) asserts that 'the main political parties in Northern Ireland have embraced neo-liberalism as the central *modus operandi*, above other forms of "peace-building", aiming to transform the conflict by generating free-market solutions'.<sup>7</sup> Since the 1990s, like other cities around the world (e.g. Neill 2004), Belfast has been re-branded as the place for foreign direct investment, regeneration, improved infrastructure and tourism. Examples are seen in the Laganside waterfront development, the new apartment blocks in the south and east of the city, and the retail, recreational and cultural renovation of the city centre through glitzy shopping centres and the designation of cultural quarters (Gaffikin et al. 2008; *Belfast Telegraph*, 2 March 2012; 3 March 2010). The most ambitious of these projects by far (labelled 'the most expensive tourist attraction in Europe' [Kelly 2012, 1]) is the renovation of the Harland and Wolff shipyard area in the inner east of the city, now re-branded as 'Titanic Quarter' (TQ), after the name of its most famous ship (Figure 1). This development promises to transform the 185-acre site into 'a new mixed use maritime quarter' to include: 'over 7,500 apartments, 900,000 sq. m. of business, education, office and research and development floor space together with hotels, restaurants, cafes, bars and other leisure uses' (TQ Ltd website).<sup>8</sup> Indeed, according to our interviewees and various newspaper reports, those behind the TQ development<sup>9</sup> believe it will create between 20,000 and 25,000 new jobs over the next 15 years,<sup>10</sup> and is expected to attract further financial and IT businesses alongside the 70 firms that are already based at the site. This is the city as the space of flows; as a cosmopolitan anywhere space, materialising a globalised educated, 'cappuccino-culture' lifestyle.



**Figure 1** Titanic Quarter's £97 million 'Signature Project'—an iceberg-shaped building hosting a museum of the famous ship, conference, entertainment and leisure facilities (Photo: Conflict in Cities, 2012)

The economic vision underlying this spatial change is contained in the words of the chief executive of TQ Ltd delivered on the occasion of a banking giant opening their offices on site:

'The future of Belfast is smart people doing smart things in a smart way... It's not about smoke-stacked factories now. It's about knowledge-based activity, innovation-led research and development, bio-science or financial services. We have the potential for all of those.'<sup>11</sup>

'Growing a dynamic and innovative economy'—significantly, the first of five priorities in the Programme for Government (2011–15)—constitutes the ground for an unprecedented level of cross-party political agreement. An abundance of media reports, government press releases and programmes testify to the readiness and enthusiasm of government to encourage a more dynamic private sector by backing up the development of new ICT (information and communications technology) and financial businesses and lowering corporation tax.<sup>12</sup> Wittily labelled 'ecumenical ... collective worship of the free market' (Kelly 2012, 45), this political agreement marks a significant change from recurring violent expressions of antagonism during the 'Troubles' and has

permeated circles far beyond the political establishment per se. The words, below, of a former republican political prisoner and presently community representative on one of Belfast's local development partnership boards,<sup>13</sup> speak unequivocally of the widely shared belief that economic development is the basis for conflict transformation:

'[R]econconciliation and good relations needs [*sic*] to be driven by an economic strategy ... We have been saying that for twenty years in these areas and [name of organisation] is one such example of [us] saying we can have better relations between the Falls and the Shankill, for the peoples in those areas, if we bring an economic strategy to it.'<sup>14</sup>

Yet, a city official (below) also expresses a concern with the inherent inability of the free market to produce equitable economic and political outcomes:

'There's an attitude of "build the economy and it will save us all". It's missing a critique. It's missing people saying, well, yeah, but if you do it in a particular way, if you do it in a way that cares for disadvantaged communities and that social responsibility is a key part of it.'<sup>15</sup>

In this respect, Murtagh (2011, 213) suggests that Belfast has only selectively 'caught up with the neoliberalisation of urban space familiar in other late capitalist cities' and is presently characterised by the development of 'urban bubbles' representing a form of class segregation.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, while a middle-class population benefits from high levels of public expenditure and newcomers to the city enjoy new residential, commercial, leisure and other services in the centre, south and east of the city (Gaffikin et al. 2008), they are not 'normally inclined to integrate [with] long-standing [local] communit[ies]' (112), neither is working-class housing normally integrated into such new developments. For instance, the original suggestions in the media (and in our interviews<sup>17</sup>) that the residential part of TQ was to include up to 15% of social and affordable housing were never

realised, leading Kelly (2012, 44) to observe that the development 'to date includes not a single unit of desperately needed social housing'.

Moreover, the kind of employment such glittery regeneration projects aim to create, and its ability to impact on the wider community, has also been interrogated. The failure of TQ to generate 'a mere 25 apprenticeships', 'creating a pitiful 15 jobs for the city's long term unemployed' (Kelly 2012, 44) is indicative of the significant mismatch between the high-end professional skills required by the new economy and the skill structure of the working population in Belfast, 24% of which is said to have no qualifications (Plöger 2007, 40). Our interviewee from a local employment agency comments, in this next quote, on some of the reasons why the working-class communities immediately adjacent to a regeneration site known as the Gasworks, have not been able to avail themselves of the job opportunities on site:

'[O]verall these areas still exhibit the highest rates of unemployment, the lowest qualification rates... [T]he figures from the Superannuation Output [Area] are that two-thirds of the people in the Shaftesbury ward have no qualifications whatsoever. Now, in the adjoining ward of Malone two-thirds of the people over 16 have a 3rd level degree or higher... [T]he reality is your life chances are seriously limited by poverty and by deprivation.'<sup>18</sup>

The result of the skills mismatch highlighted above is tersely put across by a community worker from the area concerned:

'They are building a wall between *us* and *them*... [T]here is a physical wall for a start but also in terms of employment, there is nobody and I repeat—nobody to my knowledge from the Markets area who works in the Gasworks.'<sup>19</sup>

There is also wider evidence that Belfast's neo-liberal strategy is failing in its own terms. Employment is disproportionately skewed towards the public sector, the

manufacturing base is shrinking,<sup>20</sup> inner-city population decline continues<sup>21</sup> and socio-economic inequalities have increased (Kelly 2012). This concurs with O'Hearn's (2008) argument that the 'peace-dividend' discourse linked to the peace process in Northern Ireland is neither stable from an economic point of view, nor is it based on the regeneration of marginalised communities. A similar critique of 'the new capitalist city's' reliance on physically led regeneration, simultaneously representing the internal contradictions and inconsistencies in this narrative, is succinctly suggested by the manager of one of Belfast's area partnership boards below:

'The problem with [regeneration projects] like the Gasworks [and] like will be the case with Titanic Quarter ... is that they are physically led ... and therefore the people side of it is an add-on. If one-fifth of the resources that actually go into these regeneration schemes and one-fifth of the will and energy went in ... getting people into the jobs for example and ready for these jobs, then it would work. But ... [this is] where they make money out of cause it's property development ... [W]e need to invest much more in making sure that the people who are already so disadvantaged can get into the market which is more than having another scheme.'<sup>22</sup>

A further array of discursive contradictions beneath the surface of the 'new capitalist city' narrative is masked by the apparent political consensus that 'economic growth precipitates the amelioration of a "divided society"' (Nagle 2009a, 179). An example is the discourse and practice of designating Belfast into cultural quarters—visually, politically and culturally associated with a variety of places across the city—based on the commodifying thrust of a globally *en vogue* urban development practice.

By the enthusiastic proclamation of a local real estate developer, Belfast is now 'the city of 7 Quarters ... and counting'.<sup>23</sup> To be sure, many of these quarters do not necessarily reflect a functioning—presently or in the past—urban locale but can be described

as a product of economic, cultural and political entrepreneurship.

Discursively, the practice of quarterisation aims to link the economic viability of Belfast to its social and cultural vitality; to capitalise on Belfast's political history and divisions and celebrate its cultural diversity, while creating a sense of the city as one place. Expressed in the words of a former Minister for Regional Development in his address to a flagship Belfast City of Quarters Conference in March 2010:

[I]t is now time to . . . ensure that past division is not cemented for instance by "Quarters" but rather every part of the city complements its neighbours, that we build a society based on tolerance, fairness and equality. A place open for business . . . [b]ut, ultimately a place where it is good to live.<sup>24</sup>

In the same speech the minister also talked about achieving Belfast's economic recovery by addressing the division between 'the city of haves' and of 'have-nots' and about introducing a major reform of public transport in order to promote social inclusion through mobility. Yet, in her research of the Gaeltacht Quarter (a cultural designation for nationalist west Belfast), Carden (2011, 7) reminds us that locally the discourse of 'community' and 'culture' is unavoidably political:

"The Gaeltacht Quarter is a counterbalance to broader regeneration strategies which seem not only to have favoured other areas, but with the development of Laganside, the Titanic Quarter and Victoria Square, to be actually moving the city centre east. The areas of Belfast that were for so long marginalised by conflict are in danger of being marginalised further in the years of peace, as the rest of the city reinvents itself as a regional capital that glories in long awaited "normality" . . ."

Thus, it is worth noting that the discourse of the quarters uniting as one Belfast seems to be promulgated most vigorously by people culturally and politically associated with nationalist west Belfast: politicians, businessmen, architects, media. As such the

discourse and practice of Belfast as 'the city of quarters' could be interpreted as a historically novel bid from nationalists for a role in the civic leadership of the city where they are no longer self-evidently a demographic or political minority. This is a task fraught with complications both internally—at the level of individual quarters—and externally—where the connections between quarters are concerned. Certainly, as the words below of an interviewee from the unionist Shankill area suggest, the challenges of bringing visitors from the east, or even the unionist west, of the city to Gaelic designated parts of republican west Belfast remain considerably bigger than attracting globetrotters:

"The significance of the Gaeltacht Quarter for the Shankill is zero. It's a different culture, different expression . . . I don't speak Irish . . . I appreciate it but that's it, you know. I don't understand it and I am not part of it. I don't want to be part of it at this moment of time. I don't mind it, you know, but as long as it doesn't infringe on me. . . [I]t's not my identity. So the aggressive nature of promoting that sort of stuff doesn't help towards a shared city."<sup>25</sup>

In summary, despite its ostensible 'neutrality' the 'new capitalist city' narrative does not seriously interrogate the dogmas of neo-liberalism either in terms of the in/equality of outcomes it produces or in terms of its ability to challenge spatial and political territoriality in the city. Thus, as Murtagh (2011) suggests, Belfast's recent economic development has resulted in the restructuring, but not dismantling of the city's traditional ethno-national divisions. In this respect, our interviewee below can be interpreted as criticising the narrative's preoccupation with commercialising space rather than with the welfare of those who inhabit it. He implies that Belfast's 'new capitalist' narrative has failed to consider how people's sense of self is fundamentally emplaced in the city and suggests that the narrative now needs to engage with existing senses of place and/or offer tangible alternatives:



'For once, would someone take the force, the designation and the money that focused on Lagside and will be focused on Titanic and elsewhere and focus it within some of the neighbourhoods? ... Let's get some of the investment that we put into these big signature projects and actually put it into the middle of the neighbourhoods that exist and see if we can transform that.'<sup>26</sup>

In its ambitions to make Belfast a globally competitive city, the 'new capitalist' narrative tends to sacrifice people to 'branding' while continuing to be haunted by the abiding ethno-national divisions in the city.

### The contested city narrative<sup>27</sup>

*'... [A]nybody who has lived in Belfast for a long time will know that people are born in different hospitals and buried in different graveyards. We even have separate dole offices ...'* (community activists, round table discussion, 26 September 2008)

The 'contested city' narrative is the oldest of those discussed here, dating from the inception of Belfast as a modern city. It is promulgated and maintained by politicians in political discourse and is confirmed in the everyday life experiences of communities living at and near interfaces.

The end of the 'Troubles', the ensuing political settlement and 14 years of 'post-conflict transition' notwithstanding, Belfast remains a city of political and inter-communal conflicts manifested in high rates of ethno-national spatial divisions,<sup>28</sup> marked by physical barriers ('interface walls' or 'peacewalls'<sup>29</sup>) along the boundaries between Catholic and Protestant working-class areas, and performed through contentious parades, protests and occasional riots. The 'contested city' narrative is characterised by an 'acute relationship between deprivation, residential segregation and violence' (Gaffikin and Morrissey 2011, 205),<sup>30</sup> illustrating the proposition that neo-liberalism has not only failed to dismantle ethno-national territorial

divisions but has become 'enmeshed in the politics of "territoriality"' (Nagle 2009a, 187) in the city.

Despite evidence of political, and of some degree of cross-communal, support for the development and re-imagining of Belfast as a new consumerist city, general agreement tends to disintegrate once it is tied down to those places in the city where territorial divisions between communities have been traditionally prominent. Examples are seen in the refusal of communities and politicians to agree on regeneration projects which promise to bring in large investments, tourism and hundreds of new jobs, yet are suspected of facilitating the territorial expansion of one community over another. Our research into a dispute over the residential development plans for a large regeneration scheme in north Belfast (O'Dowd and Komarova 2011) shows territoriality is most firmly embedded in social housing. Despite promising an unprecedented investment of £320 million in this area over a period of 15 years, the masterplan for this regeneration scheme has been adamantly challenged over its proposals to develop 'shared' residential space. Bluntly put, unionist communities and politicians have vetoed such a development because the overwhelming housing need among nationalists in the area would mean that any social housing built on the site is allocated to people from a Catholic community background. Fears are expressed of the development site turning into 'Catholic territory' and it is argued that the aspirations of the masterplan to develop it as 'shared space' cannot realistically be achieved.<sup>31</sup> In the words of an interviewee from a local community group:

'For us the housing thing is contentious because it's all about territory ... It's about fear ... from both communities point of view ... If it was great we would be taking the walls down ... If there is a need, and I am not denying that there is a need, but I want a wall built around it! Have your houses! But then don't say to me, you know, that will be closed off from what's gonna be called "shared space".'<sup>32</sup>

By contrast, Catholic/nationalist communities and politicians insist that the residential development plans proceed and argue that anything less would sacrifice equality to 'good relations' between communities, the latter perceived as little more than a demagogical term for utopian harmony.<sup>33</sup> The position of the Department for Social Development (DSD)—the managers of the scheme—remains vague and its role equivocal.<sup>34</sup> Only recently—in May 2012—was a breakthrough announced after long years of political deadlock over this regeneration scheme (BBC *Spotlight* programme, 22 May 2012). The new plan eschews the development of shared housing—the most contentious aspect of the scheme—in favour of separate residential developments in different parts of the site adjacent to the respective unionist and nationalist 'communal territories' (see, e.g., Figure 2).

The fraught development of that regeneration scheme, and the political debates surrounding it, demonstrate succinctly that the unprecedented level of political agreement over the importance and direction of economic development, manifested by the 'new capitalist city' narrative, falls apart once crystallised around those places in the city where ethno-national divisions (on which political affiliation itself is based) take primacy in discourse and action. The space of flows here meets its nemesis in the space of place and territory.

The 'contested city' narrative is also performed through periodic contentious events, such as parades, protests and riots. The summer months in particular are the 'season' for hundreds of commemorative parades, mostly organised by the Protestant and unionist Loyal Orders. Although the vast majority of these parades pass off peacefully, they engender varying levels of resentment among Catholic/nationalist communities. A small number remain highly contentious, generally, because their route passes through predominantly Catholic/nationalist residential areas, which can lead to increased tensions and rioting. Thus

unionists' assertion of the right to parade and nationalists' contestation of a given parade's route represent and perform a power struggle over territory (Bryan 2006; Cohen 2007). While they may not leave a lasting material imprint these contentious events come at a huge cost to the public purse (the policing of the last marching season of 2012 is estimated to have cost around £6.5 million<sup>35</sup>). Although it is questionable whether they still have the power to destabilise the whole peace process, their destructive local effects reverberate for a long time preventing the amelioration of territoriality locally and most directly affecting the life chances of the residents of such areas.

At the same time, our research shows that the implementation of the political Agreement and devolved governance in Northern Ireland has gradually created a relatively stable environment for a growing network of local community, residents' and voluntary organisations whose primary purpose is the prevention of public disorder and inter-communal violence at interface areas. With this, the possibilities and opportunities for local interactions, cooperation and negotiations around contested events have grown (even as there are regular setbacks around individual events). Such civil society organisations play a central role in the search for accommodation around contentious events, allowing local community activists to forge



**Figure 2** A loyalist paramilitary mural in south Belfast (Photo: Conflict in Cities, 2009)

and maintain vital relationships with 'the other side' and the police. In the words of a police commander:

'[T]hey [community workers and groups] were the ones who were working together and it was they who achieved more peaceful outcomes in the parading season—not the police. It was agreements that the communities made together that allowed policing levels to be reduced and it was through their own management . . . of parades and management of processes, based upon non-violence, [on] higher levels of mutual respect, [on] accommodation and negotiation that allowed some of the heat to be taken out of the marching season.'<sup>36</sup>

It is thus important to recognise that the role of local community workers and activists in the management of conflict is itself a source of a counter-discourse within 'the contested city' narrative that offers a way of bridging traditional divisions. This point relates to Till's (2012) argument that 'informal acts of citizenship' may represent a type of relationship to, and care for, 'place' and 'community' that offers alternative ways of imagining and living the city, while at the same resisting a simplistic understanding of the 'contested city' narrative as exclusively based on divisions and territoriality between Protestants/unionists and Catholics/nationalists. Here is an example of cross-community action by community activists that resulted in the avoidance of likely local violence:

'[W]e put people [community activists] physically up on the road to act as deterrent for young people not to get involved in [violent] behaviour. I think we done something like from 7pm to 1 o'clock in the morning and the police would have worked from 1 to 3 am. Nipped it in the bud so there was no trouble at that particular junction . . . But . . . we can't forever in the day provide 15 people— . . . What we are trying to do is . . . get local residents to actually become involved in the stewarding operation so that people can also use the fact that they live here

so they are the people who are living with the outcomes as well.'<sup>37</sup>

However, while local community activists often act as intermediaries within and between communities and the police, their involvement in contentious events also has the potential to compromise their position in the eyes of local communities, effectively creating conflict between them and those involved in local disturbances:

'For all of the media reports about the violence, the violence largely was not an intercommunity violence. It was violence between Catholic young people, nationalist young people, dissident young people and the stewarding services. It wasn't Protestant young people against nationalist young people as would have been the big part before.'<sup>38</sup>

Indeed, commentaries in the media and by our interviewees strongly suggest that there is a difference between contemporary street disturbances in Belfast—often overwhelmingly involving young adults and termed 'recreational rioting'—and violence that marked the years immediately after the Good Friday Agreement. This is, certainly, not to suggest that youths participating in such disturbances completely lack political awareness, or that they cannot be exploited for political purposes and by people with political agendas.<sup>39</sup> Instead it demonstrates that there is a complex bundle of multiple conflicts, not only with political and ethno-national but with other social and economic overtones that feed into the 'contested city' narrative, representing intra- (as well as inter-) community tensions and even inter-generational conflicts. For young people from socio-economically deprived areas, involvement in such disturbances represents and performs not only disillusionment with the peace and political processes but with the life chances that they face.

The description of the 'contested city' so far suggests that this narrative is shared by unionists and nationalists alike; is associated with areas of relative social and economic

deprivation; expresses disaffection with the peace and political processes; and contains, although not exclusively, strong elements of ethno-national antagonism. However, asymmetries in unionist and nationalist ‘senses of place’ generate yet further discrepancies within the narrative. These are expressed in an overwhelmingly unionist sub-narrative focusing on the loss of a privileged political and economic position in the city. From this point of view 30 years of violent conflict, combined with the long process of capitalist restructuring, de-industrialisation, physical planning and the emergence of a regional power-sharing administration, have delivered a mortal blow (mostly, but not exclusively) on working-class unionist communities.<sup>40</sup> Consequently, in interviews unionists often articulate their view of Belfast as the ‘world we have lost’. Infused with melancholy throughout, this sub-narrative represents every major political and economic development in Belfast since the beginning of the Troubles as a loss and is thus discursively oriented towards ‘the past’. In the succinct words of one interviewee:

‘Everything here is viewed not with the prospect of tomorrow but against the memory of yesterday.’<sup>41</sup>

Loss of a sense of Belfast as a ‘Protestant’ place, characterised by a narrower focus on neighbourhoods, and on the separate villages which historically comprised the city is often central to such interviews. Two unionist politicians, for instance, convey a view of Belfast’s past as the lost paradise of the urban village with its close-knit community. While one mourns the loss of sense of locality and identity that comes from ‘living close to your mother and father and aunts and uncles’,<sup>42</sup> another regrets the loss of a relative degree of unity, even across sectarian lines, and the rise of residential segregation since the beginning of the Troubles.<sup>43</sup> Similarly, Belfast’s political future is looked upon with pessimism that, again, reflects a sense of unionist political defeat.

Although many elements of this sub-narrative are shared by both middle- and working-class unionists, the working-class version of it focuses strongly on the feelings of frustration with unionist politicians and middle classes who are no longer recognised as representing Protestant working-class interests. This discursive element exemplifies another type of conflict supplanting the ‘contested city’ narrative—that around class divisions within unionism.

Overall, the ‘contested city’ narrative has immediate and material ramifications for the development of safe and accessible (or ‘shared’) public spaces in the city and also shapes most directly people’s livelihoods and their life chances. While our research has registered some elements of transition to less exclusivistic attitudes on ethno-national division, there is also evidence that parts of the city continue to fit the long-run historical pattern identified by Hepburn (2004)—the capacity of Belfast’s ethno-national divisions to accommodate themselves to successive and substantial forms of constitutional and economic change. Our next narrative, however, suggests that perceptions of continuity can also be suffused with a sense that much has changed.

### ‘The shared city’ narrative

*‘If Belfast is . . . gonna be a successful city and a sustainable city it has to be a shared city . . . [It] won’t be shared unless everybody feels comfortable in it and that they have a place, and everybody feels they can express their culture without it threatening other people or being threatened by it. Now that’s a tall order but . . .’<sup>44</sup>*

Focused on building accommodation in the present and looking positively towards the future, the notion of Belfast as a shared city is discursively supported in all interviews conducted for our research. While linked to wider academic and policy debates over the challenges of reconciling cohesion and

diversity in the context of a globalising world, locally this narrative is about the search for reconciliation—dealing with the legacy of the ‘Troubles’ and working towards a non-sectarian present and future. It is an idea promulgated most vigorously by the voluntary and community sector, civil servants and city officials, and is not objected to, in principle, by any of the politicians interviewed. Visually, the city centre is perhaps the best existing representation of Belfast as a shared city.

At a strategic policy level, promoting shared public space is an aspect of governmental strategies for the promotion of ‘good’ or ‘community relations’ in Northern Ireland (*A Shared Future* [OFMDFM 2005]) where it is described as: ‘developing and protecting town and city centres as safe and welcoming places’; ‘creating safe and shared space for meeting, sharing, playing, working and living’ (2005, 21). Belfast City Council is particularly committed to showing civic leadership in developing ‘the shared city’. The Council’s Good Relations Unit<sup>45</sup> is funded under the European Union Peace III Programme<sup>46</sup> (to the sum of £6.3 million) to develop a Peace and Reconciliation Action Plan (2008–11) which currently supports over 60 (third sector) projects for the creation of shared (public, organisational, cultural and residential) space and of positive inter-communal relations in the city.<sup>47</sup> This is in addition to a long-running stream of initiatives, research, strategies and plans that the main city authority has been involved in for years, in cooperation with a number of high-profile third sector organisations.

However, ‘the shared city’ narrative bears all the difficulties associated with the search for a political settlement and its meaning for various communities in the city. The idea of a shared city, although unobjectionable in principle, is rendered problematic at the levels of discourse and practice. Discursively it appears an empty signifier—imbued with various and, at times, contradictory meanings. Consider the following diverse understandings:

‘[We need to] move from a contested city to a city where the future is defined with others... It’s actually saying that both of the fundamental ideologies of ethno-nationalism have agreed to be defeated.’<sup>48</sup>

‘I don’t search for any of those indicators such as Catholicism/Nationalism or Protestantism/Unionism. I just want to have shared space. I have an entirely separate compass. I think the problem that we have is that ... everything is seen through “good relations”. In the past ten years there is a huge rise in the number of people who say, “I reject it all”. That’s the new vision if you like. And that’s why there are shared spaces for me.’<sup>49</sup>

‘[A] shared and better future ... needs to be applied to open space... [N]o longer would you be able to say that the Springfield Road is a nationalist road. If it’s a main road it’s a shared road and it should be accessible for people to use. And come a particular day in June, if members of the Orange Order want to use that road they have every right to use it.’<sup>50</sup>

Clearly, the definitions of a shared city above cover a whole spectrum of meaning and usage: from an articulation of a philosophy of post-nationalism and new citizenship; to a rejection of ethno-national or communal divisions as a framework for defining the meaning of ‘sharing’ space; to an expression of de facto politics of rights and recognition of homogenous cultures, eyeing each other from across public space (as exemplified by the disputes over shared residential developments and the passing of Loyal Order parades through nationalist areas, discussed previously).

Furthermore, despite rhetorical commitment at a strategic policy level, the development of shared space has had no consistent expression at the level of urban or regional policy (Knox 2010). Certainly, the pending strategic policy for tackling sectarianism and racism (‘Draft Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration’, consultation document [Northern Ireland Executive 2010]) which is to replace the previous ‘good relations’ strategy (*A Shared Future*

[OFMDFM 2005]) pays very little attention to the question of shared space. Both these documents have been criticised as superficial and failing to incorporate ‘good relations’ and desegregation into an integrated governance approach to urban planning and regeneration in Belfast (Bradley and Murtagh 2007; Knox 2010; Todd and Ruane 2010). There continues to be a political stalemate in the Stormont Executive over the implementation of policy in this area while the City Council’s power to implement a policy of its own is very restricted.

Unsurprisingly, it is exactly the task of physically developing shared urban space that has proven most challenging to the ‘shared city’. In addition to our discussion of local communities’ and politicians’ resistance to the development of shared residential space, research in north Belfast (Mitchell and Kelly 2010) demonstrates the diverse range of everyday life tactics through which ‘peace-building’ is contested—via graffiti on walls or on surveillance equipment, rioting, attacks on youth clubs and other buildings, to simply non-participation in projects for re-imagining and beautifying the physical environment. Such ‘tactics of resistance’ mean in practice that ‘shared space’ strategies have been mostly confined to commercial and work spaces and to the city centre appearing largely absent from segregated working-class residential areas.

Sharing the city, though highly problematic in terms of residential space, is acceptable and even successful in terms of central places of work, consumption, culture and public celebration. Belfast’s city centre is awash with tourists and now boasts a growing list of annual cultural and civic events<sup>51</sup> that make up for a huge contrast to what was, during the Troubles, a heavily fortified ‘ring of steel’, defaced by a series of bombing attacks. Retail spending in the city centre is rising and shoppers’ perception of safety has reportedly improved by 40% since 2006 (BCC 2010).

In assessing the significance of ‘alternative and even progressive uses of public space in

Belfast’, such as the MayDay and GayPride parades and the ‘Beat’ carnival, Nagle (2009b, 327) builds on Lefebvre’s thoughts on participatory democracy to emphasise the importance of re-imagining Belfast ‘as a place of encounter, an assemblage of difference’, manifested in ‘alternative and even progressive uses of public space’. He sees such events as re-enacting a struggle for ‘the right to the city’ by literally demonstrating visibility in public life, investing space with new memories and challenging existing representations of space. The re-imagining of exclusivistic paramilitary murals (Figure 3), especially in loyalist areas by Belfast City Council in partnership with local residents, has sought to celebrate the heterogeneity of place and make visible marginalised groups while celebrating community achievements and links across the communal divide (Shirlow 2012, 161).

Yet, as Nagle (2009b, 344) also observes, the extent to which such activities really constitute ‘radical politics of social transformation’ remains debateable. On the one hand, their event-driven character limits them temporally yet, on the other hand, their very organisation also involves an incremental process of building up skills, relationships and networks behind the scenes. As in our discussion of the importance of the work of



**Figure 3** Re-branding cultural heritage through changing murals. The mural in this photograph has now replaced the one shown in Figure 2 (Photo: Conflict in Cities, 2012)

local community groups and activists, it could be argued that the possibilities for nurturing alternative local contacts and capacities is just as significant as the public events and images that ensue.

Similarly, Bryan (2009, 3) has argued that key public events in the city centre have 'probably contributed to improved political relations within the city' and thus may be interpreted as 'possibly drivers of political change'. Our observations suggest, however, that re-imaging of events, such as the St Patrick's Day parade (Smyth and McKnight 2010) and Orangefest,<sup>52</sup> have limited success and still draw mainly on the respective nationalist and unionist publics. Furthermore, for many working-class inhabitants, even of the inner-city neighbourhoods, the city centre arguably remains reserved for use on special occasions and therefore has marginal significance for their daily lives (Smyth and McKnight 2010). The quote below from an interview with a Protestant community representative shows that community background remains relevant to whether or not people feel comfortable and have a sense of place in the city centre:

'The big word that the government are [*sic*] using at the moment is "shared space" and that is where anyone is comfortable about using a facility. And ... to me in and around the Belfast City Hall at the minute is a shared space. Castle Court is a shared space. Victoria Square is a shared space... But if you say to me in general—do I feel secure in Belfast city centre? No! Because I would feel in and around Castle Street, in and around the Markets—it's not a shared space for me. Going around central train station is not a shared space... It's one community.'<sup>53</sup>

Our research also suggests that the 'shared city' idea is increasingly influenced by business and economic imperatives. In order to develop 'the shared city' its promulgators often need the cooperation of developers and businesses. City officials argue that these have begun taking the 'conflict transformation' agenda seriously—a view

supported by developing networks and working relationships between urban government, businesses and the voluntary sector. Yet, while supporters of the 'shared city' affirm the necessity for economic growth, they implicitly critique the idea of the latter as a condition for the transformation of a 'divided society'. Rather, they see the development of a shared city as itself a condition of economic success:

'[T]he new capitalist story cannot actually succeed unless this city becomes a shared city. [I]t's nonsense to believe that the labour market can clear the 88 peace walls that we've got and it's nonsense to believe significant investors will still want to invest ... [U]ntil those kinds of political and paramilitary questions are resolved ... the new capitalist city narrative is gonna have a head-in-the-sand character.'<sup>54</sup>

Yet, as the same participant also suggests, the advocates of the 'shared city' and shared space idea 'haven't been able to put that in a sufficiently positive way' resulting—in the words of another participant—in the 'too promiscuous' use of these notions. Many of our research participants often spelled out their own lack of clarity about the meaning of 'sharing' and have suggested that ordinary people in the city remain suspicious and feel threatened by the idea because of being unable to imagine what 'sharing' looks like in practice. Even the city centre can erupt into a symbolic battleground as in the recent 'flag riots'.<sup>55</sup>

The words of a community worker below articulate the failure of 'the shared city' narrative to date to relate the notion of sharing to the familiarity that comes with a sense of place:

'[I]t goes back to what you were saying about mums of young children feeling uncomfortable out of their own areas. When they are in their own areas their life is mirrored back to them and that's comfortable. But when they go into this other space—and I happen to see Victoria Square as being a

Grand Central Station as opposed to an actual place—there's no soul to it. It's just a place where people mill where they naturally wouldn't meet... Shopping is this new religion in Belfast. I am struck by this—we don't have shared space. We have places where people converge and that's very different from shared space.<sup>56</sup>

It seems then that among the narratives discussed in this paper, 'the shared city' narrative is the one plagued by the most vagueness. It is discursively complicated and its limitations and inherent difficulties are most clearly manifested when applied to territorially divided parts of urban space or to flags on civic buildings. Additionally, the performance of sharing through key civic events, however important in a symbolic sense, remains arguably limited in space and in terms of the publics that it engages.

## Discussion

In the attempts made to substitute Belfast's 'new capitalist' for its 'conflict-city' status the city clearly exposes the 'pull' of 'exemplar' approaches to understanding and governing the urban. It reveals the ways in which the two epistemological meta-narratives identified at the outset of the paper resonate, and interface, with multiple experiences, practices and spatialities in a given city. What the 'narrative approach' promises is an escape from such exemplar or paradigmatic thinking and from tendencies to classify cities in somewhat one-dimensional categories devoid of narrative complexity. It explores whose order is to be imposed on the city, to what effects and against what resistances?

Our narratives convey, implicitly or explicitly, a sense of temporality, a 'take' on past, present and future. They transform urban space into territories and places while constituting both as part of social identity. Some narratives are demonstrably anchored in the contemporary physical environment, some

are less tangible and invisible. Often internally complex and contradictory, incorporating multiple resistances, the narratives engage in a dialogue with each other and even partially overlap. While they are each anchored in particular parts of the city, all of them imply a degree of envisioning it as a whole, as opposed to fragmentary accounts.<sup>57</sup> Taken together they are elements in an incomplete and often incoherent debate about its past and future, showing that

'meanings and symbolism conferred on entrepreneurial landscapes by state or corporate powers are not always hegemonic but constantly inflected, unsettled and challenged by the possibility of alternative readings on the part of others'. (Yeoh 2005, 952)

The specific ideological appeal of the neo-liberal, new capitalist narrative, is that it promises an escape to a future where inter-communal conflict can be sidelined or ignored, focusing on what is new, outward-looking and developmental. This narrative is performed in the production of the built environment and at the level of everyday consumerism: in the bars, shopping malls, restaurants and recreational venues of the 'post-conflict' city. In focusing on the links between the city and the global economy, it subscribes to the commodification of urban places and cultures, with the effect of depoliticising Belfast and obscuring the degree to which urban regeneration depends on state involvement and subsidisation.

The 'contested city' narrative, on the other hand, is overtly political and foregrounds the relationship between the city and the contested state. Its grassroots dimension is more vibrant in terms of collective action and claims on public space. It is deeply associated with the past and with an enduring discourse of Belfast as a 'bifurcated place' where a zero-sum struggle persists between two communities for resources and urban space. The narrative is grounded in the most segregated and deprived working-class communities in the city, manifested in ongoing,



low-intensity intimidation in housing estates and city streets, in the recurring conflicts over Orange Order parades and episodic sectarian rioting for over 150 years. A democratised, less violent and more institutionalised version of this narrative is performed by mainstream political parties in the elected arenas of Belfast City Council and Stormont. Yet this narrative also exposes the multi-layered nature of conflicts in the city, showing how a definitive discourse of ethno-national conflict has wielded the power to subsume the stories and experiences of multiple 'others' in the city.

The 'shared city' narrative has its roots in the Good Friday Agreement (1998), in civil society organisations and in the administration of Belfast City Council now presiding over an urban area where, for the first time, there is demographic parity between the two communities. Its discursive appeal resides in its promise to advance reconciliation and conflict transformation yet, its *modus operandi* can be technocratic as in the attempts to redesign public space and the built environment. Its performative dimension is relatively weak and more restricted compared to the other two narratives. It consists of making communal events more inclusive and removing signs of communal division from 'shared' urban space. Yet, in many ways, this narrative remains 'aloof' from the highly spatialised experiences of division and social deprivation characteristic of the 'contested city' narrative. It fails to turn 'new consumerist' spaces in Belfast into places that are welcoming and meaningful/relevant to the experiences of marginalised groups in the city.

Of course there are other narratives supported by organised groups not discussed here. These include writers, film-makers, artists and professionals such as architects and designers who are producing a massive 'oeuvre' on the conflicted city, reinterpreting and re-connecting communities, individuals and places in new ways<sup>58</sup> (e.g. Stainer 2005). There are ongoing therapeutic 'storytelling' projects funded by the EU Peace Programme,

transnational NGOs (non-governmental organisations) and government, to enable those most affected by the conflict to come to terms with its legacy and the trauma that they have suffered (e.g. Ardoyne Commemoration Project 2002; Gormally and McEvoy 2009). These attempts to give voice to people who were marginalised or silenced by their experiences of violent conflict exist in parallel with the kind of narratives discussed here. Yet, not all narratives and coalitions of people behind them wield equal power to materially influence the city. They remain subordinate to the types of narrative identified here—narratives that seek to forge holistic views of the city and that express the projects of organised interests and the structural links between economy, polity and culture.

Being 'spatial stories' (elicited in relation to spatial regeneration) our three narratives elucidate the spatial dimensions of the interaction between 'top-down' strategies of conflict transformation and localised grassroots experiences of these interventions. Through the discursive and performative practices associated with this environmental change, the narratives highlight not only how Belfast's various aspects of transition are manifested and performed through conflicts over space but that they are structured around conflicting spatialities. Both technocratic and commercial approaches to governing and shaping the built environment of the city have treated it as abstract space (emphasising function, competitiveness or securitisation), failing to incorporate, or have even been suppressing, place-based everyday life practices and feelings of belonging. Yet, the discourses and practices of urban strategic governance are perceived, experienced and frequently contested, or resisted, through individual and group attachments to, and practices of, place. Perceptions of injustice, inequality, inclusion or exclusion, resulting from both conflict and attempts at conflict transformation (ranging from acts of terrorism to processes of gentrification), are often associated with a sense of displacement, loss

of place or fear of entering/using public places, thus eroding the broader 'right to the city' (Lefebvre 1996; Harvey 2008).

Therefore, working alternatives to the dominant narratives depend on the success of new forms of place-making that go beyond the exigencies of commodification and bi-communalism. These might involve developing new forms of belonging and ownership that promise an escape from the paralysed politics of conflict management and from the nostrums of a neo-liberal ideology. However, alternative narratives which emphasise cross-communal solidarity and inter-dependence, underlining the rights of marginalised groups (working class, women, migrants and young people) to the city, cannot be built on a vision of a utopian city free of political conflict, class and sectarian division. Nor can they ignore the legacy of 30 years of violent conflict and the politics of conflict management which enabled a 'settlement' to be reached. Rather, these must look to an alternative politics of conflict transformation and social justice—linked to encouraging oppositional discourses and the right of diverse groups to claim public space.

Belfast's current politics of conflict management is fragmented, highly bureaucratised and split between many institutional arenas. Forged during the 'Troubles', it involved insulating the British state including the civil service, business and the middle classes from the violence on the streets. This governance style is underpinned by a policy consensus undisturbed by a politics of taxation (since Northern Ireland politicians have no tax-varying powers). Instead, local politicians are able to call for a special corporation tax for Northern Ireland while seeking to defend the huge fiscal transfers to the region in the areas of health, education, welfare and policy. In practice, this means that they argue about *sharing out* government spending. This can encourage zero-sum forms of politics which privilege communal priorities over such associated with class, gender, age and other groups spanning the communal divide. Hence, there is a pressing need to

reform the overly bureaucratic and disjointed nature of urban governance that (inadvertently or otherwise) annihilate existing places while offering no new and viable alternatives to those outside the middle classes.

So what hopes are there for the future? Will the long protracted process of local government reform (known as the 'Review of Public Administration') in Northern Ireland present a viable opportunity for escaping the vicious circles of 'solutions' to conflict offered either by the free market or by technocratic state-led approaches? A shift to 'community planning' and the re-organisation of local government, may encourage a more integrated multi-disciplinary approach to creating and governing 'place', and it may achieve something different to the myriad of individual initiatives, programmes and partnerships, which have so far failed to effect real change in the city. However, it is insufficient in itself without restructuring the fragmented form of governance that characterises Northern Ireland generally and Belfast in particular. Acknowledging multiple senses of place combined with the reformation of governance might encourage new forms of political leadership more likely to challenge the superficial consensus on Belfast as a neo-liberal exemplar, or alternatively, its image as a city characterised by unchanging and irresolvable sectarian or ethno-national antagonisms.

## Notes

- 1 Sommers and Gibson (1994) suggest that these can be attached to institutional and cultural formations larger than the single individual, for example, 'public', 'conceptual' and 'meta' narratives.
- 2 See Therborn's (2011) and Robinson's (2006) critiques of the 'world cities' paradigm.
- 3 ESRC large grant No. RES-060-25-0015, <http://www.conflictincities.org>
- 4 In considering Belfast as a spatial assemblage, we see it as neither organic nor self-contained but rather as a bundle of elements that sometimes relate to each other and sometimes are merely juxtaposed.
- 5 While discourses are enabling structures, narratives are specific stories that represent these structures

- and are produced within (or at the junction of) different discourses. As such, narratives can become tools, not simply for verbal or visual expression and meaning attachment, but for social action.
- 6 Academic planner interview, December 15, 2009.
  - 7 Though, like the author, we highlight that the 'purity' of neo-liberal principles are 'polluted' in practice by Northern Ireland's dependence on subsidy from Westminster, by high levels of public sector employment, and by a large number of external funding programmes promoting cross-communal and cross-border cooperation.
  - 8 <http://www.titanic-quarter.com/about.php?ID=3> (accessed November 9, 2009).
  - 9 A mixture of public bodies and private companies from both sides of the Irish border.
  - 10 For comparison, 30,000 jobs out of the city's total of 198,796 (as of 2007) were estimated to have been created in the decade between 1996 and 2006 (BCC 2010).
  - 11 *The Belfast Telegraph*, November 1, 2010.
  - 12 To name but a few: Northern Ireland Economic Reform Group, *The Case for a Reduced Corporation Tax in Northern Ireland* (2010); *Belfast Telegraph*, 'Locals to Get Jobs and a Say in Future of Titanic Quarter.' September 23, 2010, 2; '400 New Jobs ... But We Could Get More; Cut in Corporation Tax will Attract Further Investment, Says Economist.' November 1, 2010, 12; 'Economic Revamp Can Drive Progress ...' February 18, 2011, 22; C. Weir, 'Corporate Rate Cut Stirs Devolved Powers Debate.' March 22, 2012, 2; OFMDFM press releases: January 19, 2012; January 18, 2012; February 2, 2012; February 23, 2012; March 31, 2012 (see <http://www.northernireland.gov.uk/index/mediacentre/news-departments/news-ofmdfm.htm>).
  - 13 Partnerships between local political, non-governmental (voluntary and community) and business members working together on area-based regeneration and neighbourhood renewal initiatives.
  - 14 Interview, November 5, 2009.
  - 15 Round table discussion, March 9, 2010.
  - 16 Interview with the author, December 15, 2009.
  - 17 Interview with a TQ Ltd representative, November 3, 2009.
  - 18 Interview, October 27, 2009.
  - 19 Interview, June 16, 2009.
  - 20 According to Belfast City Council, *Belfast: A Profile of the City 2009–2010* (2010).
  - 21 See <http://www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk>
  - 22 Round table discussion, March 29, 2010.
  - 23 Enumerated as follows: Cathedral Quarter, Gaeltacht Quarter, Library Quarter, Linen Quarter, Market Quarter, Queens Quarter, and the already mentioned above *Titanic* Quarter. <http://www.barnabasventures.com>
  - 24 Conor Murphy quoted in *Belfast City of Quarters Supplement*, March 26, 2010. <http://edition.pagesuite-professional.co.uk/launch.aspx?referral=other&pnum=&refresh=wZ16D4y00H5t&EID=84f01720-bbb3-48f0-85d9-ed295a96e95c&skip=true>
  - 25 Interview, November 25, 2009.
  - 26 Round table discussion, March 29, 2010.
  - 27 The 'contested city' narrative here refers to how Belfast crystallises the durable ethno-national struggle which has shaped (Northern) Ireland's long history of political and religious discord. The latter has generated a huge inter-disciplinary literature. For a guide to this literature see, for example, Whyte (1990), McGarry and O'Leary (1995), Coulter (1999) and Tonge (2002). For background on the 'Troubles' see Fitzduff and O'Hagan (2009).
  - 28 According to Belfast City Council 'more than half of the city's population now lives in wards that are either 90 % Protestant or 90 % Catholic community background' (BCC 2007, 6).
  - 29 A recent survey by the Institute for Conflict Research in Belfast, conducted for the Belfast Interface Project, identified 99 such barriers, consisting of steel fences, walls and gates of various height and length (Jarman 2012).
  - 30 Segregated neighbourhoods tend to score higher on the Northern Ireland Index for Multiple Deprivation (NISRA 2010).
  - 31 Interviews with: Protestant community workers, July 21, 2008 and June 19, 2008; Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) representative, March 23, 2009.
  - 32 Community worker, July 21, 2008.
  - 33 Interview with a Sinn Fein (SF) representative, February 9, 2009.
  - 34 When the outgoing DSD minister, representing the nationalist SDLP party, eventually approved the building of 200 homes on the site in 2011 (BBC News, May 22, 2012), his decision was almost immediately overturned by the incoming unionist DUP minister.
  - 35 BBC *Spotlight* current affairs programme, BBC2, October 2, 2012.
  - 36 Interview, September 22, 2010.
  - 37 Interview with a community worker, April 20, 2011.
  - 38 An interface network organisation interview, April 7, 2011.
  - 39 Nationalist community representative interview, June 3, 2011.
  - 40 Who were otherwise fully reliant on Belfast's traditional industries.
  - 41 UUP representative interview, November 17, 2009.
  - 42 UUP representative interview, November 17, 2009.

- 43 A DUP representative interview, February 20, 2009.
- 44 Local area partnership manager interview, November 25, 2009.
- 45 Which sits within the Chief Executive's Department.
- 46 EU Programme for Peace and Reconciliation (2007–13) for Northern Ireland and the Border Region of Ireland (a programme of the European Regional Development Fund). Operational Programme available from: <http://www.seupb.eu/programmes2007-2013/peaceiiiprogramme/overview.aspx>
- 47 See <http://www.belfastcity.gov.uk/goodrelations/sharedcityspace.asp>
- 48 Voluntary organisation official, round table discussion, September 26, 2008.
- 49 Organiser of a cultural festival, round table discussion, March 29, 2010.
- 50 DUP local councillor interview, February 10, 2009.
- 51 Such as the 'Culture Night' festival, 'Festival of Fools', the 'GayPride' parade and the Lord Mayor's Show.
- 52 Observation for current research project, July 12, 2011.
- 53 Interview, July 21, 2008.
- 54 Independent consultant, round table discussion, March 29, 2010.
- 55 Indeed, resistances to the re-imaging of the city centre as 'shared' are exemplified by the recent, prolonged disturbances in Belfast (December 2012) which included 'furious loyalists ... rampage[ing] through the grounds of Belfast City Hall [and later attacking offices of the Alliance Party] after Sinn Fein, SDLP and Alliance councillors voted to restrict the flying of the Union flag over the building to just 17 days a year' (*The Belfast Telegraph*, December 4, 2012, 1). These latest 'flag riots' can be interpreted as an attack by young working-class loyalists and some paramilitaries on the notion that Belfast city centre (and its City Hall) should be symbolically shared. In our terms, the prolonged riots, undermine Belfast's 'new capitalist' (greatly disrupting Christmas consumerism) and 'shared city' narratives. They also illustrate the persistence of the tradition of loyalist populism and direct action arising from frustration with unionist political representatives and their inability to ensure that Belfast remains an unambiguously British city.
- 56 Community worker, round table discussion, March 29, 2010.
- 57 In this respect they resonate with Parker's (2000, 233) comment on literary narratives: '... in telling only part of the story we intend to say something about the whole story, but what we succeed in communicating is not how life is, but how life *should* be' (author's emphasis).
- 58 An example is the work of Forum for Alternative Belfast—a not-for-profit organisation of architects

and urban designers who campaign for a 'better and more equitable built environment in Belfast' and explore creative approaches to urban design, planning and regeneration cross-cutting and subverting any particular narrative of Belfast and demonstrating 'alternative ways of developing the city' (<http://www.forumbelfast.org>).

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*Liam O'Dowd is a professor of Sociology at the School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work and Director of the Centre for International Borders Research at Queen's University, Belfast. Email: L.Odowd@qub.ac.uk*

*Milena Komarova is a research associate at the School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work, Queen's University, Belfast. Email: m.komarova@qub.ac.uk*