

# FRACTURING THE URBAN: SYMBOLIC VISUAL REPRESENTATIONS OF UNDERLYING SOCIETAL THEMES IN BELFAST

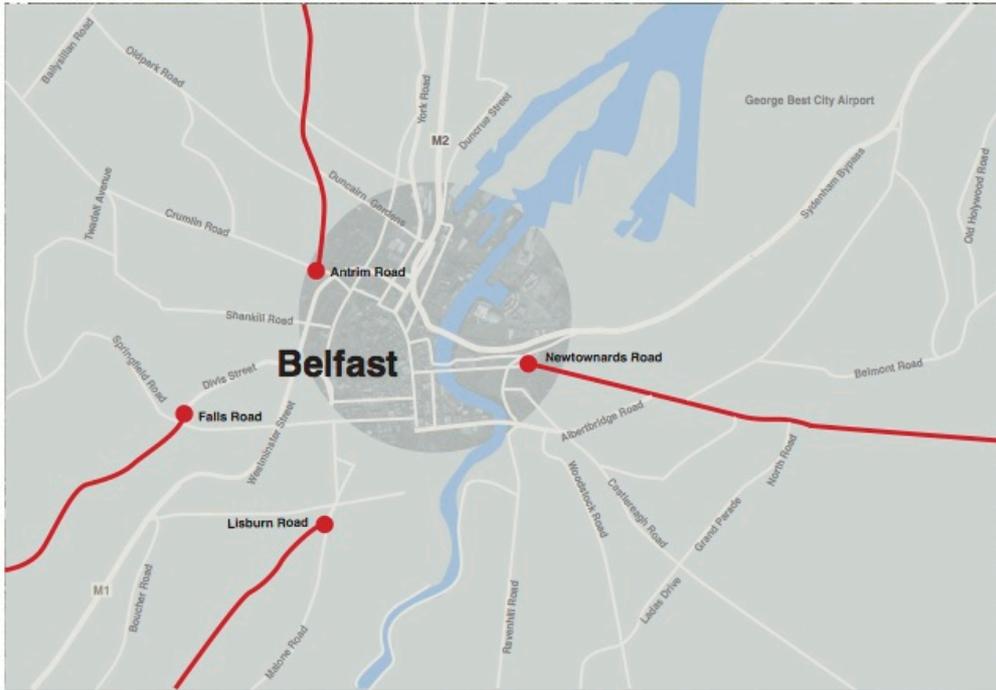
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## **Abstract**

Belfast, Northern Ireland is a city permeated by structural divisions, echoing underlying and deeply rooted societal divisions, which no amount of architectural intervention, even *Tabula Rasa*, can completely eradicate. In a city where, from the late 1960s, civil unrest prescribed a solution of walls, these once temporary structures are now permanent, having increased in size and number since the signing of the Belfast Agreement of 1998. The duality of the walls ensures that on one side communities are isolated in social housing developments where the British Army historically approved planning measures dictated by security issues. On the other, a culturally neutral postmodern city centre, re-imagined as a global tourist destination, a free and inviting environment of consumption. This city's built environment is further fractured by major roads initiatives. Without sufficient, organized or effective opposition, such as was seen in Manhattan, Belfast's motorway planning has ensured destruction and redistribution of architecture, carving the city into ill-divided socio-economic portions. On the city's arterial routes cultural identities are bound up in built environments divested with meaning through signs and symbols, where collective memory, hegemonies, group ideologies, history and myth ensure a narrative of continuity despite changes to the landscape. Even with a 'genius loci' constantly under threat the socially produced symbolic landscape of the city's arterial routes remains imbued with meaning through tangible and visible expressions of culture. This paper undertakes an analysis of the built environment and signage of these arterial routes, supported by a photographic archive, to demonstrate how such visual inquiry can prove a reliable barometer of socio-economic and societal undercurrents, mirroring census findings, in these long-established urban places.

Belfast, Northern Ireland's capital city, has emerged from a long-standing troubled past to become a city carved into socio-cultural portions. In this divided city communities are separated through interfaces; geographical, architectural, social, political, cultural, planned and arbitrary in nature. This paper, a result of ongoing research since 2010, examines Belfast's built environment, buildings and signage in their role as joint authors of the creation of the 'genius loci'. The research focuses on the culturally rich arterial commuter routes, as they pivot around an architecturally and culturally neutral reimagined city centre. On arterial routes, which still often retain the core Victorian architecture of the city's industrial past, the image of place is created through a rich mixture of buildings and commercial signage, indicating the relative socio-cultural and economic conditions of people living nearby. The paper provides visual analysis of a symbolic city, imbued with meaning through its many visual representations of culture, history and myth, through visual analysis of arterial routes leading from the city centre to surrounding countryside. (Fig. 1)



**Fig. 13 Map of Belfast and arterial routes investigated**

Photographs demonstrate how interdisciplinary visual enquiry of dynamic and static elements of place-making, buildings and signage, can provide the reader of the city with a representational map of underlying census data, in this instance the latest (2011) Belfast census.

In conjunction with buildings, signage is examined in its role in providing words and articulating the language of place through letterforms, colours and materials, as a valuable socio-economic and socio-cultural indicator on the nature of place itself, signs “*speak while doors and windows remain mute*”. (Kinneir, 1980 p.7). The semiotic landscape of signage in Belfast extends beyond commercial signs to include primal signs, graffiti, murals and tags, territorial markers of place, warning visitors that they may have strayed into territory belonging to ‘one’ or ‘the other’ of the city’s divided communities. In support of Lefebvre’s proposal that space is socially produced (Lefebvre, 1991), a reading of the built environment of Belfast demonstrates that it is visually representative of the embedded ideologies of people in long-standing communities and their hegemonic struggles.

On arterial routes interfaces are marked in the cityscape’s key features; at junctions and on roads/footpaths; through private, public, community, and commercial buildings; and at a less permanent though not insignificant level through words on signage, graffiti and murals. (Fig. 2, 3)



**Fig. 2 Boyle's Bar, Falls Road, with signage and codes associating it with Irish culture**



**Fig. 3 Mural, Falls Road, Belfast**

In areas of societal/commercial decline 'brownfield' sites and unused commercial spaces punctuate active businesses. The level and impact of commercial decline is accentuated where the city has become impermeable due to commuter routes being cut off from the central business district through the creation of alternative major carriageways and physical barriers which reinforce pre-existing metaphysical or cultural barriers. The proposed removal of so-called 'Peace Walls' in Belfast (optimistically set for completion by 2023), is unlikely as *"once in place the barriers separating disputing groups become the mechanisms for sustaining the urban pathology of communities at war with themselves"*. (Calame & Charlesworth, 2009 p.vii-viii).

The Regional Development Strategy for Northern Ireland 2025, agreed by the NI Assembly in September 2001, provides a vision of a thriving Belfast Metropolitan Area centred on a revitalised City of Belfast (BMAP 2014). Proposals to widen existing alternative carriageways already cutting through the city's arterial routes will reinforce the cultural/physical firebreak and separate the city's communities even further. Despite the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, the establishment of the Stormont Assembly, and subsequent periods

of relative peace, there are currently still 99 barriers (Peace Walls) of various shapes and sizes dividing nationalist and loyalist communities in Belfast. (Fig. 4)



**Fig. 4 Peace wall running alongside the Westlink, in the Divis area of Belfast's inner ring**

The juxtaposition of architectural styles between arterial routes and the city centre locates another interface in the city; 'old' terminates at 'new'. In areas of commercial/social decline Victorian architecture is disappearing through demolition, resulting in numerous vacant sites. In addition, 'brownfield' sites on commercially successful arterial routes often give way to postmodern structures indicative of emerging city centre architectural agendas. With the disappearance at an alarming rate of the traditional architecture of Belfast, so too is the historical and unique image of place disappearing, in favour of contemporary architectural banality, and neutrality, ultimately resulting in 'placelessness'. Regardless of whether buildings in Belfast are historical or contemporary in construction, signage endows them with meaning, through denotative and connotative codes representative of broader societal themes. Like the architecture of place, signs are being neutralised in a city centre designed to 'forget' the past, but strive to retain their cultural codes on isolated arterial routes, where reimagining is slower to manifest due to distance from key tourist destinations.

The signs transform how buildings are perceived and, by extension, aggregates of signs may transform how places are perceived, revealing wider socio-economic and cultural themes. Through clashing styles and materials signage may seem anarchic and chaotic in contrast with the relative order of construction materials in the built environment, yet the degree of perceived chaos in signage may be an indicator of underlying socio-economic and cultural disorder. As a result, observations of signage, in conjunction with buildings, can provide a valuable socio-economic and cultural barometer of place. As signs are commonplace cultural artefacts they may hold plentiful cultural cues. (Fig. 5)



**Fig. 5 Buildings and signage on Belfast's Antrim Road**

This ability of signage to inform of place is not an isolated Belfast phenomenon, but may be observed worldwide. Yet, in Belfast, while the totemic markers on signs are highly visible and obvious to all, regardless of cultural background, cultural knowledge on language and colour codes could be significant factors for safety in places where even local people might be wary by day, or fearful by night. Beyond the confines of the city centre, in arterial routes where town planning has been less in accordance with aesthetic considerations and more in line with security dictates (Neill & Shedler, 2001, p.113), the defensible urban spaces of social housing estates are rich with visual messages that are largely cultural in origin and nature.

#### **Historical context:**

Belfast is comprised largely of low-rise red brick buildings constructed during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, boom years for shipbuilding and the linen industry. The city became the world centre for linen production, had the largest rope works in the world, and a thriving printing industry. Belfast's population grew from just under 20,000 at the beginning of the nineteenth century to around 350,000 by 1901 mainly due to the migration of former agrarian workers to the city. This necessitated the building of new homes from locally produced red-orange factory bricks. (Fig.6) With a rate of urban growth in Belfast surpassing that of any other city in the British Isles, overcrowded networks of terraced housing became communities and this sense of community remains today.



**Fig. 6 Orange red brick, the traditional style of Victorian Belfast, Antrim Road, North Belfast**

The arterial routes connect the city to surrounding towns including Antrim, Lisburn, and Newtownards. Although core architectural features are common across these routes, contrasting socio-economic contexts are represented through signage and other visual markers. Commuters travel via these arterial routes to connect directly with the city centre, although the continuum of buildings is fractured by motorways (M1, M2, M3) that divide the north, west and east of the city from its centre, (Fig.7) with the exception of the Lisburn, Malone, and Ormeau roads to the affluent south. The motorways, designed to maximise traffic flow in and out of the city, act as physical barriers – a legacy from initiatives undertaken in the 1960s and 70s to solve transportation problems whilst limiting access routes to and from the city centre at times of civil unrest. Planning initiatives undertaken in the 1960s together with political and cultural instability generated a forced relocation of many of the city's inhabitants to surrounding countryside towns and villages.



**Fig. 7 Motorways and major roads fracturing the city**

Belfast's core architectural style is mainly Victorian with few Georgian and Edwardian buildings remaining. Modernisation programs have been brutal and included the demolition of major landmark public buildings in the city centre, while densely populated streets have undergone major social upheaval, with many families relocated to surrounding towns, in a bid to reduce what was seen as over-population of inner city areas. Since the outbreak of the 'Troubles' in 1969, planning initiatives resulting in physical divisions have had an inbuilt agenda of dealing with socio-political-religious city divisions. The 1980s, a time when the city-centre was undergoing a "renaissance" (McEldowney et al. 2001, p.107) saw social housing solutions centred on two storey red brick houses with an emphasis on pedestrian movement, shared courtyards, defensible space and limited vehicle access – further isolating communities in accordance with security concerns and reaffirming the polarisation of communities. (Fig. 8, 9) Pawley, referring to what he calls the 'Belfast Effect' asserts that, in Northern Ireland, "since the mid 1970s all major development projects had to be previewed and approved by the British Army" (Pawley, 1998, p.152).



**Fig. 14 Walls, fencing and pillars at courtyard off Newtownards Road, East Belfast**



**Fig. 8 Bollards preventing vehicle access to the rear of walled courtyards, Cupar Way, West Belfast**

A palpable tension may be discerned between the mixed architectural styles of the reimaged city centre (Fig.10) and remaining red brick Victorian terraces and housing estates of its arterial routes, where the people of the city largely reside. Following years of ‘troubles’ which saw a ring-fenced city-centre prone to bombings and requiring strict searching of vehicles and pedestrians, it is only within the last ten to fifteen years that city centre living has become desirable again. The recent reimaging of place and dissipation of violence has encouraged inward re-migration of professionals who now inhabit modern apartment blocks often close to the River Lagan, forming a politically neutral metro-community. However, within the city’s arterial communities, social and often religious and political identities remain strongly tied to their built environments.



**Fig. 9 Belfast centre – a mixture of historical and contemporary buildings, pedestrian areas, neutral signage**

### Socio-cultural, physical and structural divisions of the city

Belfast is a place where, according to Neill and Schedler; “two cultural identities are locked in...a ‘zero sum’ struggle with the ideal of cultural pluralism easier to evoke than to concretely realise”, (Neill & Schedler, 2001, p.14) These cultural divisions are expressed through the mainly but not exclusively Nationalist/Catholic and Unionist/Protestant communities of the city. In outward expressions of belonging in the city working class areas are often adorned with symbolism through murals and graffiti where political activists express their loyalties to a United Kingdom or a United Ireland. (Fig. 11)



**Fig. 11 Paramilitary mural Newtownards Road, East Belfast, with affiliations to Unionist/Protestant Community**

Since the outbreak of Belfast’s ‘Troubles’ in 1969, ‘Peace walls’ were erected at interface areas in the city, “where cultural differences could meet each other, if not hampered by intervening bricks, mortar and fencing”

(ibid., 2001. p.42), but in reality this was to stop bloodshed between rival communities. Many communities attribute their continued safety to the walls, yet these structures attract rioters and have become landmark sites for clashes on a regular basis. Originally home-made structures erected by residents, the walls became permanent, erected in brick, steel, reinforced concrete, or a mixture of materials. They are often interspersed with road and pedestrian gates operated by the security forces or private groups and range in length from a few hundred metres to over 5 km (3 miles) and can be up to 7.6 metres (25 ft) in height. (Fig. 12. 13)



**Fig. 12 Perhaps the most famous peace wall in Belfast is this on Cupar Way, West Belfast**



**Fig. 13 The Peace Wall on Bryson Street extends right along the interface area in East Belfast**

The 'walls' are constantly under review and in May 2013 the Northern Ireland Executive stated a commitment to remove them by 2023 despite contrary views from residents. A 2011 report commissioned by the Belfast Interface Project and carried out by the Institute for Conflict Research to identify and classify the known security barriers and associated forms of defensive architecture in residential areas of Belfast found that there were 99 different security barriers and forms of defensive architecture in the city (Belfast Interface Project). Thirty five barriers comprise metal fencing; 23 solid walls with metal fencing above; 14 mixed fence/vegetation; 12 locations have roads closed to vehicles allowing only pedestrian access; 8 have a wall alone; and 7 have roads with gates which are closed occasionally. Conflict tourism has become a major attraction for visitors to the city who take bus and black taxi tours to the sites of the walls, photographing them as mementos of their visit to Belfast.

Transport initiatives since the 1960s have further redefined the urban landscape of Belfast and played a part in segregation of communities. The 1978 Review of Transport Strategy saw the construction of a dual-carriageway motorway link (the Westlink) running to the North and West of the city centre and "*conjoined through part of its length*"(Neill & Schedler 2001, p.43). Transport objectives had the additional security benefit of cutting off the city centre from the Catholic and Protestant Housing areas of the city. In the absence of organized

objections, such as were seen in New York by Jacobs, many of the city’s communities were fractured by these transport plans, the legacy of which is seen today. (Jacobs, 1992).

**The city’s arterial routes**

Of the key arterial routes into the city, this study considers Antrim (north), Falls (west), Lisburn (south) and Newtownards (east) Roads. These directional indicators are also culturally significant, reflecting the collective identities of communities and their affiliations. The Antrim, Newtownards and Falls Roads, particularly affected by interfaces, represent largely working class communities of various, but often low, incomes. The Lisburn Road, has been unaffected by interfaces and remains walkable to the city centre, unobstructed by roads and operates a thriving ‘upmarket’ economy. This direct, unbroken access to the city centre, is in contrast to other arterial routes evidence varying degrees of socio-economic decline through the creation of motorways resulting in physical separation from the city centre. The built environment of each route displays a combination of historical red brick buildings and contemporary post-modern developments an on each the buildings, signage and graphic marks, combine to create a unique image of place.

The sections below describe findings on the built environment and signage of each route. Availability of commercial premises and local socio-economic trends directly affect the nature and frequency of commercial premises on which signage is displayed and type of goods or services provided. Both socio-economic and cultural trends impact on the presentation of signage, through language used and means of representation of that language; choice of letterform, colour, materials and condition of signage may all be socio-economic and cultural indicators of the nature of places in which signage is situated. As signage is located on buildings, the appearance of the built environment, buildings, materials, colour palettes and perceived maintenance of that environment, may impact on the perception of signage. Information from the 2011 census, on demographic and economic statistics for each route, located in ‘Wards’ of the city, corroborates observations on signage. (Fig. 14) The Antrim Road is located within the Waterworks and New Lodge Wards; Falls Road within Falls, Beechmount and Clonard Wards; Lisburn Road within Malone and Windsor Wards. There are 582 wards in total, 1 is the most deprived ward and 582 the least, the table shows how each of the wards rank from 1–582.

**Ward statistical results from 2011 census**

*The Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure (NIMDM) 2010 provides information on seven types of deprivation and an overall measure of multiple deprivation for small areas. Wards are ordered from most deprived to least deprived on each type of deprivation and then assigned a rank. The most deprived ward is ranked 1, and as there are 582 wards, the least deprived ward has a rank of 582.*

Wards	Antrim Road		Falls Road			Lisburn Road		Newtownards Road	
	Water Works	New Lodge	Falls	Clonard	Beechmount	Malone	Windsor	Ballymacarrett	Island
<b>Multiple deprivation measure</b>	16	3	2	7	34	564	421	18	92
<b>Income deprivation</b>	22	5	4	9	39	575	484	21	97
<b>Employment deprivation</b>	19	5	3	8	33	571	562	29	190
Health & disability deprivation	20	3	1	4	29	575	404	21	114
Education Skills and training disability	57	12	4	44	72	582	302	6	27
Proximity to service deprivation	576	582	577	579	575	508	564	545	555
<b>Crime and disorder</b>	<b>2</b> <i>1,158 offences 2012-13</i>	<b>19</b> <i>1,013 offences 2012-13</i>	<b>6</b> <i>2,250 offences 2012-13</i>	<b>22</b> <i>626 offences 2012-13</i>	<b>53</b> <i>529 offences 2012-13</i>	<b>200</b> <i>234 offences 2012-13</i>	<b>33</b> <i>783 offences 2012-13</i>	<b>107</b> <i>688 offences 2012-13</i>	<b>64</b> <i>875 offences 2012-13</i>
Living environment	4	8	39	35	55	196	31	36	58

**Fig. 14 Datasets from the 2011 census showing wards and statistics pertaining to routes investigated.**

**Antrim Road built environment**

The Antrim Road, originally Duncairn Street, runs from North Belfast to the town of Antrim, approximately 18 miles from Belfast. The road passes through the New Lodge, a working class Catholic district of the city and was originally farmland, developed in the 19th century by the city’s industrialists. The lower end of the road remains largely Catholic, but as the road moves towards Antrim the population becomes mixed. The core architecture of red brick buildings on this route reflects industrial roots. Communities display their socio-cultural affiliations through murals on street corners, graffiti and expression of local language on signs. Colour palettes of signage and buildings are indicators of affiliations with historical, religious and political beliefs. (Fig. 16)

One side of the road, directionally heading towards Belfast city centre, is characterised by almost continuous commercial activity. The line of commercial premises is defined by the density of signage, created in a mixture of materials, colours and letterstyles. Rising and falling levels of rooftops accompany changes of style and period of building construction, from Victorian terraces to modern apartments. Many buildings have painted fronts, sometimes in colours to compliment signage, however the core building material of traditional terraces is still red brick. Traditional red brick buildings are usually two or three storeys in height. Newer developments, in yellow or grey brick, concrete or steel rise to four or more stories; where ground space is limited along the route vertical space provides a solution for extension of commercial premises and residential units. Architectural modifications have been undertaken in many traditional Victorian terraces to accommodate commercial premises, ground floors often have bay windows removed, replaced with large display windows for goods. Dedicated fascia areas for signage are located between the ground and second floors for advertising, which would otherwise be constrained to areas above canted bay windows.

The most commonly occurring type of commercial premises are hairdressers and barbers, indicating that small luxuries and a care for personal appearance are important to the people of the working class communities residing here. Carry-outs and takeaway food premises thrive from fish and chip shops, to Chinese food or kebabs, there are no restaurants, just street-side cafés. Chemists, opticians and veterinary services advertise services with modest signage. Grocery and food outlets sell basic supplies and bars and off-licenses demonstrate their affiliations to football teams, which in Belfast signify political and cultural inclusion, or exclusion, of clientele. Goods for the home displayed in shop windows are functional and mass-produced; there is no market for luxury goods or services.

The opposite side of the road has large green spaces, the park surrounding the Waterworks, few traditional Victorian buildings and modern apartment buildings where these might once have been with few businesses or commercial signs. The apartment buildings are plain in detail, vertical space provides dwellings for multiple occupants without commercial presence or opportunity. Buildings are often set back from the road, separated by walls, hedges or greenery, denoting the value of privacy in shared spaces. Architectural amendments to Victorian buildings in order to accommodate commercial premises are apparent, canted bay windows have been removed, replaced by display windows. Fascia signs stretch above doorways and windows, at a depth dictated by the space between lower and upper storeys. Grocery and food sold is of an essential nature, a launderette, barbers and bakery are the most extravagant shops. Nestled between a modern apartment block and Antrim Road Baptist Church is a three-storey Victorian building set back from the road by about ten feet. Metal grilles on the windows indicate a perceived need for security and a small discrete sign reads, in Irish, 'Tar Isteach, Republican Ex-Prisoners Association'. (Fig. 15)



Fig. 15 Republican ex-prisoners association (to the left of the frame)

Antrim Road - side of the road travelled towards Belfast city centre



Antrim Road - side of the road travelled on way out of Belfast city centre



Fig. 16 Character of built environment Antrim Road, North Belfast

**Antrim Road Signage**

On the Antrim Road the language used on signs is familiar and friendly, using first names, *Angela's*, *Aldo's*, *Hectors*, *Manny's*, *Ramzeys*, *Curley's* and *Barney's*. (Fig 17) It is as though the shops are themselves members of the community. The language is working class and straightforward. *Angela's* is a café, *Barney's* is a barber shop,

*Aldo's* sells fish and chips, no complex connotative codes are at work. Language indicates that services provided are basic, they will do what is needed, fix broken teeth, *Cavity Corner*, attend to foot care, *Foot Clinic*, or cut hair, *Hair Salon*; limited expendable income reduces the market for selling relaxing experiences or expensive cosmetic treatments. Letterstyles are varied, serif, sans-serif, italic and script, the latter contributing to the overall informal perception of signs. Lettering on *Cassidy's* bar references Irish culture, uncial script, images of Gaelic football and dual language. The colour palette of the road is mostly of strong primary colours, reflecting either the Unionist or Nationalist communities of place. (Fig.18)



**Fig. 17 Buildings and signage Antrim Road**



**Fig. 18 Cassidy's Bar Antrim Road**

#### **Relating findings on the built environment and signage of the Antrim Road to census data**

Businesses sell basic goods geared towards a working class income, there are few luxuries, but fast food outlets, hairdressers and barbers and street-side cafes thrive. Goods for the home are inexpensive and food supplies are basic. The 2011 census indicates that of 582 wards, the most deprived ranked at 1 and the least at 582, the two electoral wards relating to the Antrim Road had ranking of 16 and 3, at the lower end of this scale.

Employment deprivation was indicated at 19 and 5, indicating a relatively low level of employment for this area, which would correspond with the concentration of businesses meeting basic needs. The crime and disorder statistics indicate that this area has a fairly high incidence of offences, yet the built environment and signage are fairly well maintained. This may be due to pride of ownership by shop keepers/owners or community members. There are murals on street corners indicating the territorial nature of place, it is a working class community with low employment, which itself has the potential to lead to crime. Statistics relating to living environments, the homes in communities on the Antrim Road, were, according to the census, the lowest of any of the arterial routes examined.

### **Falls Road built environment**

The Falls Road gets its name from the Irish words 'Tuath-na-bhfal' district of the falls or hedges. Exclusively Nationalist, it is the main road through West Belfast and runs from Divis Street in the city centre to Andersonstown. One of the more famous streets in the city, it has become a tourist destination to what were once troubled places. It is separated from the neighbouring and predominantly Loyalist Shankill Road by peace walls and has cultural codes aligning it more to the Republic of Ireland than to the United Kingdom, including a high proportion of Irish language signs.

(Fig. 19)

One side of the road is characterised by almost continuous commercial activity, as usual the side approaching the city centre. Churches and residential premises are located on both sides of the road, schools are located on this side, but not the other. There are murals on most street corners, leading to communities located behind the main route. The architecture is mostly traditional Victorian red brick terraces, two and three storeys high. The chapel rises above the other buildings, to around four or five stories in height, on a road with a traditionally strong Catholic faith.

Buildings face straight onto footpaths, the route is largely shared space. Architectural amendments to buildings, in order to accommodate commercial premises, have been undertaken on the ground floor fronts of some Victorian terraces – canted bay windows have been removed in favour of large windows and dedicated fascia boards on which to place signage. Many of the buildings have painted fronts, in a colour palette of primary hues; green, blue, orange, pink, yellow and red and cream. The core building material is red brick, no yellow or grey brick is evident. Both buildings and signage are well maintained with the most commonly observed types of commercial premise relating to health, carry-outs/takeaway food, hairdressers or barbers, restaurants or cafes and bars/off licenses. The *Failte Restaurant* offers finer dining than the street-side cafés. A high proportion of the businesses relate to community needs, inward investment, training and community care.

The side of the Falls Road heading out of Belfast is characterised by the large footprint of the Royal Victoria Hospital grounds and surrounding car parks. The various hospital buildings have been constructed through differing time periods, from the original Victorian red brick building through high rise developments of the 1960s and '70s, to recent developments. The buildings are largely flat-roofed and brick colours vary, with the most recent constructed in glass, steel and concrete. What was formerly a church, now *Culturlann*, (Fig 20) a cultural centre, has its purpose designated by signage, without which it would still appear to be a church. Buildings generally face directly onto footpaths, with small walls in front of some residential terraces providing barriers from the street.

Almost half of the buildings on this side of the road have painted or part-painted fronts, the colour palette is mostly of primary hues, red, cream, pink, purple, blue, green or yellow, reminiscent more of Donegal than Belfast. Buildings are often painted to match colours in signage. The most common types of business are carry-out and takeaway food premises, legal, health and hairdressers.

Falls Road - side of the road travelled towards Belfast city centre



Falls Road - side of the road travelled on way out of Belfast city centre

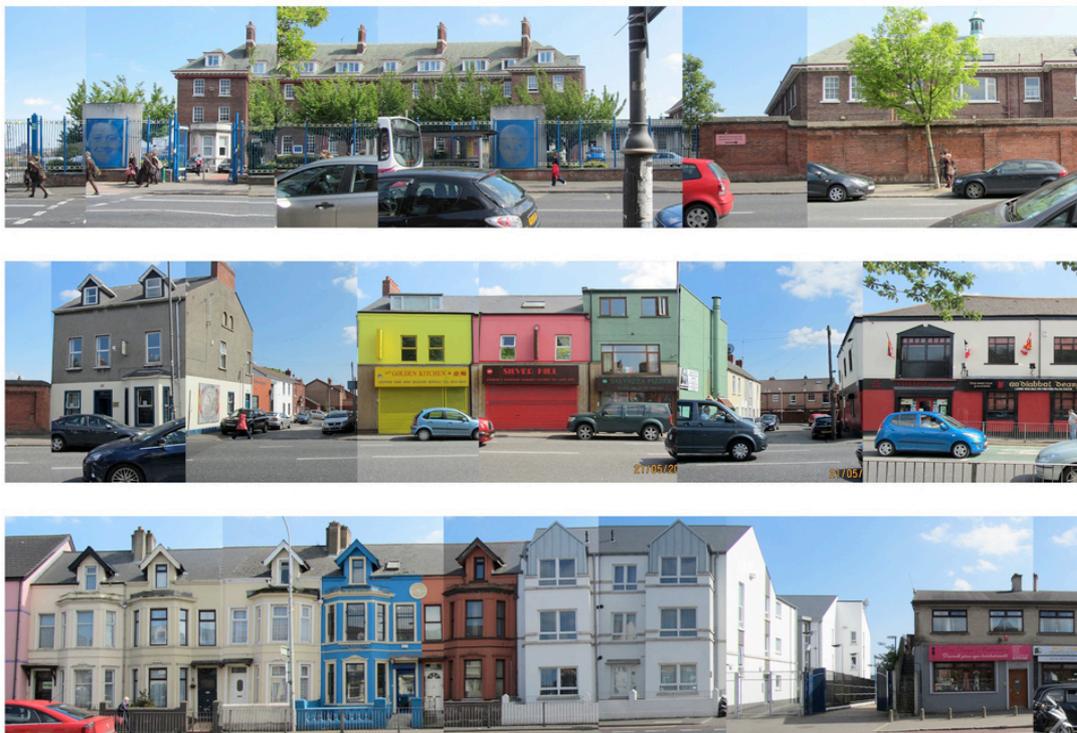


Fig. 19 Character of built environment Falls Road, West Belfast

**Falls Road Signage**

On the Falls Road the language on signage is largely friendly, with a proportion of signage presented in dual language format to include Irish. There is a familiarity to many of the names, *Kelly's*, *O'Hara's*, *Michael*

*Flanagan*. Colloquialisms and humour are used in naming *that wee café* and *The Codfather*. The informal nature of language on signage reflects informal community relationships and overtones of spoken language. *Hoops Barber Shop* requires some cultural knowledge to realise the connotative association between the name and hoops on the socks of players for Celtic Football Club. There are many healing businesses and references to faith and angels evident on signage through language and associated imagery. This road has a rich colour palette reflected in colour choices for both buildings and signage. Colours frequently observed are greens, pink, black, grey, white, yellow, purple, blue, gold, red and brown. The barber's pole on the *Hoops Barber Shop* replaces the traditional red and white with green and white, referencing local culture. Letterstyles are a mixture of serif and sans-serif. The *Red Bar* uses Irish Language and uncial lettering, gold on a black background. Cultural references to place are made through use of colour, letterstyle, and to the society living in this place, the football club they support and faith.



**Fig. 20** Culturelann Falls Road, West Belfast, a cultural centre, formerly a church

#### **Relating findings on the built environment and signage on the Falls Road to Census data**

On the Falls Road, signage advertises businesses selling a range of goods through a high density of commercial premises. Goods are not luxurious and there are roadside cafés, only one fine dining establishment and no luxury goods. There are hairdressers and barbers, pubs, a bakery and one grocery store selling basic food supplies. As three electoral wards relate to the section of route examined there are three sets of relevant statistics pertaining to each measure. On the multiple deprivation measure the statistics indicated the three wards ranked at 2, 7 and 34, the first two of these figures are very low, the third, whilst higher, still indicates that is one of the most deprived wards. Employment and income deprivation figures were also low, indicating that economic means on the Falls Road were the most limited of any of the arterial routes examined. These figures would confirm findings on the type of businesses indicated by signage and goods sold. Crime and disorder figures are mixed, higher on some wards than others.

#### **Newtownards Road built environment**

The Newtownards Road, in East Belfast, is the main route between the city and town of Newtownards. The section of route examined for this investigation is a mainly Protestant working-class district with strong employment links to the Harland & Wolff shipyard. The yellow cranes of the shipyard can be seen from many vantage points on the road as a reminder of more lucrative times for the area. Since the shipyard workforce was cut from 23,000 to 14,714, in 1960-61 and further reduced to 7,000 people by the 1980s, both

employment figures and the built environment have reflected an economic downturn. The area remains strongly associated with the ill-fated Titanic, which is remembered through murals and signage. (Fig. 21)

Further impacting on the economy of this area were initiatives undertaken in the 1960s to improve roads infrastructure, the motorway and ring roads have left this road cut off from the city centre economy. Concrete plinths supporting road overpasses have created large pieces of land that cannot be developed, creating a barrier between the road and rest of the city. The road has the greatest density of murals observed of any of the arterial routes and it is a place which still sees outbreaks of violence that impact on the appearance of the built environment; many of the windows on properties have grilles, indicating the need for protection. There is a high rate of dereliction of properties. There are vacant lots with billboards, though recent times have seen some new development. Many of the buildings and signs on this route are in a poor condition.

The side of the road travelled towards the city centre characterised by an array of small businesses, vacant or derelict buildings, new developments, churches and green space with trees. The core building material of Victorian terraces is red brick, but newer developments are created in concrete, glass and steel. The building heights are mostly three storey, but churches and newer developments rise to about four or five storeys. A small number of commercial premises have painted facades, in orange, red, blue or white. Signage is presented in a range of hues, although the colour code of place is largely red, white and blue, 'flagging' the British flag. Buildings generally face directly onto the roadside, even residential premises are without small walls or barriers between them and the street. There are murals at street corners, where side streets to communities join the main route, they vary from political to historical in nature, with the Titanic featuring prominently. A large Bingo Hall indicates this to be a popular working class pastime. There are no restaurants offering fine dining, but a selection of fast food outlets. There are two pharmacies, a doctor's surgery and dentist. Grocery and food outlets cater to basic needs and include butchers and a bakery, there are no luxury food outlets. Hardware shops cater to basic needs for the home and a second hand charity shop offers furniture.

A taxi firm, launderette and hairdressers offer the most extravagant services and a make do and mend shop offers sewing services. Unique to this route is a Highland Kilt Outfitters. Signage is created in plastic, vinyl or wood, and the language is direct and factual. The connotative value of signage is largely in the letterforms and colour palettes of signs. There are, on this side of the road, only 55 buildings remaining, although brownfield clearance for new buildings and vacant lots indicate that this number was at one time much greater. This reduction in the number of potential businesses, combined with the number of derelict and vacant properties, reduces the commercial potential of the Newtownards Road and may impact on the socio-economic and cultural wellbeing of place. As is, there is a high vacancy/dereliction rate.

The side of the road on the way out of Belfast (NO) is characterised by large residential areas, a park, churches, commercial premises, a funeral home and a modern development. Building heights range from one storey to four. The core building material is red brick and a new development is made of concrete, glass and steel. Some buildings appear to have been built in the 1960s or '70s, in breeze block or cement, brutal inelegant architecture. There are few trees or green spaces, other than in the park area and commercial premises face directly onto footpaths – many have grilles or wood on upstairs windows for safety, while shutters, once lowered out of business hours, protect the lower floor. There are murals on corners of side streets marking historical links of place to the shipyard and Titanic, giving voice to political and cultural preferences; some indicate a desire for community reconciliation and peace. A bar/UVF club indicates, through the stenciled signage repeated on the buildings front, a paramilitary presence in the area. The mural above A&M Furniture celebrates the Orange Order and Protestant culture, although not part of the signage for the business premise it and the commercial sign merge. Businesses include carry-out/takeaway food outlets, community based, home, grocery and food stores and bars/off licenses and many shops sell second-hand goods. The grocery and food outlets sell basic supplies and there are no restaurants. The types of commercial premise on the Newtownards road indicate that disposable income is low.

Newtownards Road - side of the road travelled towards Belfast city centre



Newtownards Road - side of the road travelled on way out of Belfast city centre



**Figure 20 Character of built environment Newtownards Road, East Belfast**

**Newtownards Road Signage**

On the Newtownards Road the language used is largely factual, informal, sometimes friendly, seldom personal.

Where on other routes a butchers might advertise high quality meat here there is a *Freshmeat Centre* and another butchers, *David S. McMullan* (Fig.22) uses his name on signage. *Pick'n'Pay*, a hardware shop, uses the language of working class people to indicate informality and *taylor's* hairdressing salon uses a small 't' on the name. Simply-gnosh, a cafe, uses colloquial language on signage created on a home computer, printed in colour, laminated and placed on the fascia board. Other language used on signage references the Titanic, *The New Titanic Restaurant* and *Titanic News*. *Second Time Around* sells used furniture. The language on the *Kebab and Pizza Palace*, a worn and faded plastic sign, is much grander than the food sold. *Mr Ging's*, a Chinese takeaway uses a faux font for the name of the owner. Stenciled signage on the *Belvoir Bar* warns that it is 'the property of East Belfast Ulster Volunteer force', a paramilitary organisation.

Typography on signage is varied, there is no overarching theme through the letterforms alone, but through the poor maintenance of signage that theme might be perceived as economically deprived. Letterforms are a jumble of sans-serif, serif, italic and script, faux fonts and ornate display type. The colour palette is a totemic, red, white and blue, occasionally orange or black. *The New Titanic Restaurant*, *Bethany* fish and chip shop, *Kebab and Pizza Palace* all use red, white and blue. *Mr Ging's*, the *Freshmeat Centre* and *Jordan's* bakery use red. *McDowell's Pharmacy*, the *Dental Surgery* and *Davis S. McMullan*, use blue. Buildings, although most retain a dirty red brick exterior, are painted white, red, blue or orange and both buildings and signage are often in need of maintenance.



**Fig. 21 Buildings and signage Newtownards Road, East Belfast**

#### **Relating findings on the built environment and signage on the Newtownards Road to Census data**

On the Newtownards Road colours are totemic, indicating the presence of unionist culture. Businesses are fewer than on other routes and vacancy and dereliction rates are high. There are no luxury goods and no restaurants, but takeaway food outlets commonly observed. Census statistics indicate that the wards relating to this route have mixed outcomes, with the Ballymacarrett Ward being one of the most deprived, but Island Ward faring better than wards for the Antrim and Falls Roads. Income deprivation was also varied and much lower on the Ballymacarrett Ward, however still better than the Antrim and Falls Roads. The types of business on this road indicate much lower economic means than these figures support and both buildings and signage are poorly maintained. Through observation of the condition of the built environment, low density of commercial premises, high vacancy and poor maintenance it would be supposed that incidences of crime and disorder are high – local knowledge and news reports on cultural clashes and violence support this. However, crime and disorder figures are indicated as being lower than those for the Antrim and Falls Roads. It might be deduced that the run down appearance of the built environment of this route is less to do with poor economic means and more to do with economic isolation due to roads infrastructure.

#### **Lisburn Road built environment**

The findings on this route, unaffected by exclusion zones created by roads and interfaces, are in direct contrast with what is observed on the working class routes above. Lisburn Road is a major arterial route in South Belfast, linking Belfast to Lisburn. The road is an extension of the city's Golden Mile, the location of much of the

city's night life, bars, coffee shops and restaurants and one of the city's most exclusive shopping destinations. Sectarian markers observed on other routes, painted kerb stones, flagging and murals are, at least on the main road, absent. It is a predominantly middle or upper class area, the location of some of the city's most luxurious, lucrative and successful commercial enterprises. (Fig. 23)

There is almost continuous commercial activity and no vacant lots, or sites with billboards. Businesses and rents are expensive; a property on the road is considered to be more exclusive than those on other routes. The architecture is a mixture of Victorian terraces and new modern developments. Amendments to traditional architecture have been undertaken in order to accommodate commercial premises. Removal of bay windows, which, particular to this route, are curved and not canted, is apparent on some but not all commercial premises. Just over a third of the buildings have painted fronts in a muted colour palette – the colours are not primary, as they are on the Falls and Antrim Roads, but cream, white, black, or grey, this colour palette is echoed in signage.

The core building material is red brick, though some buildings use yellow brick; other building materials, particularly on the modern developments, include steel, glass, cement and wood. Newer architecture is often unique and unusual, *Lily's Pub and Eatery* (Fig. 24) has been created with a front fascia area taking over the top half of the building to accommodate signage, beside which is a vertical garden. Apartments can be seen above businesses, with planted pots and greenery, indicating pride of ownership. Restaurants and cafés line the route, as leisurely strolls or shopping trips entice wayfarers to enjoy being a part of this place. Ladies and mens fashion outlets advertise designer clothes, selling a lifestyle that only the elite can afford.

There are many hairdressers and barbers, but by the appearance of the buildings, with custom made signage and evocative language, services are more expensive than elsewhere. Grocery and food outlets advertise delicatessen and gourmet foods. Property agents and businesses concerning finance and investment are prominent. Businesses selling goods for the home display designer wares under spotlights in luxury premises enticing the viewer to aspire to the lifestyle offered. A 'spy agency' offers 'secret' services to those with means to pay for them. The lifestyle offered is one that many people, especially in working class communities on other arterial routes, cannot afford. Buildings and signage are all well maintained, there is no dereliction, breakage or indication of economic decline.

### **Lisburn Road Signage**

On the Lisburn Road the friendly and informal language of the Antrim and Falls Roads is not evident. Signage is formal and aspirational, using connotation to evoke associations with middle and upper class lifestyles. Estate agents are 'property consultants', grocery stores sell 'Gourmet Foods', or 'artisan' products, *Purveyors of Fine Cheese*. Shops selling fashion have been branded with names evoking luxury, *Velvet Boutique*, or exotic places, and *La Moda* uses French language. Hairdressers have brand names evoking glamour and beauty, *Synergy* or *Complexions*. A hairdresser brands its name in gold, discretely, on the door of the unique building façade. (Fig. 25) *Stafford* is the brand and, like a secret society, the client must press a button on a small gold intercom to gain entrance to the premises. Haircuts are expensive, what is purchased is the membership to an exclusive group.

A barber shop, *Cambridge Barbers*, associates with the University or place, not Belfast, gold serif lettering expands over the curve of a rounded bay window and gilded lettering is applied to the windows below. Lettering on signs is often customized and the serif styles used evoke notions of sophistication. Oriental restaurants do not use the yellow, red and gold colours commonly observed on other routes, and names are sophisticated and evocative, *Essence*, uses language referencing extract or sense of being. The custom lettering and expensive manufacture of signage entices the potential purchaser to be a part of a lifestyle. Signage echoes the luxury theme and economic success of this route, where both signage and buildings are excellently presented and maintained.

Lisburn Road - side of the road travelled towards Belfast city centre



Lisburn Road - side of the road travelled on way out of Belfast city centre



**Fig. 22 Character of built environment Lisburn Road, South Belfast**



**Fig. 23 Lily's pub and eaterie, Lisburn Road, with bespoke frontage for signage and vertical garden**



**Fig. 24 Paul Stafford, Lisburn Rd South Belfast, with discrete golden lettering on the doorway signals exclusivity**

#### **Relating findings on the built environment and signage on the Lisburn Road to Census data**

The Lisburn Road appears, from observations of businesses and signage, to be the most economically buoyant of all the routes examined. Restaurants and cafés and premises selling luxury goods are the mainstay of this route. Census material supports this assessment of the economy of place, which ranks among the most economically successful wards. Incomes are high on this route, buildings and signage are excellently maintained and crime and disorder incidences low – census statistics support findings. If we consider that the deprivation scale moves from 1 to the most deprived area for each census category, to 582 for the least deprived, figures show the Lisburn Road to be in the high 4-500s.

#### **Conclusion**

This investigation has highlighted how underlying socio-economic and cultural themes in Belfast may be determined through an analysis of the built environment and signage. As expected, these themes related to the greater Nationalist and Unionist core communities of the city and were representative of census data. The research questioned how signs and other visual markers might visually demonstrate socio-economic and cultural discourses of place and how, by observing the signs, it is possible to learn about place. Both the built environment and signage were observed, with consideration given to how they combine to create the overarching themes of place. Socio-economic and cultural indicators on signage formed part of the greater pattern of the whole of each environment. By comparing findings on arterial routes an image may emerge of differing socio-economic and cultural compositions of communities representative of Belfast as a whole.

There is undoubtedly a correlation between what was observed in the built environment and signage and underlying socio-economic and socio-cultural underpinnings of place, evidenced by the 2011 census. In summary, on the essentially Nationalist Falls Road, where Irish language forms a significant part of local culture, Irish translations appeared prominently on signs. Application of colour codes to letterforms reinforced their socio-economic and cultural value. In the working class communities of the Antrim Road, Falls Road, and Newtownards Road language and letterforms reflected community priorities, socio-economic means and cultural exchanges. Commercial premises offered basic goods and services; this was reflected in signage, which, through language, letterform, colour and materials, demonstrated qualities empathetic to wider socio-economic themes. Seldom on most arterial routes were expensive materials used in the construction of signs and design intervention was usually perceived to be minimal. On the middle-class Lisburn Road the aspirational language on signage, expensive materials, design intervention and often customised typography, reflected the economically robust underpinnings of place and desire for lavish goods, indicated by the density of shops catering to exclusive lifestyles.

Buildings shared qualities of signs, from perceived maintenance to the types of goods sold. When advertised goods were modest, signage was perceived as modest, as were the buildings on which it was situated. Where the built environment was generally perceived to be in need of maintenance this pattern extended to the perceived need for maintenance of signage. Significantly, colour palettes of place were observed to extend beyond signs to the built environment. Primary hues observed in signage on the Falls, Antrim and Newtownards Roads often extended to building fronts. Where colour palettes on signage were observed as totemic, indicating strong evidence of local culture, these codes extended to the facades of buildings. On the Lisburn Road, expensively designed signage using aspirational language had their subtle and muted hues mirrored on facades of buildings.

Findings from the investigation were measured against census statistics for electoral wards in which arterial routes were situated. Comparisons demonstrated that, with regard to demographic and socio-economic underpinnings of place, census statistics supported the hypothesis of a correlation between observations on buildings and signage and official findings. In Belfast signage extends to murals, graffiti and tags, primal markers of place, and in this divided city understanding of visual territorial markers of place is essential.

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