

*"When a city is re-developed a pattern of life is laid down for at least a century. I find myself in disagreement at the proposals that the divisions in the community should be accepted as a feature of life which must inevitably persist for a hundred years or more. ... This seems a counsel of despair. The word ghetto has been lightly and loosely used in the past. These proposals would give the name substance, and would attract criticism from all over the world."*

Anthony Hewins, Office of the United Kingdom Representative in Northern Ireland, 1971

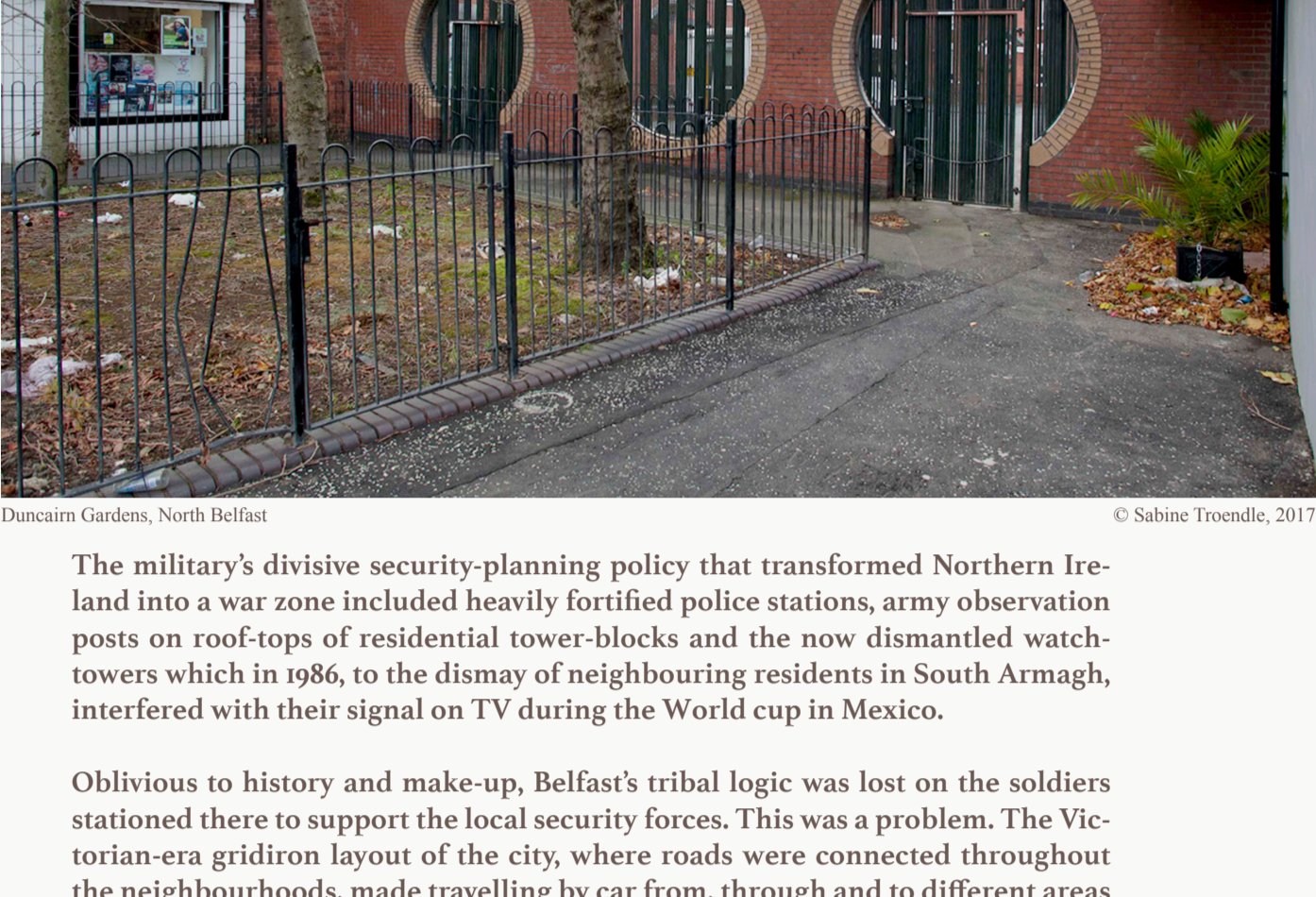


Peace Wall Cupar Way, West Belfast

© Sabine Troendle, 2017

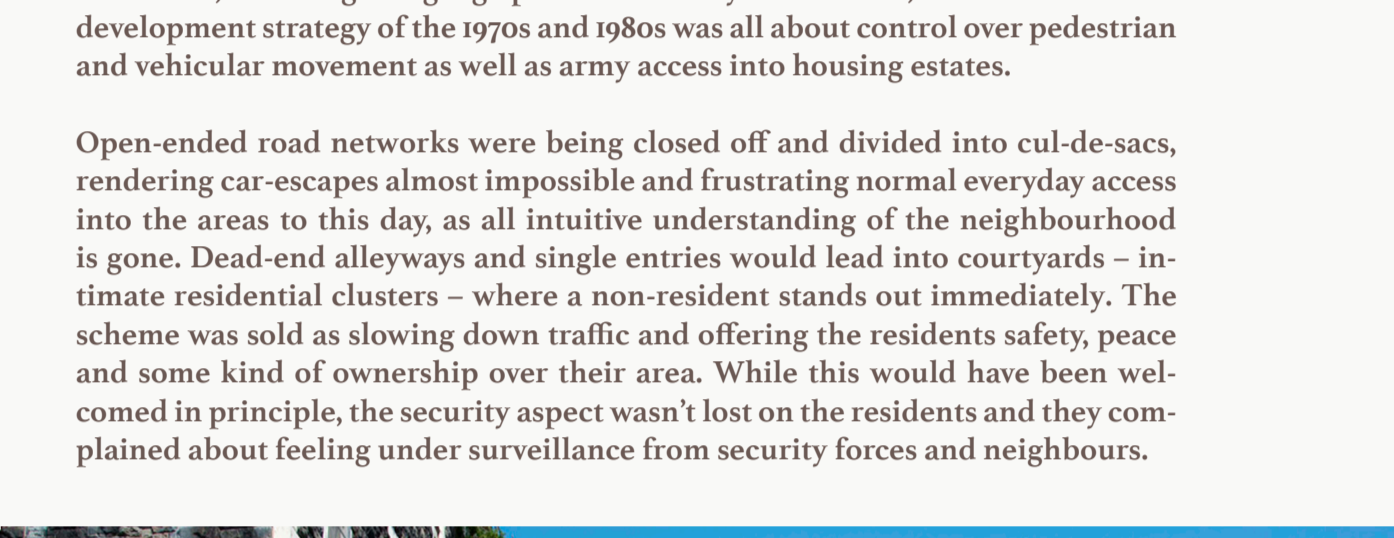
It's been estimated that between 1969, on the outbreak of the Troubles, and its heights in 1976, more than 60,000 people have fled their homes because of sectarian violence, intimidation and fear. The attacks on Catholics and the burning of Bombay Street in 1969 initiated the biggest inter-city migration process western Europe has ever seen since World War 2. Where before people lived side by side in some kind of peace, they now would seek the sanctuary of single-identity estates. Persistent disproportion and inequality in housing distribution facilitated Protestant refugees finding a new home with relative ease while Catholic areas were already over-crowded.

If the homes of leaving Protestant families haven't been completely destroyed in order to prevent any Catholics from moving in, they were squatted by those Catholic families that couldn't find refuge in clearly designated Catholic areas, contesting of course the existing boundaries between the two communities. Because these areas were still perceived as Protestant territory, the authorities couldn't just allocate the freed houses to the displaced Catholics. The looming threat of Catholics spreading into Protestant areas had to be stopped or rather controlled to prevent confrontation and violence to erupt. The solution seemed to have been found not by building houses but by letting the highest ranks of army and security forces – quite outside of public view – get involved with assessing security issues and planning decisions, leading to permanent inter-community barriers and therefore fixing the boundaries of disputed borders for good.



Short Strand, East Belfast

© Sabine Troendle, 2017



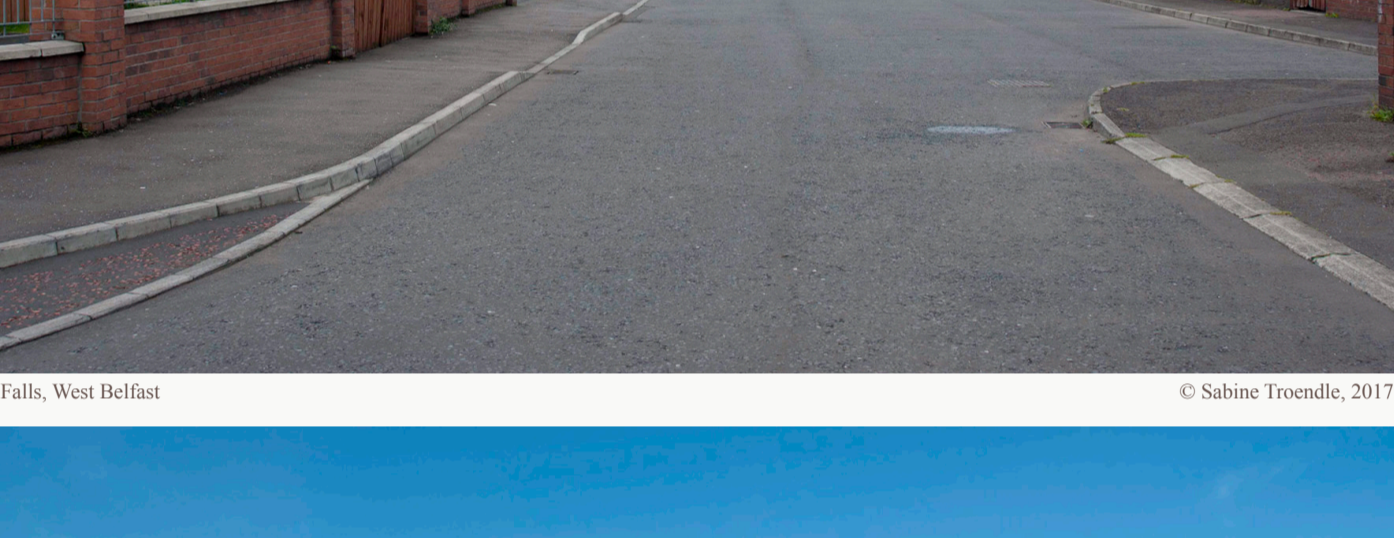
Duncrain Gardens, North Belfast

© Sabine Troendle, 2017

The military's divisive security-planning policy that transformed Northern Ireland into a war zone included heavily fortified police stations, army observation posts on roof-tops of residential tower-blocks and the now dismantled watch-towers which in 1986, to the dismay of neighbouring residents in South Armagh, interfered with their signal on TV during the World cup in Mexico.

Oblivious to history and make-up, Belfast's tribal logic was lost on the soldiers stationed there to support the local security forces. This was a problem. The Victorian-era gridiron layout of the city, where roads were connected throughout the neighbourhoods, made travelling by car from, through and to different areas easy and most paramilitary attacks were carried out using cars. This was a problem. Thus, besides getting a grip on community boundaries, the militaristic re-development strategy of the 1970s and 1980s was all about control over pedestrian and vehicular movement as well as army access into housing estates.

Open-ended road networks were being closed off and divided into cul-de-sacs, rendering car-escapes almost impossible and frustrating normal everyday access into the areas to this day, as all intuitive understanding of the neighbourhood is gone. Dead-end alleyways and single entries would lead into courtyards – intimate residential clusters – where a non-resident stands out immediately. The scheme was sold as slowing down traffic and offering the residents safety, peace and some kind of ownership over their area. While this would have been welcomed in principle, the security aspect wasn't lost on the residents and they complained about feeling under surveillance from security forces and neighbours.



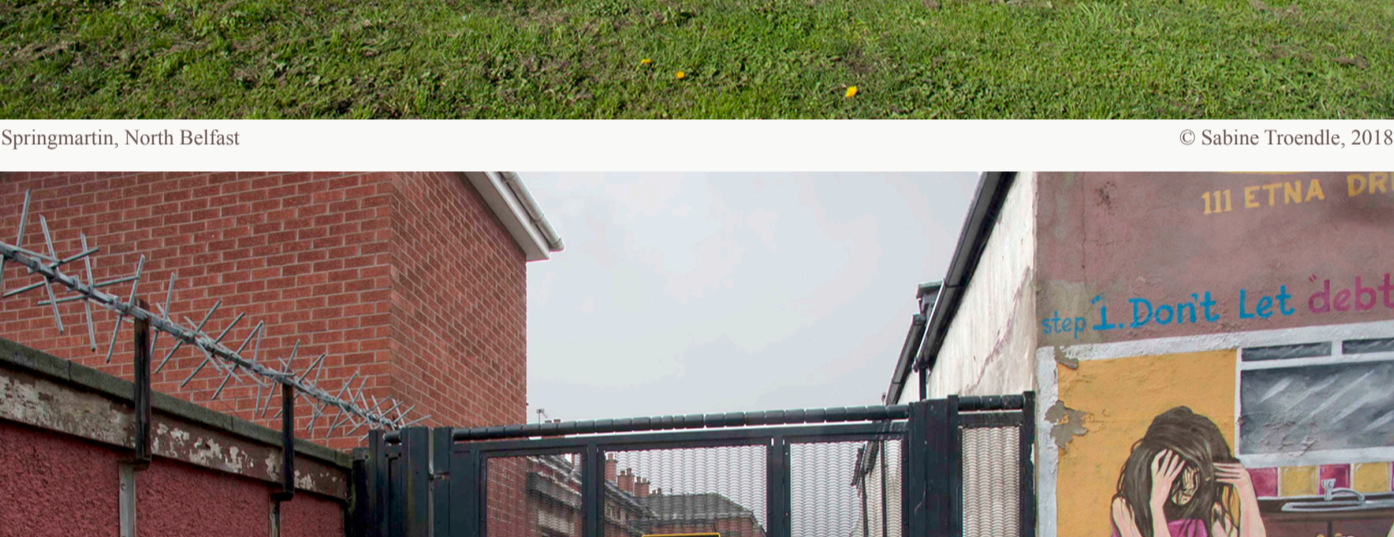
Crumlin Road, North Belfast

© Sabine Troendle, 2018



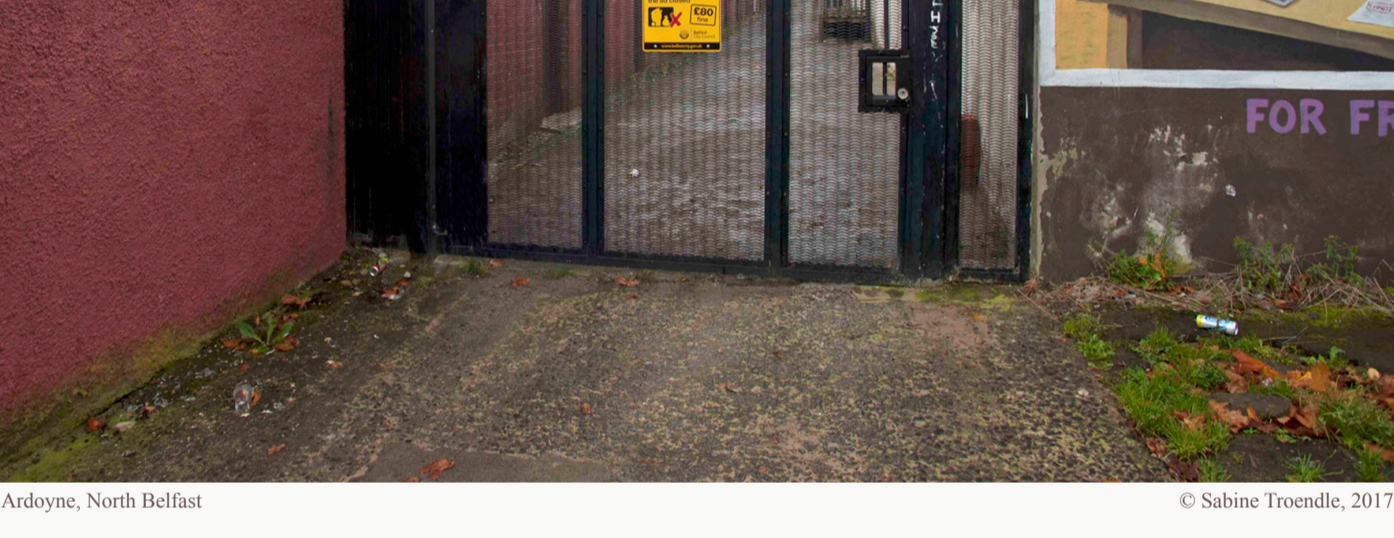
Falls, West Belfast

© Sabine Troendle, 2017



Springmount, North Belfast

© Sabine Troendle, 2018



Ardoyne, North Belfast

© Sabine Troendle, 2017

Disruption of and obstacles on through-roads confront residents with long journeys and dependency on cars just to get to the shop around the corner. If you want to go from the WELCOME CENTRE to the Presbyterian Church situated within a hundred metres on the one and same road, you'll be sent through the Catholic Falls over to the Protestant Shankill in order to get to your destination – unless you're lucky and the newly won'terred gate on Townsend Street is open. Then you can also just stroll over. It won't take more than two minutes.

Security-focused redevelopment made use of everyday architecture creating buffer zones such as shopping centres, roads, industrial zones, hotels, recreational spaces or tight hedgerows to reinforce spatial division between nationalist and unionist communities and would keep undeveloped land or derelict areas unused instead of building houses for communities in housing distress. These hidden barriers remain largely unrecognised as such but play their role in dividing communities and hindering access to the city centre.

Probably the most persistent barriers rest in people's minds. Separated by walls and other dividing structures, Protestants and Catholics live in close proximity without necessarily interacting with each other at all. Knowledge of past violent events and injustices build on mutual generational distrust, impacting on movement and behavioural patterns and leading to so called activity segregation. People take detours to avoid certain areas, they refuse to go to the adjacent park perceiving it to be a Protestant area. Instead of using the bus around the corner, they walk a longer distance to the bus servicing areas within their comfort zone. There might not always be a physical barrier between communities, but history, events and memory provide for invisible demarcation lines.



New Lodge/Tigers Bay, North Belfast

© Sabine Troendle, 2021



Ardoyne/Woodvale, North Belfast

© Sabine Troendle, 2018

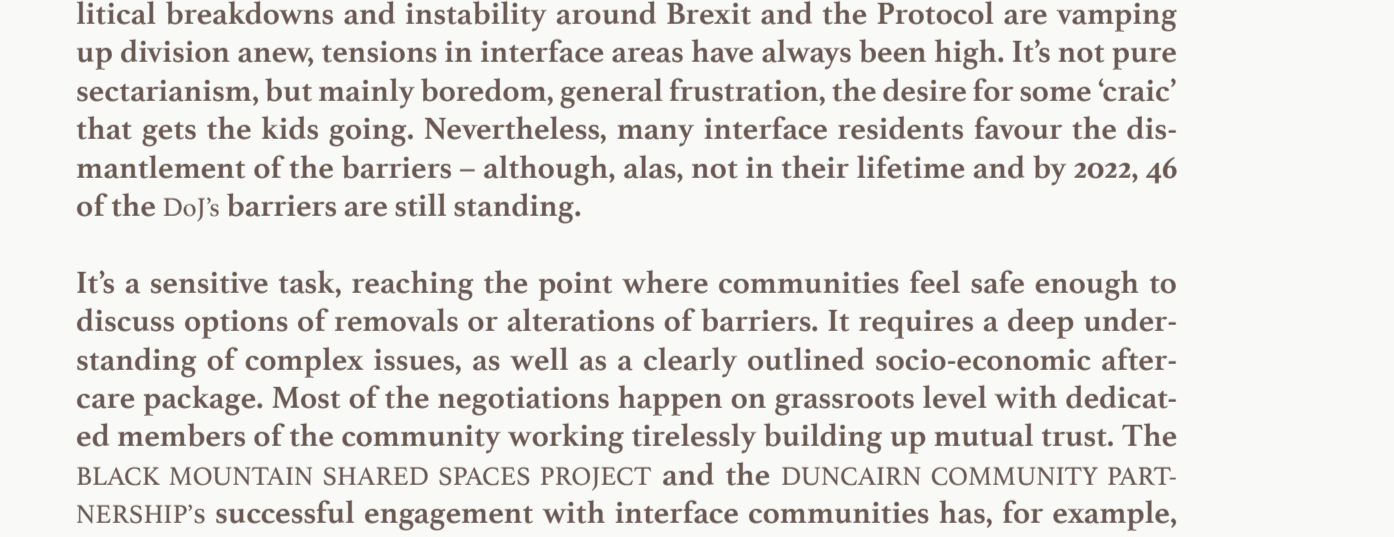
These hidden barriers and invisible boundaries continue to encourage conflict-era behaviour and keep society's mindset trapped in time. They've become part of the communal fabric, normalised, people just live with it, though they affect their lives and wellbeing – even the DUP's Nelson McCausland in his former role of Minister for Social Development agreed –

*"There are still areas blighted by dereliction and decay, with empty houses that are boarded up and land that lies derelict and undeveloped. These problems drag a community down, becoming magnets for anti-social behaviour and dumping. They blight the lives of residents."*

However, these less visible barriers are not evaluated to tackle related divisions and there's no specific governmental body assigned to conflict the issue, quite unlike the clearly visible and in 2021 officially recognised 59 peace walls owned by the DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE (DoJ) and the 20 peace walls owned by the HOUSING EXECUTIVE – out of the close to 100 identified by the BELFAST INTERFACE PROJECT in 2019. While the structures were put up for protection and safety, it's well been documented how people living in the shadow of peace walls are more likely to battle physical and mental health problems. About one in five receive antidepressant medication compared to one in eight for the rest of the population. Educational attainment lies low, economic achievement stays persistently below average, and violence and anti-social behaviour projects high above other residential layouts.

Launched in 2012, the PEACE BARRIERS PROGRAMME funded by the INTERNATIONAL FUND FOR IRELAND pledged to have the programme down by 2023. While various political breakdowns and instability around Brexit and the Protocol are vamping up division anew, tensions in interface areas have always been high. It's not pure sectarianism, but mainly boredom, general frustration, the desire for some 'craic' that gets the kids going. Nevertheless, many interface residents favour the dismantlement of the barriers – although, alas, not in their lifetime and by 2022, 46 of the DoJ's barriers are still standing.

It's a sensitive task, reaching the point where communities feel safe enough to discuss options of removals or alterations of barriers. It requires a deep understanding of complex issues, as well as a clearly outlined socio-economic after-care package. Most of the negotiations happen on grassroots level with dedicated members of the community working tirelessly building up mutual trust. The BLACK MOUNTAIN SHARED SPACES PROJECT and the DUNCAIRN COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP's successful engagement with interface communities has, for example, seen some easing of physical division on the Springfield Road in the west and in North Queen Street and Duncrain Gardens in the north of the city.



New Lodge/Tigers Bay, North Belfast

© Sabine Troendle, 2021



Ardoyne/Woodvale, North Belfast

© Sabine Troendle, 2018

Prior to the change, residents of North Queen Street didn't use their front door and garden. With the replaced fence, which is barely recognisable as a peace wall, came more room and just the other day a barbecue was simmering on a grill in one of the residents' new gardens. Replacing the four metre high wall required the windows and doors being enforced with security glass but for the first time in thirty years the sun shines into these homes unhindered.

The dismantling of a huge corrugated steel wall replaced by a transparent mesh fence gives way to a panoramic view from loyalist Tigers Bay into the republican New Lodge. There's no opening through the scaled-down barrier but floral landscaping along the fence and a wandering gaze into the unknown space beyond maybe help to alter feelings of fear and held prejudice against that backyard community on the other side –

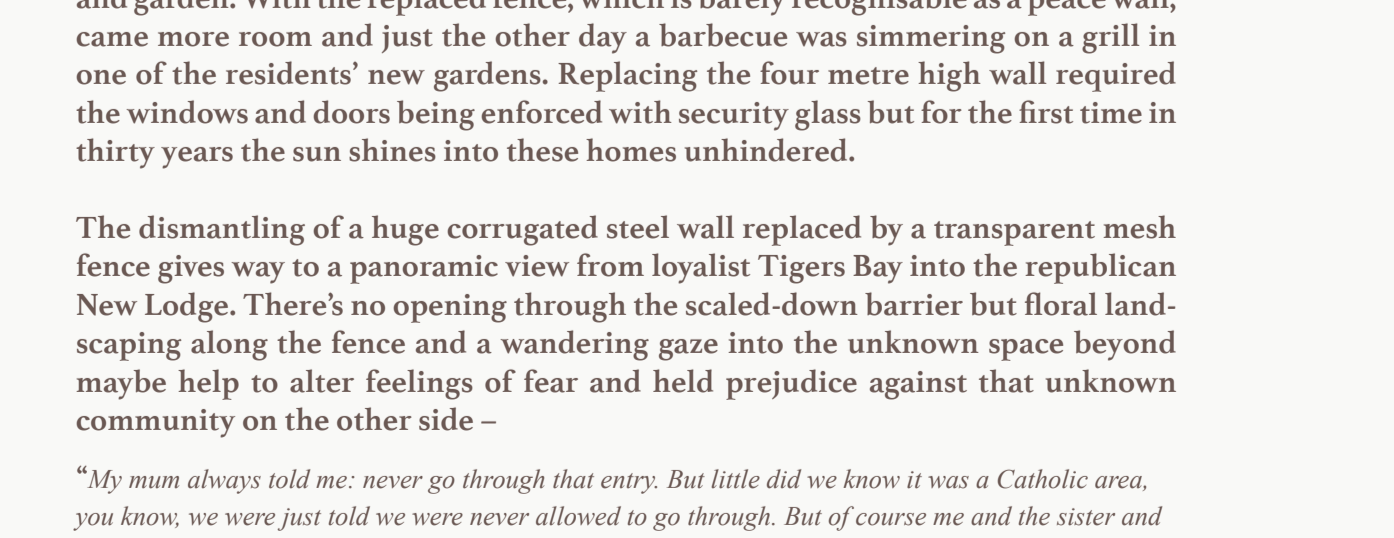
*"My mum always told me: never go through that, entry. But little did we know it was a Catholic area, you know, we were just told we were never allowed to go through. But of course me and the sister and a wee friend stuck our head round the wall to see, you know, what is going on round here. But everything just looked normal to us."* Woman from East Belfast

Erected in 1989 to protect residents, the partial removal of the three metre high security wall facing the police station on the Springfield road is a significant step forward for the Springhill community. The only fly in the ointment, a good part of Gael Force Art/Gerard 'Mo Chara' Kelly's Palestinian mural is gone too.



Mesh fence replacing concrete blocks, Springfield Avenue, West Belfast

© Sabine Troendle, 2017



Low garden fence replacing high peace fence, North Queen Street, North Belfast

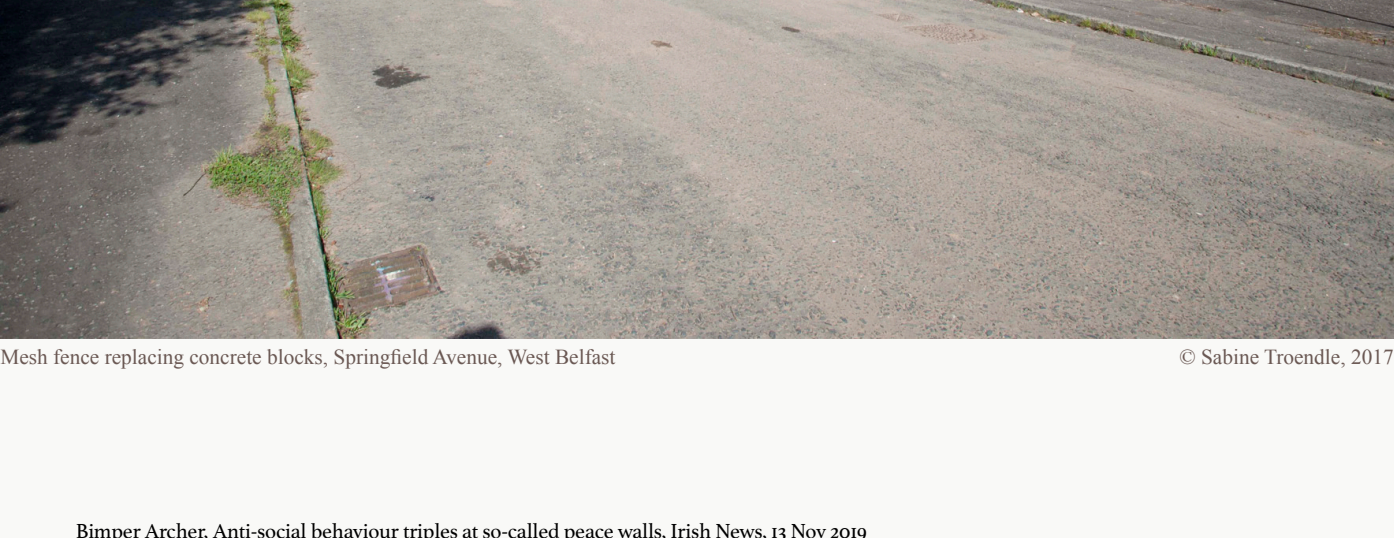
© Sabine Troendle, 2021

Prior to the change, residents of North Queen Street didn't use their front door and garden. With the replaced fence, which is barely recognisable as a peace wall, came more room and just the other day a barbecue was simmering on a grill in one of the residents' new gardens. Replacing the four metre high wall required the windows and doors being enforced with security glass but for the first time in thirty years the sun shines into these homes unhindered.

The dismantling of a huge corrugated steel wall replaced by a transparent mesh fence gives way to a panoramic view from loyalist Tigers Bay into the republican New Lodge. There's no opening through the scaled-down barrier but floral landscaping along the fence and a wandering gaze into the unknown space beyond maybe help to alter feelings of fear and held prejudice against that backyard community on the other side –

*"My mum always told me: never go through that, entry. But little did we know it was a Catholic area, you know, we were just told we were never allowed to go through. But of course me and the sister and a wee friend stuck our head round the wall to see, you know, what is going on round here. But everything just looked normal to us."* Woman from East Belfast

Erected in 1989 to protect residents, the partial removal of the three metre high security wall facing the police station on the Springfield road is a significant step forward for the Springhill community. The only fly in the ointment, a good part of Gael Force Art/Gerard 'Mo Chara' Kelly's Palestinian mural is gone too.



Mesh fence replacing concrete blocks, Springfield Avenue, West Belfast

© Sabine Troendle, 2017

Bimper Archer, Anti-social behaviour triples at so-called peace walls, Irish News, 13 Nov 2009

Bimper Archer, Barriers to peace still, Irish News, 16 Nov 2021

Belfast School of Architecture – the Built Environment, Hidden barriers, SuperStudio 3 + 4

David Coyle, Brandon Hamber, Adrian Grant, Hidden barriers and divisive architecture, June 2021

Nick Garbutt, Who plans Belfast?, ScopeNI, 12 Dec 2014

Nick Garbutt, Defence planning – how the military shaped Belfast, ScopeNI, 5 Jan 2017

Ria Harkin, Anything goes – architectural destruction in Northern Ireland after the Troubles, 2014

Andrew Sanders and Ian S. Woods, Times of Troubles, Britain's War in Northern Ireland, 2012

Andrew Walsh, Belfast '69: bombs, burning and bigotry, 2015

Belfast Interface Project, Belfast Telegraph, Irish News