

"Damp on the wall, so she slinks into bed with mummy. There's four in the bed and the little one said, I HATE IT HERE. With sunken eyes, she's sleep deprived. She goes to school but she's behind."

Poem by Fionnuala Kennedy, based on a Belfast teenage girl, 2019.



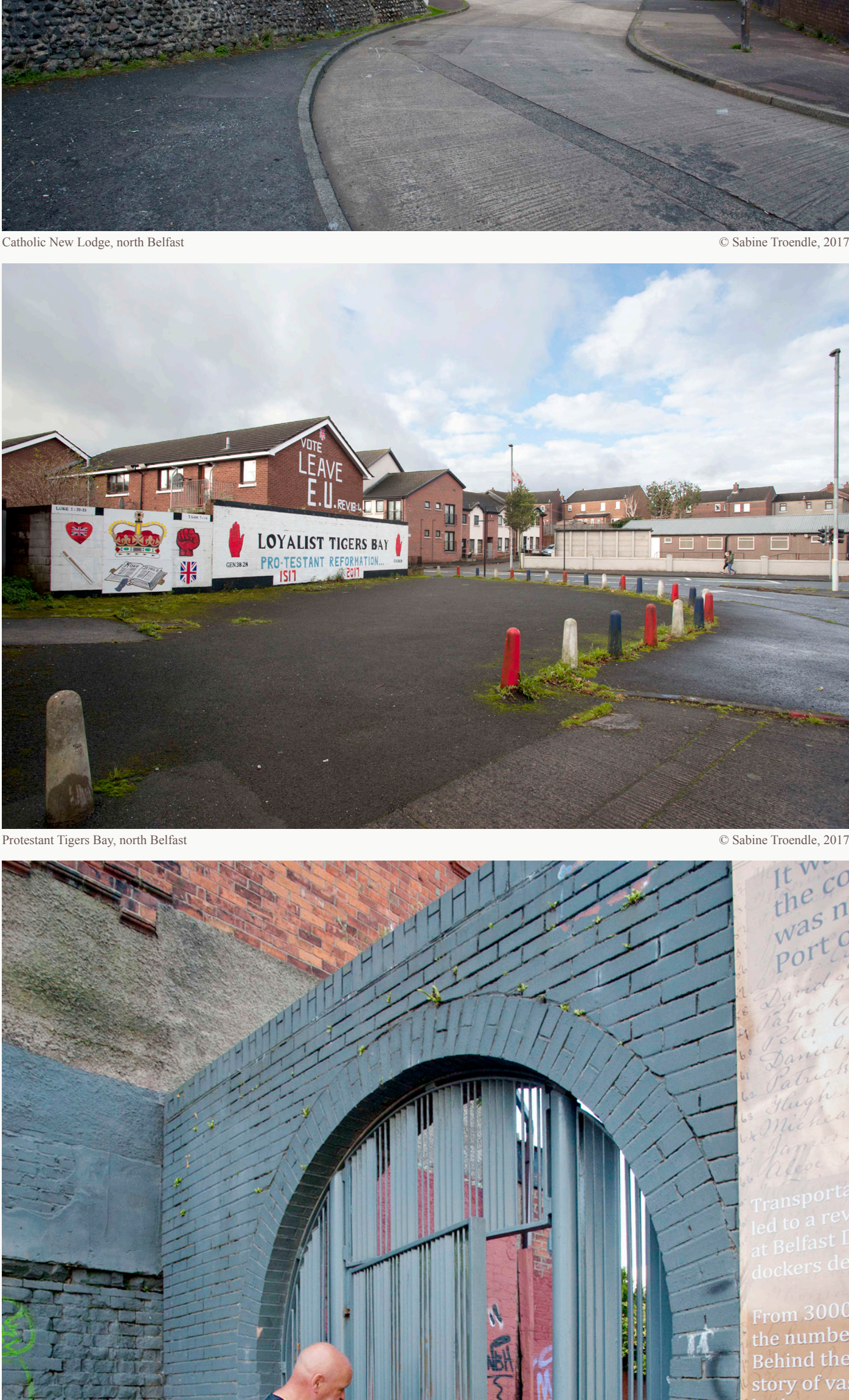
Hillview site, north Belfast

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According to the NORTHERN IRELAND HOUSING EXECUTIVE, by the End of March 2021 there were 43,971 households on the social housing waiting list with at least 24,717 children under 18 years amongst them. Two thirds are considered to be in housing stress and are on the transfer list because their home is not safe or suitable and they need to be moved. Over half, and at least 14,000 children, are deemed full duty applicant homeless, living in hostels, in overcrowded apartments, staying with friends or family on sofas or in houses with issues such as damp and serious disrepair. The huge lack of social homes results in thousands of families living in dire housing circumstances, in short term private landlord properties which they can't afford and get them into debts and in the worst case scenario, on the street.

The government's focus is set on short-term maximising of capital, visible when counting cranes and high-rise glass structures in the city centre and around the dock lands, rather than investing into the future of children from marginalised backgrounds and thus into social equality and stability. Just like so many other European cities. The problem with development in Northern Ireland is that it is linked to so called normalisation and the move away from violence.

The Good Friday Agreement in 1998 came with a reward for building peace, the peace dividend, which is predominantly visible in the emergence of expensive tourism attractions, new shops, hotels, upmarket restaurants, luxury apartment blocks and office buildings. Development at the heart of peace, conflict transformation in its neo-liberal prime. Nothing to be snubbed upon, considering that in the past people had to go through army turnstile checks entering the city centre, which was completely dead at night. People are grateful having what other cities have. After decades of conflict Belfast's city centre was run down and development with help from the peace dividend is welcome. The problem is, it comes at a price.



PPR campaigns for social housing on Hillview

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Carrick Hill social housing campaign

© Sabine Treondle, 2021

Whilst money of the peace dividend goes into gentrification – middle-class consumerism as harbinger of a shared post-conflict society – the gentrified areas expand into working-class communities with much need for social housing. For them, the promise of a peace dividend improving their lives does not materialise. The city's forward moving struggle with the trauma of conflict plays out in their much deprived communities, attributing to a widespread notion that the peace process is a middle-class endeavour and sectarianism a prevailing working-class phenomenon. A stereotypical concept that let's politicians and decision-makers off the hook way too easily.

For the first time, a Minister responsible for the DEPARTMENT FOR COMMUNITIES, which is responsible for housing in Northern Ireland, admitted to a housing crisis, calling the current system broken and the religious inequality in housing allocations worrisome. The average need of social housing in Catholic areas is 1,041, according to Housing Executive 2018/19 figures. In Protestant areas it's 40. Nonetheless, more land is proportionally purchased and social homes are being built in Protestant areas. THE UNITED NATIONS confirmed in several reports: sectarianism remains institutionalised and disparities between Catholics and Protestants still persist. A rather damning situation, considering that the unfair allocation of social housing played a big part in bringing along the Civil Rights Movement 50 years ago – and eventually led to the Troubles.



Catholic New Lodge, north Belfast

© Sabine Treondle, 2017



Protestant Tigers Bay, north Belfast

© Sabine Treondle, 2017



Tomas locking the gate between the New Lodge and Tigers Bay for the night

© Sabine Treondle, 2019

The conflict has led to many people living in single-identity neighbourhoods, as a means of feeling safe. In the same time, the Protestant population is steadily declining while the numbers of Catholics and those who identify with neither religion are growing, which means that suitable housing for the mainly Catholic families on the waiting list is in Protestant areas. For Protestants, it's a hard deal, as Professor Gafkin from QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY BELFAST observes,

"Many unionists (mainly Protestants) may see that as incursion onto what was formally 'their' land and thereby see it as a physical, visual representation of the political loss of ground that they think they have experienced in their politics and culture. The metaphorical political loss of ground is now being manifest in the physical loss of ground."

Aware of the electoral impact in their constituencies a change of demographics can have, little is it surprising, when die-hard unionist politicians promote fear and hate in regard of any attempt to build new social housing in or near a Protestant area. In 2019 – after a previous withdrawal of plans following a meeting with senior unionist politicians – work on new homes on Clifton Street has finally started. With the Orange Hall and the traditional marching route down the street during the Twelfth, the location is known as a parading flashpoint and officials of the Orange Order promptly claimed that the City Council didn't recognise the sensitivities of the area with regards to cultural expression and that the street should be renamed Sectarian Street. Implying of course, that with the new homes, anti-Protestant activities such as attacks on their marches will increase and therefore endanger the Protestant culture.



Clifton Street, north Belfast

© Sabine Treondle, 2019

In 2017, the Police rapped the doors of four Catholic families, informing them that they were in danger after receiving threats by a loyalist paramilitary group. They left Cantrell Close, a social housing development project with the aim of 'creating a new, united, reconciled and shared society'. People were too frightened to be interviewed on camera, including Protestant residents who supported their Catholic neighbours. In 2019, a couple with a Catholic-sounding name in a Protestant neighbourhood have been left terrified for their safety after the graffiti '24 hours to get out' appeared at their door. The police informed them that they had to remove the graffiti themselves – a sensitive issue in Northern Ireland – and provided them with a booklet on self-protection and the advice to spend the night somewhere else. In 2021, the UVF and UDA placed a Catholic single-mum-of-three under threat, telling her she was not wanted in their Protestant estate. The family had only moved in a few weeks ago, after they were offered the house by the Housing Executive. A few of many more incidents.

According to the PROGRESSIVE UNIONIST PARTY'S Dr John Kyle, there are criminals to see being part of a paramilitary organisation as a way to make money and to exercise and gain power:

"If they realise that there are negative feelings towards newcomers they will exploit that for their own ends and they will often sail under the flag of a paramilitary organisation because it gives them a great sense of authority. Paramilitaries should have left the stage, we should be in a post-paramilitary phase now, but the reality is that they haven't."

New loyalist paramilitary mural in Carrickfergus

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When homeless Catholic families turned down home offerings in areas defined by loyalist paramilitary emblems, the Housing Executive concluded that 'choice' was one of the reasons why Catholics sit longer on waiting lists. An argument emphatically contested by Daniel Holder, Deputy Director of the COMMITTEE ON THE ADMINISTRATION OF JUSTICE,

"The obvious reason why many Catholics cannot move to areas where there is loyalist paramilitary activity is that they fear they will encounter sectarian intimidation. It's shocking to estimate that Catholics face extreme housing inequality about of some sort of personal choice. There needs to be an urgent review into how racist and sectarian intimidation in housing is being handled."

There is a long history of community tension resulting in peace lines in the form of fences, walls, gates, parks or wasteland, keeping Catholic and Protestant communities apart. Any changes require political and community agreement.

Peace wall New Lodge/Tigers Bay

© Sabine Treondle, 2017

Mackies site, west Belfast

© Sabine Treondle, 2018

Hillview site, North Belfast

© Sabine Treondle, 2018

THE PARTICIPATION AND THE PRACTICE OF RIGHTS (PPR) organisation has been campaigning for a long time. The Hillview site has been taken hostage with families and children building and drawing their own homes, resulting in a wider poster campaign. The Mackies site's been sunflower seed-bombed to raise awareness of the Sunflower (social housing) project on the site. Serious feasible studies and plans for social housing on Hillview and Mackies have been delivered. The Housing Executive's been invaded and political parties have been met in City Hall. Numerous videos, poems and performances are out there to watch. The YES.MEN have been invited for a political stunt at a conference which resulted in a legal threat issued by no other than the City Council. Nonetheless, they keep on fighting. The public space is the stage, politicians and official decision makers the targets, we – the public – are there to take notice, share and participate. Because, the YES.MEN said,

"This is important, it needs to happen. And not only that it should happen, but that it COULD happen, if enough people pressure the City Council and the government on it."

I'd like to conclude by reciting another part of the poem by Fionnuala Kennedy, based on and performed by Abbie Morris:

"She's thirteen. She can't remember when she realised it wasn't normal. It's always been temporary – 'just for now', 'it'll get better' – and then there's her friends. It's embarrassing to say, I LIVE IN A HOSTEL. You can't stay or come over. The panic, the fear – of what they'll think when they hear, we've been homeless for years. So she makes excuses, she lies and after a while they stop, inviting her over because she never returns the favour."

Build Homes Now! campaign by PPR on Hillview

© Sabine Treondle, 2018

Build Homes Now News, NTV, 2 May 2019
Caoimhe McFall, Gentrification in a post-conflict city: the case of Belfast, 9 February 2018
Fionnuala Kennedy's, www.wallstudies.com/video-2020-09-plan_vest_fund_build_a_poem
PPR, Response to Belfast City Council consultation, 24 October 2019
PPR, Waiting for a childhood to call their own, Nanture, 16 Oct 2020
Rory Winters, The Detail, 19 February 2020 - 2 March 2020

BBC, Belfast Telegraph, Irish News, Irish Times, PPR, Sluggie O'Toole