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Green, Grey and Orange: urban democracy and the formation of climate publics in Belfast, Northern Ireland.

Robert Edward Gilmore

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Green, Grey and Orange: urban
democracy and the formation of
climate publics in Belfast,
Northern Ireland.

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Abstract

This thesis explores the relationship between cities, democracy, and public engagement with climate change. It does so by comparing two attempts to further democracy: one by creating green infrastructure, designed to connect the Belfast's ethno-communally divided territories; the other by working towards the construction of low-carbon social housing on land left vacant due to the city's conflicted past.

In doing so, this thesis provides a rich empirical account of the way which attempts to realise democracy in Northern Ireland are increasingly intersecting with attempts to engender more sustainable futures, through the reconfiguration of Belfast's urban territories. In addition, it contributes to understandings of the role which urban greening can play in assembling publics in contexts where existing institutions are no longer able to consistently deliver the infrastructures needed to sustain urban life. More conceptually, this thesis contributes to debates about the role which cities can play in facilitating democratic engagement with climate change in an urbanising, climate-changing world, where cities, and promises of sustainability associated with them, are increasingly coming apart.

This thesis begins from the idea that contemporary democracy is troubled in part because of declining belief in the possibility of governing climate change, and so creating a sustainable common future, democratically. It develops its understanding of democracy and public formation by drawing upon ideas from American Pragmatism, supplementing them with understandings of government associated with Foucauldian scholarship. It develops these theories and ideas, in turn, by bringing them into dialogue with empirical material gathered through a variety of qualitative methods, including interviews, focus groups, and ethnographic engagement with political projects in Belfast.

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List of Acronyms

Acronym	Meaning
CNR	Catholic, Nationalist and/or Republican
DUP	Democratic Unionist Party
EU	European Union
FMCG	Forth Meadow Community Greenway
GAA	Gaelic Athletic Association
GFA	Good Friday Agreement
GVRT	Greater Village Regeneration Trust
IRA	Irish Republican Army
MLA	Member of the Legislative Assembly (Northern Ireland)
NI	Northern Ireland
PEACE	Acronym used to describe peace process funding associated with European Union.
PPR	Participation and the Practice of Rights
PSNI	Police Service of Northern Ireland
PUL	Protestant, Unionist and/or Loyalist
QUB	Queens University Belfast
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SDLP	Social Democratic and Labour Party
SEUPB	Special European Union Programmes Body
TBTC	Take Back the City
TCPA	Town and Country Planning Association
UDA	Ulster Defence Association
UUP	Ulster Unionist Party
UVF	Ulster Volunteer Force

Statement of Copyright

The copyright of this thesis rests with the author. No quotation from it should be published without the author's prior written consent and information derived from it should be acknowledged.

Acknowledgements

In my early teens I ended up on a long car journey with a family friend who'd been heavily involved with the peace negotiations in Northern Ireland. Halfway through the journey I plucked up the courage to voice a question which had been rattling around my mind. 'So then,' I asked, 'what does it *really* take, to make democracy?'

In my memory a long pause followed before the family friend replied: 'it needs people to get stuck with each other on broken down trains.'

It was a clever answer. From memory, it shut me up for the rest of the journey. In some respects, I feel like all I've been doing ever since is trying to figure out what he really meant. This is a way of saying that this thesis is the product of a lifetime of experiences, which have made me pause to think, thereby shaping me and, by extension, this piece of work. I owe a debt of gratitude to many different people and places I have interacted with along this journey – too many to list here. There are, however, a few people without whom this thesis would have been impossible.

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1 Introduction

‘Optimism about democracy is to-day under a cloud. We are familiar with denunciation and criticism which, however, often reveal their emotional source in their peevish and indiscriminating tone. Many of them suffer from the same error into which earlier laudations fell. They assume that democracy is the product of an idea, of a single and consistent intent.’

The Public and its Problems, John Dewey (1927 [2016] p.144)

1.1 General Context: Democracy Under a Cloud

In the late 18th century, inspired by the French revolution, a secret society known as the ‘United Irishmen’ was founded in Belfast. A cross-religious, cross-class association, in 1798 they initiated an armed rebellion, which marked the first substantive attempt to realise modern democracy on the island of Ireland (Mitchell, 2022; Stewart, 2001). Their efforts were violently suppressed, and in their wake the United Kingdom was founded, as a reaction to the threat of further political insurrection. In the rebellion and its aftermath, more than 30,000 people were killed (Mitchell, 2022; Stewart, 2001).

In the late 1960s, inspired by the American Civil rights movement, a group known as the ‘Northern Irish Civil Rights Association’ (NICRA) was founded in Belfast. A cross-religious, cross-class association, in 1968 they initiated a series of marches across the province, in order to try to realise fuller democracy by ensuring the ‘true’ enfranchisement of the province’s Catholic minority (McKittrick and McVea, 2012). Their efforts were violently suppressed by the Protestant majority, representative democracy was suspended, and the British army was deployed, as a reaction against the threat of further political insurrection. This threat was realised; the subsequent thirty-year period of violence – usually known as ‘the Troubles’ – left more than 3,000 people dead (McGarry and O’Leary, 2004; McKittrick and McVea, 2012; Mitchell, 2011).

In the late 1990s, a nascent ‘Peace Process’ started to gain traction in Northern Ireland. Supported by an array of international actors, inspired by the ideas of eminent European and British political scientists, this Peace Process came to fruition on Good Friday in 1998, when a major peace treaty was signed, officially drawing an end to ‘the Troubles’ (McGarry and O’Leary, 2006a, 2006b, 2004). The document was designed to constitute a new Northern Ireland, which promised a return to democracy for this corner of the world, through the creation of a self-governing, plural public, enshrined in a set of institutions deliberately designed to protect the province’s minorities (Mitchell, 2011). The agreement has, largely, succeeded. Today the guns have, largely, fallen silent in Northern Ireland. The institutions set up by the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) are an established part of political life in the province. Democracy, in this particular form, appears largely secure (Coulter et al., 2021; Coulter and Shirlow, 2019).

And yet, this arrangement has its flaws. Internationally, Northern Ireland's democratic institutions have become infamous for their instability; when I started to write this thesis, these institutions had been suspended for more than half of their existence, thanks to a range of disagreements and stand-offs, on the basis of everything ranging from the decommissioning of paramilitary weapons to subsidies for renewable energy (Coulter et al., 2021; Coulter and Shirlow, 2019). Meanwhile though, within Northern Ireland, beneath this perpetual instability lies a sense of stagnation; despite it being said during every political crisis that 'Northern Ireland stands [once] more at a crossroads [instead] the place often more often feels like it is forever circumnavigating a roundabout' (Coulter and Shirlow, 2019, p. 19). As Derry-born urbanist and memoirist Darren Anderson puts it:

'The schools remain segregated. The cities remain internally divided. The trauma is, against the lessons of psychiatry, buried. The Peace Process is disrupted and undermined, but it has always had a problem, for all the relief that the respite of violence has given. The North remains a patient in a medically induced coma.' (Anderson, 2020, p. 346)

There are, of course, specifically Northern Irish facets to this condition. But step back from the particularities of this place, and there are aspects of sentiment – of a politics which is at once disrupted yet stagnant, in part thanks to the fragmentation of democratic publics – which are increasingly widespread across the neoliberal world (Dardot and Laval, 2019). As popular political theorist Wendy Brown (2017) puts it, 'the demos' which lies at the heart of democracy is increasingly coming 'undone' or is fragmenting and reconfiguring in ways which do not align with existing political institutions. On this basis, she suggests that there is something of an epochal shift underway, as regards public faith in democracy:

'At the triumphal "end of history" in the West, most have ceased to believe in the human capacity to craft and sustain a world that is humane, free, sustainable, and, above all, modestly under human control. This loss of conviction about the human capacity to craft and steer its existence or even to secure its future is the most profound and devastating sense in which modernity is "over."' (Brown, 2017, p. 221)

It seems unlikely that the desire to create a more 'sustainable' world was of concern to the United Irishmen of 1798, or the NICRA marchers of 1968, and it didn't feature prominently in the creation of the GFA in 1998. But it is an idea which is becoming increasingly important for politics in a climate-changing world. It is also an idea which has animated a wave of democratic innovations, many motivated by a sense that existing forms of democracy are not up to the task, of providing opportunities for people to engage with the issue of climate change and so create more sustainable futures (Marquardt et al., 2025). For some, this type of climate-inspired democratic innovation might not only help to save the planet, but democracy too. Perhaps, political theorist Amanda Machin

(2022, pp. 301–302) muses, climate change ‘opens the space to reconsider not only what is wrong with democracy, but also how it could be put right’, so posing ‘the possibility of revising prevailing theories, models and practices of democratic politics and of precipitating a transformation that not only enfolds environmental aims but also a democratic renewal.’

In Northern Ireland, attempts to try to realise democracy through the creation of new publics have long focussed on the province’s ethno-communal, territorial divisions, especially in urban areas, where the province’s geography is most aggressively divided (Cunningham and Gregory, 2014; De Young, 2023). Today, attempts to try to secure and further democracy in Northern Ireland are increasingly becoming ‘environmental’ in form, drawing together concerns about sustainability and climate change (Belfast City Council, 2024). This thesis focusses on two projects reckoning with Northern Ireland’s most materially and symbolically significant ethno-political division, which runs between the Catholic/Nationalist/Republican (CNR) ‘Falls’ and Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist (PUL) ‘Shankill’ areas of Belfast. Both projects are trying to realise more democratic futures while integrating concerns about urban sustainability. This thesis explores how these projects create publics, and examines the implications they have, for both democracy generally, and more specifically for engaging with climate change democratically, through the urban.

This introductory chapter provides the broad context for the thesis and sets out the key lines of thinking which are explored through it. It begins by situating this thesis against broad contemporary trends with regard to politics and climate change (section 1.2), before providing an overview of the core themes which run through the thesis (section 1.3). The chapter then sets out the research questions (section 1.4), and the thesis’ overall structure (section 1.5).

1.2 Substantive Context: Searching for Climate Democracy

Even the series of snapshots of attempts to realise modern democracy within Northern Ireland sketched out above indicate that this is a political ideal which has shifted through time, as have the practices used to try to realise it: once associated with the French Revolution’s ideals of *liberté, égalité, fraternité*, presumed best realised at the point of a rapier, by the late 1960s democratisation meant winning ‘civil rights’ for marginalised communities through peaceful protest, whilst today it is often associated with the institutions enshrined by the GFA. In a similar vein, the meaning of the term ‘climate politics’ has shifted through time: when climate change emerged as a matter of substantive political concern in the 1980s it was largely considered as an issue of ‘greenhouse gas emissions’, to be governed through international institutions and agreements, like the Kyoto Agreement of 1997. But over time, the governance of climate change, and the politics associated with it has become associated with a ‘constantly diversifying and expanding set of sites and actors’ (Paterson et al., 2026, p. 60); some

today suggest that it is best considered not a discrete political object-problem, but a ‘condition’ which permeates, and is remade through, a wide variety of different domains, from ‘local solar-powered swimming pools to the board-rooms of large multinationals, [to the] the celebrity Instagram posts of Leonardo de Caprio [...]’ (Bulkeley, 2019, p. 4). As Matthew Paterson (2021) points out, these shifts in climate change’s politics mean that today:

‘[...] almost anything can be understood as part of climate politics. Climate politics is not analytically reducible to the things that are articulated explicitly in relation to climate change. Anywhere there is political activity (collective authoritative decisions, conflicts and power relations, and the relations between these elements) that entails energy use, we can treat these as questions of climate politics. Even if actors have not yet sought to frame an object as a climate change object, since its qualities and relations will be transformed as we respond to climate change, then we can explore its dynamics to help us think through climate change’s politics.’ (Paterson, 2021, p. 8)

But this also, as Paterson (2021) explores, means that it can be hard to actually locate climate politics’ whereabouts: it is an issue which can seem at once everywhere and nowhere, in the sense that it increasingly permeates political life, yet remains challenging to actually pin down and govern, as perhaps best illustrated by ever steeping global temperature graphs, and ever accelerating rates of associated socio-ecological destruction. The task of locating climate politics becomes even more complicated when one starts trying to identify *democratic* forms of climate politics; the word democracy is ‘among the most contested and promiscuous terms in our modern political vocabulary’ (Brown, 2017, p. 19).

One way of reckoning with this complexity, particularly popular with critical theorists, has been to equate democracy – and by extension, democratic forms of climate politics – with moments of contestation, or disruption, when existing political systems are challenged, by groups articulating issues not yet adequately catered for in existing forms of government (Machin, 2020, 2013; Swyngedouw, 2018, 2010a). This is a line of theorisation which is founded upon radical democratic theories, which approach democracy not as something constant, but as a process realised through particular situated practices; for theorists working in this vein, it is only when those who are not adequately represented in existing systems of government, or understandings of who the public is, challenge the existing parameters of political life in moments of ‘dissensus’ (Rancière, 2010, 1995), or through ‘agonistic’ forms of conflict which recognise the partiality of all forms of publicity (Mouffe, 2005), that democratisation can occur.

This is a body of theory, however, which developed largely in response to what some have termed the ‘post-political’ period of the late 1990s and 2000s, when the Berlin Wall had fallen and neoliberalism appeared to have reached quasi-hegemonic status. In this

context there appeared, for some, to be no alternative to capitalist, neoliberal forms of democracy and the forms of environmental politics associated with it (Mouffe, 2005; Swyngedouw, 2010a). But after the financial crisis of 2008 ‘this order began to crack, assailed by diverse and often antagonistic forces’ and the results have ‘turned out to be forbiddingly difficult to taxonomise’ (Jäger, 2026, p. 4). We now live in an age which is ‘political, to be sure, but its modes uneasily complement and supersede the postpolitics of the 1990s, reuniting private and public in ways the classical age of democracy could not have expected’ (Jäger, 2026, p. 4). In Jäger’s (2026) analysis, having shifted from postpolitics, through a period of ‘antipolitics’, marked by mass protests against the political status-quo, we now live in an era of ‘hyperpolitics’ where political engagement is often fervent, but lacks the public institutions through which to gain traction and effect change. Against these conditions, it is not just disrupting existing forms of politics but building new alternatives which is a ‘radical’ act.

Climate politics has both played a role in, and been marked by, these political shifts. Extinction Rebellion’s shifting tactics provide an emblematic example: when this movement burst onto the political scene in the United Kingdom in 2019, it quickly became renowned for its disruptive protest tactics and drew attention to the idea that democracy’s ills and climate change are entangled. But in 2022 this movement declared that they were ‘quitting’ disruptive protests, instead aiming to embed themselves in a variety of community-based struggles, in part because in ‘a time when speaking out and taking action are criminalised, building collective power, strengthening in number and thriving through bridge-building is a radical act.’ (Extinction Rebellion, 2022). In making this change, Extinction Rebellion has shifted with the political weather, and joined a growing number of ‘everyday environmentalist’ movements, which recognise ‘the importance of material practices as a form of *political action*’ (Schlosberg and Craven, 2019, p. 100) and are aiming to facilitate engagement with global environmental problems by reconfiguring the ‘*flows, systems, or circulations of materials*’ (Schlosberg and Craven, 2019, p. 100) which underpin the reproduction of human and nonhuman communities. These are movements, in other words, which recognise that politics – and by extension – democracy, is something ‘infrastructural’ (Farías and Blok, 2016; van Veelen et al., 2021), and that politics is something which can play out on a material plane (Marres, 2015). These movements form part of a growing shift towards more experimental, prefigurative, and/or design-focussed attempts to try to create more sustainable worlds (Escobar, 2018). They are also of increasing interest to scholars interested in the relationship between sustainability and democracy, in part because they ‘widen our perception of what is considered within the political realm and what is without’ (Marquardt et al., 2025, p. 10). But these movements are also interesting, academically, because they call ‘for new conceptual tools and theoretical approaches’ as it is becoming increasingly clear that a ‘range of assumptions which still underpin much of critical social movement research are becoming increasingly questionable; and

eco-political commitments often condition academic perceptions of repoliticisations.’ (Blühdorn and Deflorian, 2021, p. 260). It is not just social movements, however, which are pushing the boundaries of what we understand climate politics can be. In Bulkeley’s (2016) exploration of the way which climate governance is actually accomplished across a wide range of domains, for example, she notes that climate change has ‘no particular politics’ but its politics are instead ‘made by the ways which climate governance is accomplished’ (Bulkeley, 2016, p. 152). Building upon this analysis, Tobin, Paterson and VanDeveer, (2025, p. 5) argue that although many have historically said that ‘we need more contestation, not less’ in order to politicise climate change, this ‘binary opposition between “stability” and “politicisation” is overly simplistic’, and fails to recognise the multiple ways which this issue is both de- and re-politicised, with a variety of implications for democracy.

Belfast is an interesting place to begin interrogating these contemporary trends. This is a place where contestation and democratisation can by no means be easily equated; this is a city where contesting the status quo has also led to non-democratic results. More specifically, this is a city which is often described as having a kind of ‘divided’ society, ill-catered for by ‘radical’ and/or ‘agonistic’ theories of democracy, which fail to adequately cater for the need to build public institutions and infrastructures, in order to further democratic life, in places where these institutions and infrastructures are fragile or non-existent (Barnett and Bridge, 2013; Dryzek, 2005; Pløger, 2004). The moniker ‘post-political’ is one which has, moreover, never really fitted well in the city; I grew up in Belfast in the 2000s, and when I started my undergraduate studies in 2013 – and first came across the idea of ‘post-politics’ – it seemed to provide a reading of politics which was at once easily applicable to, yet reductive of, the realities of politics and challenges of realising democracy in places like Northern Ireland.

Given these limitations – and, more broadly, the risk of beginning from an overly narrow understanding of what either climate change or democracy is – this thesis does not begin from a particular definition of democracy, or climate politics. Instead, it begins with the practices which particular actors are trying to use, in order to try to realise more democratic futures, and explores the implications of these for the definition and realisation of climate politics. More specifically, this thesis is based around a comparison, between two projects, both of which are attempting to realise democracy, through the creation of new publics, in different ways, as the next section explains.

1.3 Thesis Focus: Democratising towards the low-carbon city, or urban greening towards democracy?



Figure 1.1: Mural, Belfast City Centre, painted by BRINK! gardeners. Garden set up as a climate-hub on a piece of derelict land (Source: the author)

Neither of the two cases at the core of this thesis was initially focussed upon climate change but both have become engaged with this issue, via growing concerns about sustainability and urban greening. To engage with the city's politics through these two projects is, then, to take seriously the idea set out in the preceding section that climate change's politics are not reducible to things with the title 'climate change' and that we 'can learn a lot about climate politics by looking at interventions that might be consistent with the sorts of transformations responses to climate change entail, even if climate change is not invoked as a primary rationale for those interventions.' (Paterson, 2021, p. 12). This is particularly true in the urban realm, where 'patterns of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions are set in train by everyday decisions by municipal governments – where to allow what kinds of buildings to be built – whether or not such decisions are explicitly discussed regarding their climate impacts' which means that much of this politics 'goes on in hidden, subtle ways, and does not need to be articulated explicitly in relation to climate change in order for us to consider it as part of urban climate politics.' (Paterson, 2021, p. 79).

Both of the cases at the core of this thesis are projects are trying to realise more democratic futures in Northern Ireland. But what makes these projects interesting – and makes their comparison productive – is that they have different understandings of what democracy should be, how it should be realised and what role the city should play in this process. One of the projects at the core of this thesis is associated with the Northern Irish Peace Process and is supported by funding from the European Union, through its Special Programmes Body (SEUPB) for Northern Ireland. This is a long-standing governmental programme, tasked with delivering the kinds of socio-spatial transformations needed to create a self-governing Northern Irish public. This thesis focusses specifically on a project called the Forth Meadow Community Greenway (FMCG) – a greenway developed as part of the Peace Process, in order to try to create a new public in the city, by remaking its urban territories. It compares this project with a movement called the ‘Take Back the City’ (TBTC) coalition, which is aiming to try and realise a new form of more explicitly urban democracy, by trying to remake the city and its politics. Specifically, this thesis compares the implications of these two different projects for Belfast’s climate politics. In doing so this thesis explores the idea that attempts to realise urban democracy should be considered a form of climate action; an idea explained in more depth in sub-section 1.3.1.

Both the FMCG and the TBTC have made use of different forms of urban greening, in order to try and realise their political aspirations; greenways like the FMCG are perhaps the archetypal form of green infrastructure in post-industrial contexts, and the TBTC have increasingly centred their campaign around attempts to realise a ‘garden city’ neighbourhood. In doing so, as sub-section 1.3.2 sets out, these two projects join an increasingly long list of projects around the world, which are making use of urban greening to try and remake cities, as part of efforts to combat climate change and create more sustainable urban futures. Part of the reason that the comparison between these two projects is interesting, however, is because they are using urban greening to try and realise distinct kinds of publics. Where the FMCG is using urban greening to try and create a ‘Northern Irish’ public – made up of PUL, CNR, and ‘Other’ groups, which aligns with the political institutions associated with the GFA – the TBTC is trying to use urban greening to encourage the emergence of new types of publics in the city. In exploring the implications of these differences, this thesis attends to questions about the role which greening – particularly when used in an ‘infrastructural’ way – can play in remaking cities, and democratic publics.

But it is not just the similarities and differences *between* these projects which makes their comparison interesting. This comparison is also interesting because of *where* these projects are. Belfast, as touched upon above, is a city which has become famed for its socio-spatial divisions – often called ‘interfaces’ – the most materially and symbolically

significant of which runs along the boundary between the PUL Shankill road and the CNR Falls district. These two projects have collided on a patch of land known as the Mackies site, which lies right across this interface. Once home to the city's second largest factory, it now lies vacant. This means it is at once in the heart of, yet somewhat outside, the city's ethno-territorial geography, turning it into a site of political potential. Both the TBTC and the FMCG are aiming to channel this site's potential towards the realisation better futures. But each has very different understandings of what it means to do so, in part because they have come to different understandings of what Belfast is, and how its publics should be included in the creation of the city's futures. These are projects, then, which not only answer the question 'what should this city do?' – as set out in Figure 1.1 – differently – but have also come to different understandings of what *the city* itself is. Sub-section 1.3.3 explains how this thesis reckons with this, and in doing so, sets out the basic theoretical cues which lie behind the thesis.

1.3.1 Urban Democracy as Climate Action

For a variety of commentators, the 2008 financial crisis – and the austerity policies and rising levels of inequality associated with it – marked the beginning of the end of neoliberal democracy, laying the foundations for some of the anti-democratic political shifts which have been seen in the intervening years (Brown, 2017; Dardot and Laval, 2019; Jäger, 2026). But this moment of crisis also opened up new forms of democratic possibility – in its immediate aftermath, for example, a series of social movements sprung up across the global North, such as the European *Indignados*, and the 'Occupy' movements, advocating for and exploring the possibilities of moving beyond existing forms of neoliberal democracy (Graeber, 2014). The exact claims and aims of these movements were diverse, but urban geographers were quick to note that many had sprung up in response to distinctly 'urban' problems and were making use of the urban as a means for their organisation (Harvey, 2012; Purcell, 2013). More specifically, as these movements evolved and developed, some came to articulate their own versions of the idea of the 'right to the city': perhaps the most storied concept within studies of urban democracy. This 'right' was first described by Henri Lefebvre in 1967 (Lefebvre, [1967] 1996), and is usually considered a claim to both participate in the creation and enjoy the fruits of the city, as a material and cultural entity (or as the city as '*oeuvre*' (Lefebvre, Kofman and Lebas, 1996, p. 196 emphasis original)). In the wake of the 2008 crisis, movements like *La PAH* (La Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca – or 'People Affected by Mortgages') – first founded in Barcelona – took this concept and developed their own readings of it, through attempts to try to democratise contemporary urban life and reckon with its inequities (Colau and Alemany, 2012).¹ Some of these movements have

¹ La PAH have, in many ways, become the archetypal European case study for this type of urban democratic movement, but I am also particularly familiar with the case because in 2021 I spent six months in Barcelona, studying the relationship between urban democracy and climate politics and the city. During this period, I ended up spending time as La PAH's de-facto photographer, giving me an excellent

subsequently morphed into, or helped to spur the development of, new forms of municipal democracy; Barcelona is the emblematic case, where one of *La PAH*'s members founded a political party called 'Barcelona en Comú' (Barcelona in Common), which 'in 2015 became a model for urban movements and activists from all over Europe' (Frick, 2023, p. 1593) after it won an electoral victory, making a former *La PAH* activist the city's mayor. A range of similar 'new municipalist' movements, in cities from Preston to Naples, have since emerged and are experimenting with various new forms of city-focused democratic organisation (Russell, 2019).

For advocates, these emerging forms of urban democracy represent the best hope for remaking democracy, and so keeping it alive into the 21st century; Beveridge and Koch (2023a) for example, argue that it is only by 'seeing democracy like a city' – appreciating the various forms of democratic organisation both spurred by, and necessary for, realising the city as a political project – that it might be possible to recognise the role which urbanisation can play, in creating new forms of democratic life. But this is a line of argument which is explicitly developed against a growing body of urban theory, increasingly suggesting that the city is an outdated category for engaging with the diversity of forms which urban life can take. 'Planetary urbanisation' theorists are the strongest proponents of this position; drawing upon Lefebvre's ([1989] 2014) later work, which suggests that city-country boundaries are increasingly 'dissolving' thanks to capitalist urbanisation, this is a body of scholarship which suggests the need for an urban theory 'without an outside' which moves away from the city towards a focus on urbanisation, and the many different types of urban territory which it effects (Bathla et al., 2023; Brenner and Schmid, 2015; Merrifield, 2018).

For those who draw from planetary urbanisation theory, making use of the 'city lens' (Angelo, 2017) – rather than making use of 'urbanisation as a way of seeing' – leaves us blind to the realities of the way which contemporary forms of urbanisation are remaking the world, particularly ecologically. Partly for this reason, planetary urbanisation theorists have been at the forefront of questioning long-standing political promises associated with the city, such as those associated with the ideal of the 'sustainable city' (Angelo and Wachsmuth, 2020, 2015). For these scholars, a planetary urbanisation approach provides a better means of thinking through the relations between the global and the local, and the concrete and the abstract, in turn providing a more useful set of tools for thinking about contemporary forms of climate politics than traditional city-focussed approaches (Angelo and Goh, 2021; Goh, 2020).

opportunity to engage in a form of participant observation with the movement. One of the things which I learnt during this period was that many of *La PAH*'s members came from Latin America, where the concept of the right to the city enjoyed a resurgence through the 2000s (Harvey, 2012, 2008). *La PAH* took these ideas and developed them in a European context, and more specifically with regard to the conditions facing those on the margins of urban life in the wake of the financial crisis.

And yet, in spite of these academic developments, it is clear that the city still plays a key role in the political lives of many urbanites; as Davidson and Iveson (2015a) point out, ‘for millions of people across the planet the particularities of city life form the context from which planetary urbanization is experienced, understood, and potentially transformed’ (Davidson and Iveson, 2015a, p. 662). Consequently, they argue, ‘if urbanisation is indeed becoming planetary, a renewed and relational politics of the city is a potential resource in the struggle to come, not an impediment in such struggles’ (Davidson and Iveson, 2015a, p. 660). Moreover, it’s long been clear that democratic projects which claim some form of right to the city are often not actually claiming a right to something which actually exists, but are animated by the gap between the actuality of urban conditions and the possibility of the city as a kind of political ideal (Beveridge and Koch, 2023b; Purcell, 2014). As David Harvey, p. (2012, p. xv) puts it in his popular conceptualisation, to ‘claim the right to the city is, in effect, to claim a right to something that no longer exists (if it ever truly did).’ More specifically, Beveridge and Koch (2023b) argue – with direct reference to the concept of planetary urbanisation – that even if urbanisation ‘dissolves the actual, material city’ it does not dissolve ‘the city as a democratic project’ (Beveridge and Koch, 2023b, p. 147). Some have, moreover, argued that right to the city movements, aspiring towards a form of urban democracy, might have a particular role to play, in helping to facilitate engagement with climate change through the urban; as Daniel Aldana Cohen puts it:

‘There can be no success in “right to the city” struggles that is not, simultaneously, a success in democratically decarbonizing urban life. Once we realize that several core stakes of right-to-the-city struggles—especially housing, transit, and land use—are the also the core stakes of low-carbon urbanism, we see that it is no longer possible (or desirable) to deeply distinguish social from environmental politics (Cohen, 2015).’ (Cohen, 2018, p. 141)

On this basis, he argues for a need to recognise these kinds of movements as climate actors, in particular because they tend to advocate for low-carbon ‘grey’ forms of infrastructure, rather than more aesthetically pleasing ‘green’ alternatives, which do little to actually shift urban life towards more climate-friendly futures (Cohen, 2018). But these types of urban democratic movements are not usually analysed in these terms; this is a kind of ‘implicit’ climate politics, in that their aims are usually not articulated in climate terms, and these movements may not even necessarily comprehend their acts with reference to climate change. In addition, this is a form of climate politics which is about what doesn’t happen – the types of urban transformation which do not occur, such as a failure to create new low-carbon forms of social housing – as much as those which do.

This is part of the reason that the comparison between the TBTC and the FMCG is so productive; it makes it possible to explore and compare the types of infrastructural change advocated for by movements aspiring towards urban democracy with those being

developed by a governmental programme attempting to try and secure representative democracy by remaking urban territory. The fact that these two projects are trying to remake *exactly* the same patch of land helps, moreover, to make this comparison particularly direct. In addition, though, this thesis attends to the way which these different forms of political engagement with the urban shape understandings of what the city is and what its political potential might be. Specifically, it explores how governmental programmes explicitly designed to transform the city (like the Peace Process), as opposed to movements aspiring to reclaim a right to the city (like the TBTC), hold in place and/or disrupt existing understandings of what the city is, and considers the implications for engagement with socio-environmental problems, on an urbanising planet. Both projects have made use of forms of urban greening in order to try and remake the city; the next section explains why exploring this particular urban practice is interesting, when it comes to thinking about public formation and democracy.

1.3.2 Making Publics through Urban Greening

There are long-standing associations between urban greening and the ideal of the sustainable city; the ideal of the ‘Garden City’ which the TBTC are organised around is perhaps the oldest conceptualisation of the sustainable city, first developed in the 19th century by Ebenezer Howard, who believed that by blurring the distinctions between the grey of the city and the green of the countryside it might be possible to resolve some of the social, environmental, and economic ills associated with industrial urbanisation. In recent decades, however, both urban scholars and practitioners have become increasingly interested in the possibility that urban greening might be ‘infrastructural’. The idea of the green infrastructure was developed in the world of landscape ecology in the 1990s, and the associated concept of ‘Nature Based Solution’ was developed in the early 2000s (Grabowski et al., 2022; Matsler et al., 2021; Mell and Clement, 2020; Mell, 2009). Both have seen a significant uptick in popularity, in both urban scholarship and practices.

This rise in popularity has coincided with a shift away from the long-standing ideal of the sustainable city, towards what some have termed ‘climate urbanism’ (Long and Rice, 2021). The former, first developed in the 1970s and popularised through a range of UN conferences and reports, was founded upon the possibility of achieving forms of equilibrium; temporally – by achieving ‘development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’ (WCED, 1987, para. 27) – and across different social, economic, and ecological domains (Hodson and Marvin, 2014; Parnell, 2016). The latter, by contrast, is often associated with a turn towards urban ‘resilience’, ‘experimentation’, and ‘transformation’ (Hodson and Marvin, 2017); each of these discourses are themselves diverse (Anderson, 2015; Bulkeley, 2023; Bulkeley et al., 2023), but to some extent they have each developed against a sense that, in a climate-changing world, it may no longer be possible to achieve a future which in any way resembles the past, and that past experience may be an increasingly poor predictor,

for creating a 'better' future (Bulkeley, 2021; Bulkeley et al., 2021; Derickson, 2018; Wakefield, 2022).

Green infrastructures have played a key role in this transition towards new forms of urban environmentalism. Their flexibility, adaptability, and multifunctionality means they are often valorised, as forms of infrastructure which offer more 'resilient' alternatives than their 'grey' counterparts (Meerow and Newell, 2017; Shokry et al., 2022; Wakefield, 2020). Infrastructures generally have, meanwhile, emerged as key sites for experimental forms of climate politics (Bulkeley et al., 2014; Bulkeley and Castán Broto, 2013), and green infrastructures can offer particular opportunities for public experimentation; the rising popularity of community gardens is a good example, some of which serve as important sites for public experimentation related to attempts to realise more sustainable futures (Deflorian, 2021; Mancebo, 2018). They are also infrastructures which offer potential for urban transformation; for Elmqvist et al. (2019), for example, an excellent example of a 'directed transformation' is the way which 'abandoned urban railway systems in many cities around the globe have transformed into highly popular and frequently visited linear parks (for example, the High Line in New York). Such transformations include not only changes in landscape but also changes in the use and function of abandoned infrastructures, creating new urban economies and new urban flows of people and services.' (Elmqvist et al., 2019, p. 271). An excellent example of this type of green infrastructure led transformation is the Connswater Greenway in inner-city East Belfast. In a relatively deprived area of the city, the greenway was developed using Lottery funding in the 2000s and has sparked a major transformation of the area. The project has become famous across the city and has turned this area of East Belfast into one of the city's most popular – and now gentrifying – districts. The project has also since become one of the city's key sites for public engagement with climate change; put differently, it has become an important site for the formation of climate publics.

These kinds of 'rail-to-park' transformations (Argüelles et al., 2022) – or more broadly, shifts from 'grey' to 'green' forms of urban infrastructure – pose interesting questions, regarding the relationship between urban infrastructure provision, public formation, and democracy. It is by now well established within 'mainstream' literatures focussing on infrastructural politics that infrastructures play a critical role in public formation, and so are a key domain for the realisation, and study, of democracy (Amin and Thrift, 2017; Barry, 2013; van Veelen et al., 2021; Von Schnitzler, 2016). Within this literature, it is also now widely recognised that infrastructures shape publics not just through their material effects, but also because of their cultural affects; in particular, the capacity of infrastructures to make 'promises', often associated with modernist ideals of progress, plays a key role in infrastructural politics (Bowker et al., 2018; Davies, 2024; Hetherington, 2016; Larkin, 2013; Mitchell, 2002). These promises are related to, but often not synonymous with, infrastructure's material qualities; for example, Cesafsky (2017) argues that one of the reasons infrastructures can promise to mend fragmented

cities is because they ‘deploy symbolic-metaphorical logics – that is, that infrastructures concretize [social relations] because they are made of “hard” materials or integrated because they are shaped like networks’ (Cesafsky, 2017, p. 152). These promises, in her analysis, often override the actuality of what infrastructures achieve; because they divide anew as they connect, and destabilise old social relations as they create new ones, [w]inners, losers, controversies – that is, social fragmentations – are inevitable.’ (Cesafsky, 2017, p. 156). More specifically, these promises are often related to the relationship between a particular infrastructure and the material and political context against which it is created and within which it becomes embedded. Against the background of the UK’s crumbling post-industrial post-austerity infrastructure, for example, Dominic Davies (2023, p. 10) argues that promises of new infrastructures ‘stir nostalgia for industry and empire together with myths of entrepreneurial nationalism, and then attach them to infrastructures that will do little to restore prosperity’.

There is a long-standing geographical tradition, of exploring the way in which the provision of urban nature in cities serves to exclude some urban publics from full participation in city life in favour of others (Davis, 1990; Lang and Rothenberg, 2017; Reichl, 2016). Across the global North scholarship is increasingly turning towards questions of how urban greening is being used to manage transitions towards post-industrial, post-austerity forms of urban life (Akers et al., 2020; Safransky, 2023). But there has been relatively limited engagement with the way that infrastructural ‘symbols of Modernity in the 19th and 20th centuries’ are interlacing ‘with greening and sustainability’ (Argüelles et al., 2022, p. 811) in these kinds of context. The need to do so is important, in part, because when nature is recognised to play a potentially infrastructural role, then its benefits cannot be neatly contained or bounded, meaning that it ‘has the quality of occupying a liminal space in the urban milieu between the public and the private’ (Armstrong et al., 2022, p. 2). This means that attempts to try to use urban nature in an infrastructural fashion ‘may not only serve to exacerbate existing ways in which public/private divides serve to shape who benefits from different forms of public good and essentially private benefits, but actually reconfigure the very basis of what constitutes the public and the private in the urban realm’ (Armstrong et al., 2022, p. 3). Urban scholars have increasingly recognised that to examine these dynamics requires the examination of how particular normative understandings of nature are established and mobilised, by particular political actors and, in particular, political communities (Tozer et al., 2020). As Hilary Angelo points out, in the ‘absence of associations of green with good, adding trees to urban streets bears no obvious moral connotations. But, once these associations are present and widely shared, it becomes possible to “improve” cities through the addition of everyday signifiers of nature (trees, green space) and be confident that these actions will be interpreted as improvements’ (Angelo, 2021, p. 19)

In Angelo’s analysis, this association between urban greening – which she defines as ‘the normative practice of using everyday signifiers of nature to fix problems with

urbanism' (Angelo, 2021, p. 3) – and 'goodness' relies on a shared 'social imaginary', generated in response to industrial urbanisation and since disseminated widely around the world. One of the characteristics of this imaginary is, she argues, that urban greening is presumed to offer universal public benefits, making greening a particularly 'powerful way of intervening in the urban built environment because, although specific projects are embedded in the political economy of each moment and reflect its biases, in each era they are constructed as universally beneficial investments in the public good by both greening protagonists and their target audiences' (Angelo, 2021, p. 5). The implications for democracy are, in Angelo's view, decidedly negative: these qualities 'tend to foreclose public debate about the benefits conferred through greening [...] and cause the power asymmetries intrinsic to greening to express themselves in the form of paternalism rather than conflict' (p24). Other scholars have described similar dynamics using different theoretical tools; Pow (2018) for example, has charted the emergence of a green 'aesthetic' form of governmentality in China, which relies on a 'normative ordering of space and society where established visual codes and aesthetic norms are established to demarcate what is deemed good or bad' (Pow, 2018, p. 868), and aims 'to engender a collective form of eco-aesthetic sensibility that promotes the Chinese state's vision of a harmonious society' (Pow, 2018, p. 866).

These kinds of analyses suggest that the establishment and utilisation of particular, relatively hegemonic understandings of what urban greening is, and why it might be good, serve to sustain the political status quo in ways which are negative for both democratic and ecological outcomes – in this sense, they are arguments which chime with but provide a more cultural analysis of a much broader body of literature, which has examined the way which 'green fixes' serve to sustain existing forms of urban political economy (Castree and Christophers, 2015; Deng et al., 2025; Holgersen and Malm, 2015). But in a place like Belfast, where public fragmentation and conflict has historically served to delimit the possibilities for democracy, establishing shared understandings of what urban greening is, and why it is of significance for the city, might have some utility for trying to further democracy. For example, in a longitudinal study of the capital of the Basque Country, Vitoria-Gasteiz (frequently compared to Belfast, thanks to similarities between the Basque country's conflict with the Spanish state, and the Troubles), Neidig and others (2022) found that the city's greening served as a 'political fix' which helped to build connection and consensus 'across the political spectrum of all local parties' (Neidig et al., 2022, p. 3) which 'had a reconciling effect on a polarized and fragmented municipal political structure' (Neidig et al., 2022, p. 2). In a place like Belfast – where conflicts on ethno-communal lines can threaten the delivery of infrastructure projects (De Young, 2023) – this is potentially quite useful.

Existing studies of the political implications of urban greening in Belfast have explored the capacity of these types of projects and initiatives to achieve these kinds of outcomes, focussing, for example, on the capacity of parks to join together the city's 'fragmented

landscape’ (Abdelmonem and McWhinney, 2015), or contribute to the creation of ‘shared space’ (Lang and Mell, 2020; Mell, 2019; Mell et al., 2022a). But these analyses tend not to reflect on the normative understandings of the city and urban publicity embedded in ideals like ‘shared space’ – a specific spatial category created as part of the Peace Process, which is associated with the idea that a ‘good’ public is one which is connected across PUL/CNR divides (as this thesis explores). These particular normative ideals are, themselves, associated with a particular set of political institutions, and the maintenance of particular systems of political power, which run through the city’s ethno-communal territories (De Young, 2023). This is particularly important when it comes to thinking about how these types of initiatives might serve to transform, or hold in place, particular understandings of what the city is and should be. If urban greening is a means of ‘materially embedding a normative vision of society in the landscape’ (Angelo, 2021, pp. 201–202) and a key domain ‘through which to communicate new ideals of cities and citizenship’ (Angelo, 2021, p. 8), then urban greening initiatives undertaken to create ‘shared’ publics might not only be an important means of establishing the normative ideal of a public structured around PUL/CNR distinctions, but might also hold in place a sense that this is a public which does not yet exist. In other words, by suggesting that the city is one which *should* be more connected, these types of initiatives might hold in place the sense that this is a city which *remains* divided and that these divisions remain of key importance, for the city and its political life.

This thesis unpacks the way which different understandings of urban greening, are developed and mobilised, through attempts to try to reshape cities and urban publics. Achieving this requires remaining attentive to the relationship between the material changes which initiatives like the creation of greenways make to the city’s landscape, and their broader cultural and political implications, for the city as a whole. But it also requires attending to the question of how particular actors come to particular understandings, of what the city is, and what its problems are, in the first place. The next section sets out the tools which this thesis uses to achieve this.

1.3.3 Reckoning with The Divided City Pragmatically

This thesis begins from a sense that Belfast is something different to different people, or in more academic terms, that the city is something which is potentially ‘multiple.’ This is an approach which has been pioneered by a body of theory known as ‘assemblage urbanism’ which advocates for a move ‘away from a notion of the city as a whole to a notion of the city as multiplicity, from the study of “the” urban environment to the study of multiple urban assemblages’ (Farías, 2011, p. 369). This approach suggests that understanding urban public formation requires following particular urban actors, as they go about creating these kinds of assemblages, and as they themselves go about their own ‘inquiries’ or come to understandings of what the city is and what its problems are (Farías, 2011, p. 367). Rather than beginning from the premise that Belfast is a city which neatly

fits into a particular residual category of ‘divided city’ (or segregated city, or fragmented city), instead this thesis explores how actors involved with the city’s politics come to define it, and how they come to understand what its divisions are, and why they matter for the city’s political life. Put differently, this is a thesis which explores how particular actors ‘problematise’ the city, coming to particular understandings about how the city is divided, and why these divisions matter for engagement with climate change through the urban.

The notion of ‘problematism’ is one which is often associated with the work of Michel Foucault and the secondary literature focused upon government and politics which writings have spawned (Foucault, 2007, 2003; Li, 2007a; Rose et al., 2006). This thesis draws on Foucault’s work but supplements his thinking with the work of American Pragmatist (from here forwards, simply ‘Pragmatist’ or ‘Pragmatism’) thinkers John Dewey and Walter Lippmann. This is an approach which Farías (2011) deploys in his argument that understanding urban public formation requires following ‘inquiry’ and is one which geographers Clive Barnett and Gary Bridge (Barnett and Bridge, 2016, 2013) have developed and argued for, in order to better understand the relationship between the urban and democracy. More broadly, recent scholarship has pointed out the close connection between Pragmatism and the genesis of neoliberalism. This is a connection Foucault himself pointed out, noting the importance of the Lippmann colloquium of 1939 for neoliberalism’s genesis (Foucault, 2008, p. 132), but did not himself extensively explore; some therefore suggest there is a need to more deeply engage with Pragmatism, if we are to understand our contemporary socio-political juncture (Stiegler, 2022). In addition, there are three more specific reasons that this thesis draws upon a Pragmatic understanding of urban democracy and politics.

The first is the Pragmatic understanding of public-formation has served as a key influence for thinking about ‘material’ forms of public formation, particularly through the work of Noortje Marres (Marres, 2015, 2007), useful for thinking about the increasingly material forms of climate politics and attempts to try to bring sustainability and democracy into relationship with one another. At the most basic level, following Marres, this thesis understands a public to be a ‘community of strangers’ (Marres, 2005a, p. 10) (a definition which she in turn develops from her reading of Dewey and Michael Warner (2002)).² But Marres’ interpretation of Pragmatism is a specific one, and one which deliberately pushes against the centrality of community as a normative ideal, set out in John Dewey’s vision of democracy (Marres, 2005b). This point of difference is interesting,

² Foucault develops his own definition of a ‘public’, noting its emergence as an object of concern in the eighteenth century, and describing it as ‘the population seen under the aspect of its opinions, ways of doing things, forms of behaviour, customs, fears, prejudices, and requirements; it is what one gets a hold on through education, campaigns, and convictions’ (Foucault, 2007, p. 75). Historically, however, Foucault’s writings on this point have ‘received far less discussion than his focus on population-biological processes’ (Anderson, 2012, p. 32), and have certainly seen far less subsequent development than the pragmatist understanding of publics.

and useful for thinking about the relationship between communities and publics; a relationship which is important when thinking about the relationship between climate politics and urban democracy. This is of particular interest in Belfast, where communities play a significant role in urban politics, but the city's 'public life' has been historically limited, thanks to threats of political violence should one mix with others. More broadly, urban geographers have built upon Marres' understanding of public formation to explore the specific role which *urban* geographies might play in the formation of democratic publics (Barnett, 2014; Barnett and Bridge, 2016), pushing against the sense that democracy is the product, as the Dewey quote framing this chapter puts it, is the result of a 'an idea, of a single and consistent intent' (Dewey, [1927] 2016, p. 144), towards a sense that democracy is something which is developed through situated, material relationships and practices; a set of ideas useful for specifying how and why the urban might play a key role in revivifying contemporary democracy.

The second is because of another point of tension, or debate, between Walter Lippmann and John Dewey, regarding the types of public engagement needed, in order to try and facilitate democratisation in an industrialising, ever more complex and seemingly accelerating world. This debate drew upon Lippmann's sense that 'the public' had become a 'phantom' (Lippmann, [1925] 2020), invoked in classical liberal political theory, but an increasingly fictive presence, in a world where a variety of 'publics' were emerging around different socio-material issues, and no longer aligning with existing systems of democratic representation. Dewey agreed with Lippmann and described himself as 'indebted' to Lippmann's thinking on these points (Dewey, 2016, p. 149). For both, this meant that democracy was (as the quote framing this chapter puts it) 'under a cloud'; both questioned the possibility of democracy against this context. They came to very different conclusions, about what should be done. For Lippmann, the answer was a more technocratic, expert-led form of government, which worked on public opinion through symbolic means 'to secure unity and flexibility without real consent' (Lippmann, [1922] 2013, p. 140) and weld publics 'to purposeful action' (Lippmann, [1922] 2013, p. 140); he would later become famed for coining the term 'manufacture of consent' (Lippmann, [1922] 2013, p. 145), meaning the 'fabrication [of public opinion] 'at an industrial scale' (Stiegler, 2022, p. 35), using the tools of science and technology. Dewey, by contrast, argued for a community-based form of democracy, where experimentation took place in public life rather than on publics; something which would 'signify that science was absorbed and distributed; that it was the instrumentality of that common understanding and thorough communication which is the precondition of the existence of a genuine and effective public' (Dewey, 2016, p. 211). He has, consequently, become remembered as being an advocate for participatory democracy and for some offers 'the first great philosophical critique of neoliberalism' (Stiegler, 2022, p. 5), in contrast to Lippmann's more technocratic, anti-democratic stance. More specifically though, these differing perspectives provide an interesting means of framing, and exploring, the different

implications for democracy of using urban greening as a kind of aesthetic tool, for drawing publics together and towards more sustainable futures, as opposed to through more community-based experimental means.

The third reason for drawing on Pragmatism is because of the relational, reconstructive ethos, which lies at its core. Pragmatism is a philosophical approach which was developed in response to the slaughter of the American Civil war and is, consequently, a philosophy with a strong anti-ideological bent and reconstructive elements (Menand, 2011).³ In broad terms, geographer Owain Jones (2008) argues, this means Pragmatism offers tools which might help us to ‘step from the wreckage [of modernity] – the crude industrialisms, capitalisms, technologies, ideologies, theologies and identities that have crashed so dismally (not least ecologically) rather than remain within them, trying to patch them up, or worse still, fighting over the ghastly ruins of it all’ (Jones, 2008, p. 1601). More specifically, this approach has appeal in a place like Belfast, where politics has often been marked by a zero-sum form of dogmatism. In particular, Dewey’s understanding of public formation bears some relationship with later ‘agonistic’ theories of democracy, which have proven popular when it comes to thinking critically about the formation of democratic forms of climate politics as set out in section 1.2 of this chapter; Dewey writes, for example, that in order for the public to form itself it must ‘break existing political forms’ (Dewey, [1927] 2016, p. 81). But Dewey is also attentive to the need for institution building and the establishment of relationships; in his conceptualisation, a public is ‘all those who are affected by the indirect consequences of transactions to such an extent that it is deemed necessary to have those consequences systematically cared for’ (Dewey, 2016, p. 69). His writings, consequently, attend carefully how it might be possible to establish political communities and institutions which realise this kind of care, whilst also recognising that some form of contestation is an inevitable part of political life; a conceptualisation which potentially offers a useful means of thinking about (urban) democracy and politics, which builds upon and goes beyond once popular ‘post-political’ theories of democracy (Barnett and Bridge, 2013; Serrano Zamora and Santarelli, 2021).

This reconstructive ethos has encouraged some urban geographers to suggest that Pragmatism offers an understanding of democracy which is superior to other more ‘paranoid’, critical, post-structuralist alternatives (Lake, 2017). Others strongly disagree; Purcell (Purcell, 2017) for example, argues that it is important to ‘roundly reject [the idea] that we should choose Dewey *over* Ranciere, or Foucault, or any of the other contemporary critical theorists. We don’t need to split these extremely convergent ideas of democracy and choose one over the other. [...] Instead, we need to stream them

³ The most famous development of this aspect of Pragmatism is in Bruno Latour’s call to turn from forms of academic inquiry and political practice focussed on critique, towards those focussed on re-assembly (Latour, 2004b); a line of thinking inspired in part by his work with Noortje Marres, and in turn, the writings of John Dewey (Marres, 2023).

together. We need to figure out [...] how each can augment the energy of the others, so that we can increase the flow of democracy, stoke its force, and, over time, come increasingly to *realize* the immense potential—and delight—that democracy offers’ (Purcell, 2017, p. 500). This thesis takes this more generous, synthetic approach. The aim in doing so is no – as Foucauldian Tania Murray-Li says of her own use of different theoretical approaches – ‘to construct a supertheory, an improbably seamless amalgam’ (Li, 2007a, p. 19). Instead, this thesis is based upon a sense that it is worth tolerating ‘the untidiness and tension introduced by different theoretical traditions because of the distinct questions they pose, and the tools they offer to guide my analysis’ (Li, 2007a, p. 19).

The next section sets out the questions which guide this thesis, and the section following explains how it unpacks these questions – and the points set out above – in the chapters which follow.

1.4 Thesis Questions

This thesis addresses the following core questions:

1. How and why has climate action come to be understood as requiring the development of a public across ethno-political divides in Belfast?
2. Which kinds of intervention are able to foster politically viable publics across ethno-communal divides, and how do these interventions configure the relationship between urban democracy and sustainability?
3. What implications do the practices of urban greening and infrastructuring employed by interventions designed to create new publics across Belfast’s ethno-communal divides have, for the social and spatial reconfiguration of the city in relation to climate change and democratic life?

In addressing these three questions, the thesis makes three broad contributions to geographical scholarship. First, to understandings of the way which the Northern Irish Peace Process is increasingly intersecting with attempts to try to tackle climate change, through attempts to reform Belfast’s urban territories. Second, to understandings of the political role which urban greening can play, in contexts where existing institutions are no longer able to consistently deliver the public infrastructures needed to sustain urban life. Third, to debates about the role which the normative ideal of the city can play, in democratic engagement with climate change through the urban, in a time when urbanisation and climate change are undermining the promise of the sustainable city. In addition, the thesis provides a set of practical recommendations, for those who are currently engaged in attempts to make Belfast more democratic and sustainable. The following section sets out the overall structure of the rest of this thesis.

1.5 Thesis Overview

None of the chapters which follow are purely empirical or theoretical – every chapter develops theoretical ideas in relationship with the details of the case studies sketched out above and Belfast’s political dynamics. In broad terms, this is an approach which aims to push against the sense that democracy, and climate politics, are things which happen in the abstract; the aim is to try to keep this thesis grounded in the empirical realities, of how these things play out in practice, all the way through the thesis. But it is also a choice shaped by the way which I have engaged with the actors whose experiences and narratives make up the empirical material in this thesis; many of them have developed their own theorisations of Belfast and its politics, and I hope that by bringing their ideas into concerted dialogue with work in the existing academic canon, I can dispel the sense that there should be a neat partition between these urban theories developed through lived experience, and their more overtly scholarly counterparts. To this end, the main body of this thesis is structured as follows.

Chapter 2, ‘Back to Belfast’, explains how this thesis approaches the city, and provides more details about the cases which lie at its core. In doing so it details the ‘Belfast context’ of the thesis and deepens the justification for approaching the city ‘problematically.’ In doing so it provides explanation, as to why focussing on urban territories is interesting, when it comes to thinking about the relationship with climate change through the urban. The chapter then sets out the methods used in this thesis, to gather material for, and develop answers to, the questions set out above.

Chapter 3, ‘Belfast, What’s Your Problem?’, explores how the Northern Irish Peace Process – and its opponents – have come to understand Belfast’s ethno-communal divisions as being a climate change problem. To do so, this chapter draws upon an argument advanced by urban geographers Barnett and Bridge (2016) that there is a need to think about the city ‘problematically’, by exploring how the city comes to be considered a particular kind of problem in particular conjunctures; an argument they build and advance by bringing Foucauldian and Deweyan notions of problematisation and inquiry together. In exploring these ideas, and the history of the entanglement of the Northern Irish Peace Process and climate change, this chapter demonstrates that the issue of climate change is not simply being added to – or landing atop – the city’s existing political divisions and conflicts. Instead, climate change and its politics are being remade as different actors in Belfast go about negotiating the city’s politics; a process which is in turn remaking what political action looks like in the city today.

Chapter 4, ‘Green, Grey, and Orange Communities’, delves into the different modes of community engagement which have been used by the FMCG and the TBTC, as they have set about trying to engage publics in the city. More specifically, the chapter explores how these different forms of community and public engagement shape, and are shaped by, different understandings of what the sustainable city is and should be. In doing so,

this chapter explores and deepens a series of arguments regarding the relationship between 'green' and 'grey' forms of urban ecologies and sustainability, advanced by Wachsmuth and Angelo (2018), and Cohen (2018), bringing them into dialogue with Pragmatic theorisations of community. The chapter demonstrates that the FMCG has attempted to make use of 'green' forms of urban sustainability in order to try to transcend the city's ethno-communal boundaries, in order to try to fulfil a vision of sustainability focussed on the delivery of projects which demonstrate the continued relevance of the Northern Irish Peace Process to those already living in the city. Meanwhile, the TBTC's vision of sustainability has been developed both as a response to lived experiences of the urban environment, and through the creation new political communities, and aims in turn to try to encourage responsibility towards the future. The chapter demonstrates that, in neither case, do these attempts to try to realise more sustainable cities create publics which stretch equitably across the city's ethno-communal lines. But each project fails to achieve this outcome differently. Where the FMCG has engaged communities equitably across the city's ethno-communal distinctions, it has served to reinforce the power of existing stakeholders, with connections to the city's past, more than create a new public. Meanwhile, the TBTC has engaged a vibrant political coalition of people who aspire to create a better city in the future, but this coalition is of little interest to those who have given up hope for better futures in the city already, nor those who are trying to hold in place particular normative understandings of what the city should be. The conclusions of the chapter reflect on what this means for understanding the relationship between urban democracy and attempts to create more sustainable future.

Chapter 5, 'Towards Greener Urban Futures', this chapter focusses on the way which the FMCG and TBTC have actually materialised aspirations for better futures, in the city's streetscape today. To do so this chapter draws upon the Foucauldian idea of 'heterotopia' (Foucault, 1986), which is a concept useful for exploring how utopian aspirations are developed through, and brought into relationship with, existing socio-material conditions. In doing so, the chapter explores the political utility of creating green infrastructures in places where both government, and activists, are finding it increasingly difficult to deliver the public infrastructures needed to actually sustain urban life. The chapter shows that these types of infrastructures can be delivered by encouraging publics to see the city's streetscape as being a green infrastructure; this is what has happened in the case of the FMCG, which has been delivered almost wholly through public engagement and consultation, rather than by making material changes to the streetscape. This makes these types of projects particularly helpful for channelling funding towards the perpetuation of governmental programmes like the Northern Irish Peace Process, by paying the salaries of urban professionals and sustaining connections between them, even if it doesn't actually substantively reshape the urban environment nor connect it in new ways. Meanwhile the TBTC have turned towards community gardening to try to sustain their coalition even as they've failed to actually deliver a single

low-carbon social house (as they've promised). Here a different aspect of this project's greenness is helpful for sustaining their aspirations; the garden needs constant care, repeatedly drawing actors back into relationship with it, and with the community, which is a part of this place. To some extent the net result, in both cases, is the same; both green infrastructures are part of, and establish, cyclical relationships with the city, which offer little obvious progression towards better futures. But these cycles maintain their momentum in different ways. In the FMCG's case, this momentum is maintained – as it is in much of the rest of the Peace Process – by forever promising, but never actually delivering, space for a Northern Irish public. In the TBTC's case, this momentum is maintained by the promise that the city contains unknowable potential, best worked with by turning urban territories into public infrastructures, which might help to develop new forms of urban being. The implication, the chapter suggests, is that creating green infrastructures by encouraging publics to 'see' urban space as green serves to turn urban differences into divisions, which sustain and are sustained by modern forms of government. Turning urban territories into public infrastructures, by contrast, requires accepting and working with the irreconcilable differences between urban actors, treating tensions associated with these differences as a creative resource, productive of and produced by the city's different political communities.

Chapter 5, 'Conclusions: The Unknowable City', describes the overall contributions the thesis has made to geographical thinking, by returning to the research questions set out above, and the core areas of focus. In doing so, it sketches out two different forms of 'green infrastructural democracy', which these cases demonstrate, and which are emerging in Belfast today. The thesis finishes by reflecting on the limitations of this study, and some potential points for further exploration. It concludes by suggesting that it is the unknowability of cities which provides them with their ongoing political relevance, in a climate-changing, urbanising world.

2 Back to Belfast

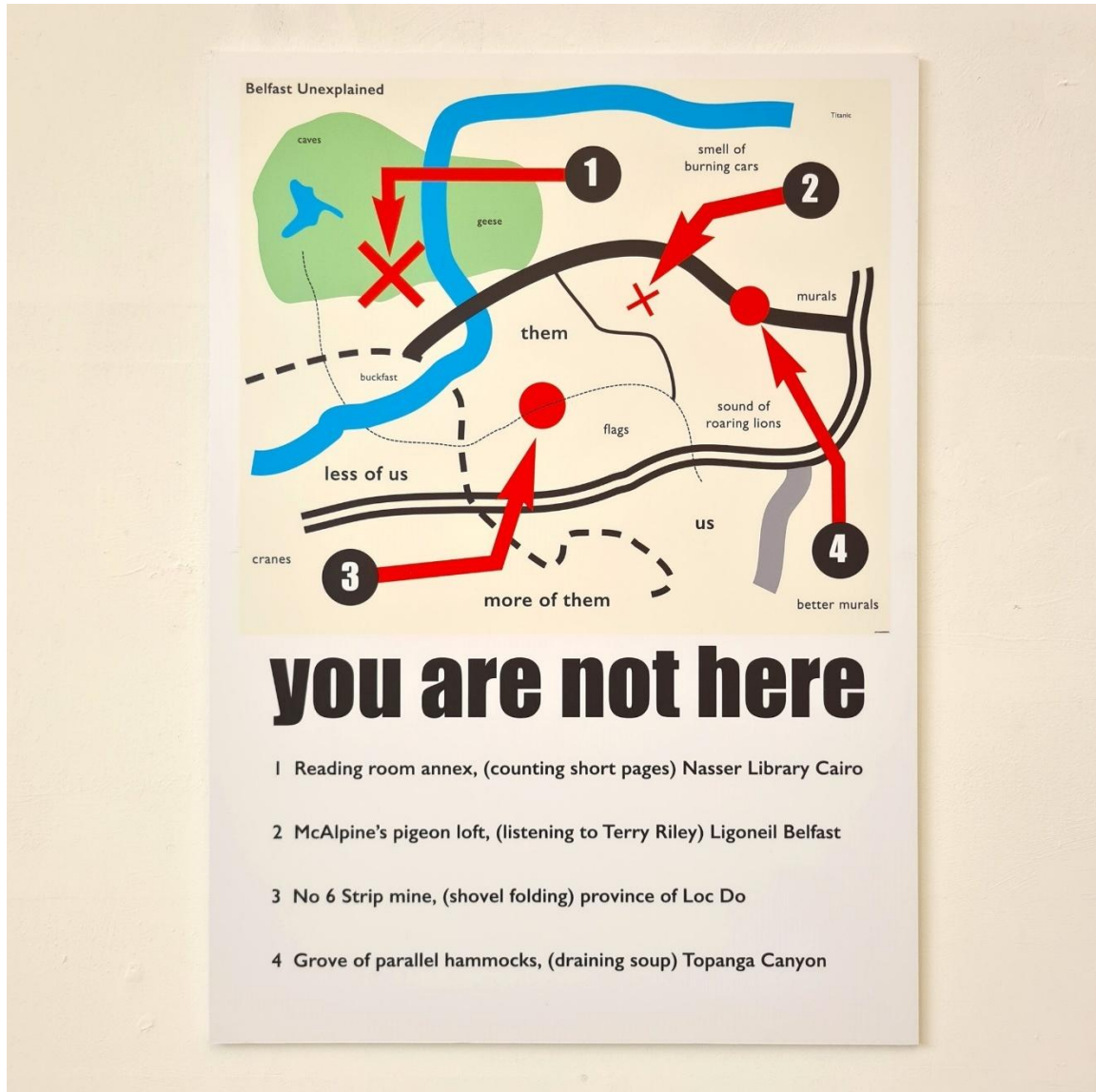


Figure 2.1: Poster for 'Belfast Unexplained' exhibition by John Waid, Shankill Road Library. Image Source Flax Art Studios (2024)

2.1 Introduction

This chapter explains the methods used in this thesis and also provides some of the 'Belfast context' necessary to understand it. These things are brought together because Belfast came both before and after the development of this research project. As touched upon in the introductory chapter, I'm from the city, and my understanding of urbanism is inevitably linked to my iterative engagement with it.

Like any city, Belfast is made up of many different urban worlds, some of which blur together and overlap, some of which clash and grate against one another. If this multiplicity is true of all cities, perhaps it is particularly evident in Belfast, because of its

ethno-communal territories and the layers of history associated with them. This makes Belfast a particularly interesting place to study the geography of public formation, as the first part of this chapter explains (section 2.2). To allow for a full appreciation, and comprehension, of this multiplicity, this thesis compares rich case studies within Belfast; an approach explained in more depth in the second part of this chapter (section 2.3). But this kind of ‘intra-city comparison’ can be challenging in a place like Belfast, as it can be difficult to both engage deeply in, and move between, the different urban worlds in the city. My positionality helped me to do so, as the third section of this chapter explains (section 2.4). But, as the final section of the chapter sets out, I also carefully developed my research methods in order to make this possible (section 2.5).

In a more conceptual vein, this chapter pushes back against the idea that research should aspire to provide neat descriptions of cities, or neat answers to questions like ‘how should this city be remade in order to tackle climate change?’ The map in Figure 2.1 is a useful allegory here; a map which I first encountered in the Shankill Road library, where I regularly spent time during my fieldwork. The map is part of a poster for an art exhibition by John Waid of ‘useless’ tools and the poster itself is a kind of ‘useless’ map; anyone from Belfast will recognise that this is a map of the city, but it wouldn’t help you to navigate its streets. And yet, this ‘useless’ map does have some uses. For one thing, it always made me smile when I first entered the library. But it also made me reflect, more carefully, on my own situatedness within the city, and my own relationship with representations of it. In ‘unexplaining’ Belfast then, as the map’s title puts it, this map opened space for me to think anew about what the city is, and what potential might exist within it. In a climate-changing, urbanising world, urban scholars have repeatedly called for new ways of seeing and knowing cities, in order to better apprehend their political potential (Amin and Thrift, 2017; Angelo, 2017; Beveridge and Koch, 2023b). Before that though, perhaps urban research needs to destabilise our habitual understandings of what cities are and can be, like this poster did for my understanding of Belfast. This is a sentiment this chapter returns to in the conclusion.

2.2 Belfast’s troubles

‘Belfast is Rome with more hills; it is Atlantis raised from the sea. And from anywhere you stand, from anywhere you look, the streets glitter like jewels, like small strings of stars. Some say it is a city of 279,000 people, 130,000 men and 149,000 women, and that these people are squashed into 11,489 hectares. Some say that there are half a million souls there – Greater Belfast is Belfast too. Two cathedrals, some docks, a harbour, many hills and mountains. A sea-level town on the lip of the land. However many, whatever size, it is magical.’

Eureka Street, Robert McLiam Wilson, (1997, pp. 213–214)

Even if one really believes that Belfast is magical, this doesn't explain why it is an interesting place for a research project. This section of this chapter does so, by setting out some of the city's history. As sub-section 2.2.1 explains, thanks to the history of political conflict in Northern Ireland, Belfast is a particularly interesting place to study public assembly. But it is also a particularly interesting place to study the geography of public formation, as sub-section 2.2.2 explains, because this history has fragmented the city's geography into a series of ethno-communal territories, which must be engaged with in order to understand its politics.

2.2.1 The Problems of the Northern Irish Public

'I have hope for Northern Ireland. I believe the war is over, but at the same time I do not think people should expect too much from the peace. Perhaps one of the problems in Northern Ireland is that people spend too much time talking about 'the problem' and 'the solution'. Perhaps people should realize that the only *final* solution is [the] abyss [of genocide].'

Killing Rage, Eamonn Collins (1998, p. 9 emphasis original)

Northern Ireland was formed as part of an attempt to try to deal with a range of problems related to Ireland's (de)colonisation. The country's genesis is usually traced to the end of the Irish war of Independence in 1921, when Northern Irish Protestant politicians and paramilitary organisations started to threaten sectarian civil war, should the island of Ireland's minority Protestant population be forced into a Catholic-majority Irish Republic (McGarry and O'Leary, 2004). To avoid this eventuality, the British government drew a line on a map, which attempted to demarcate a partition between the island's Protestant population – who lived largely in the island's North – and the island's Catholic population – who lived largely in the South.

From the outset this was an imperfect solution, in no small part because pockets of Protestants lived south of the new border and pockets of Catholics north of it, especially in the Lagan Valley where Belfast is situated (McGarry and O'Leary, 2004; Stewart, 1997). The Lagan Valley was the only portion of Ireland to undergo an 'industrial revolution' during the mid-19th century, so significant numbers of Catholics moved to this area from Ireland's South and West, following promises of prosperity, or fleeing rural worlds destroyed by the Great Famine of 1845-48 (Stewart, 1997). Partition may have resolved the problem of a Protestant minority in a Catholic-majority Republic of Ireland. But it created the problem of a Catholic minority within a Protestant-majority Northern Ireland (Anderson, 2008). Management of the many political problems this has precipitated can be roughly divided into three historical periods.

During the first, from 1921 to the late 1960s, the government of Northern Ireland aimed broadly towards the creation of a 'Protestant State for Protestant People' – a misquotation of Northern Ireland's first prime minister widely popularised both then and now (McGarry

and O’Leary, 2004; Mitchell, 2011).⁴ In basic terms this meant eliminating the province’s Catholic population from public life, in order to preserve the near hegemony of Protestant, Unionist rule. This sometimes occurred through recourse to overt violence, but more often happened through what became known as the ‘Orange system’; a system of political economy where, through practices like inequitable access to employment and housing, the ‘loyalty’ of the Protestant majority was ensured, to the detriment of the Catholic minority (Kelly, 2012; Mitchell, 2011).

This system started to break down in the late 1960s, with the advent of deindustrialisation and the arrival of new ideas about civil rights from North America. This breakdown started the second period of government, associated with ethno-sectarian violence which has since become known as ‘the Troubles.’ During this period Northern Irish democracy was suspended, the province was ruled ‘directly’ from Westminster, and the British Army were deployed onto the streets, to prevent spiralling sectarian violence (McKittrick and McVea, 2012; Munck, 1992). Famously, Belfast’s Catholic population welcomed the arriving soldiers into the city with tea and biscuits, believing the troops’ arrival spelt the end of persecution of Northern Ireland’s Catholic minority by the Protestant majority. In practice this is not what happened. Instead, a complex period of insurgency/counterinsurgency followed, largely managed through cementing particular forms of division – the building of barricades and Peace Walls (see Figure 2.2) along ethno-sectarian lines is a good example – and forging particular forms of alliance – between British security services and various paramilitary groups, for example (McGarry and O’Leary, 2006a, 2004; Tonge et al., 2011). The Peace Process developed through the late 1980s and 1990s in order to try to end this period insurgency/counterinsurgency, and culminated in the signing of the Good Friday Peace Agreement (GFA) in 1998.

⁴ In actuality James Craig is reputed to have claimed that ‘All I boast of is that we are a Protestant Parliament and a Protestant State.’



Figure 2.2: The Lanark Way Peace Wall, Belfast. This is Belfast's most materially and symbolically significant Peace Wall, and runs through the heart of this thesis (Source: Carroll (2023))

The signing of this document marked the beginning of the third period, where governing Northern Ireland has officially aimed towards creating Peace and Reconciliation between once-warring protagonists in order to further and stabilise Northern Irish democracy. This process has been far from smooth but has successfully disrupted the PUL (Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist) monopoly on political power, largely through the creation of a consociational ‘power-sharing’ governmental system, which is supposed to share power between PUL and CNR (Catholic/Nationalist/Republican) groups (McGarry and O’Leary, 2006b, 2006a). This system has proven to be a vital foundation for the building of peace and democracy in Northern Ireland. But to some extent it has also replaced a monopoly with a duopoly, where power is shared out through a political patronage system, centred around PUL and CNR poles, to the exclusion of those who do not fit neatly into either (Coulter et al., 2021; Coulter and Shirlow, 2019; De Young, 2023; McGarry and O’Leary, 2006b).

In each of these three periods, ethno-political minorities have encouraged the development of, and been created by, new forms of governance; concerns about a Protestant minority on the island of Ireland led to partition and the creation of the ‘Orange system’; the exclusion of the Catholic minority within this new Northern Ireland eventually led to political violence and ‘direct rule’; the GFA and consociationalism has ensured that power is shared out between PUL and CNR blocs, to the detriment of those whose politics revolve around other axes of identity. There is no simple singular solution

here, any more than there is a neat singular origin.⁵ This is what makes Northern Ireland such an interesting place to study the geographical dynamics of public formation. As in other (post)colonial settings affected by partition (Yiftachel, 2002), the demarcation of space – or more specifically, the creation of territories – has played an especially significant role in creating these different Northern Irish publics.

2.2.2 Troubling Territories

In his classic study of Northern Ireland's historical geography, Anthony Stewart argues that a lack of intermingling between Northern Ireland's populations has given 'rise to a situation in which the "territorial imperative" is extremely insistent. The quarrel [of Northern Irish politics] is therefore very much concerned with the relationship of people to land, and that relationship has indeed been considered the central theme of Irish history.' (Stewart, 1997, p. 181). To understand the province's politics, he argues, requires an intimate understanding of this territorial chequerboard. In some regards, this 'chequerboard' is hard to miss, and not just because the edges of some of the city's territories are demarcated by 'Peace Walls' as described above; these territories are also associated with a wide range of more mundane spatial practices, a selection of which are captured in Figure 2.3 to Figure 2.7. But these territories also have a kind of depth; the 'chequerboard on which the game is played has a third dimension. What happens in each square derives a part of its significance, and perhaps all of it, from what happened there at some point in the past. Locality and history are welded together. The perduring quality of local patterns of reaction almost defies a rational explanation and is certainly underestimated to a remarkable degree.' (Stewart, 1997, p. 182). More specifically, in Anderson's (2008, p. 94) view, understanding territory is essential for understanding democracy in Northern Ireland, because 'what is basically in dispute is precisely the territorial framework or shell within which this democracy is to take place. The problem is "which place, and who decides?"'

⁵ Although the history set out in this section begins in 1921, a favourite point of political contention in Northern Ireland revolves around the question of when, exactly, Ulster's political troubles started – a range of dates between 1169 and the present are usually in play, although some argue that this unfairly cuts the struggles between Celts and Gaels out of the picture.



Figure 2.3: Lambeg Drum player and loyalist band, Shankill Road, 11/07/2023 (Source: the author)



Figure 2.4: Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) sign demarcating territorial boundary between PUL 'Village' area and CNR 'Lower Falls' (Source: the author)



Figure 2.5: A well-known quote from Irish Republican Army (IRA) Hunger Striker Bobby Sands. For someone from Belfast this is a clear demarcation of CNR territory. (Source: the author)



Figure 2.6: Loyalist Paramilitary Mural, Highfield Estate. (Source: the author)



Figure 2.7: Memorial for Troubles-era atrocity, Springfield Road, Belfast. (Source: the author)

Typically in this type of analysis, politics is explained by territory, which in turn is presumed to be produced by history. Belfast's contemporary political challenges, for example, are often explained as being a product of the city's 'divided' nature, in turn a product of history, particularly the conflict of 'the Troubles' (Boal, 2008, 2002; Cunningham and Gregory, 2014; Nagle, 2009). For those inclined to look deeper into the past, partition, the identities associated with it and the forms of political ecology and political economy which drove Belfast's 19th century development provide the ultimate explanation for the city's contemporary political trends (Stewart, 1997). Even for those looking to move past this politics, this is an appealing explanation, for it suggests that history might be engaged with through space; by achieving the right kind of spatial arrangement it might be possible to create a more harmonious, more unified Northern Irish public, who can move on from the pain of the past (Herrault and Murtagh, 2019; Komarova, 2008; Murtagh, 2018; Rallings, 2014).

But, to paraphrase Delaney (2005, p. 10), if one thinks that territory simplifies understanding of Northern Ireland, perhaps one has a rather simplistic understanding of what territory is. This becomes particularly apparent when one begins to unpack the way in which Belfast is defined through its relationship with territory. When claims are made that territory matters for understanding Belfast, usually this is actually a claim that a particular, historically specific *type* of territory matters more than others for

understanding the city (O'Dowd and Komarova, 2013).⁶ Specifically, this is usually a claim that the type of territory associated with ethno-national groups, paramilitaries, and the 'imagined communities' of the nation state (Anderson, [1983] 2006), is the most important type of territory for understanding the city and its politics (O'Dowd and Komarova, 2013). This is not, by way of contrasting example, a claim that urban territory of the material socio-ecological type of interest to planetary urbanisation theorists (Bathla et al., 2023; Elden, 2019; Schmid, 2015; Schmid et al., 2018) is important for the city's definition. If Belfast were defined with reference to this latter type of urban territory, then it might be considered a post-industrial and post-austerity city, more than one which is post-conflict (O'Dowd and Komarova, 2013; Shirlow, 2006).

Given the historic importance of ethno-national forms of identity for politics in Belfast, it might seem reasonable to presume that ethno-communal forms of territory are by far and away the most significant forms of territory – or more broadly, space – for understanding the city's political life. But this is a presumption which should, at the very least, be carefully reflected upon, and is certainly possible to challenge. Even during the Troubles, for example, it is by no means completely clear that ethno-communal forms of territory were of primary importance for understanding Belfast and its politics. This is best illustrated by digging into somewhat 'subjugated' histories (Beiner, 2018; Foucault, 2003, p. 7) of the city's politics. For example, Ron Weiner's *The Rape and Plunder of the Shankill* (1975) was written at the height of the Troubles and, although it has long been out of publication, remains so popular in North Belfast that, during my fieldwork, one of my research participants was manually typing out a bootleg edition for easier distribution through community groups in the city. The book details a participatory action research project focussed upon housing in the Shankill; an area of the city where the Troubles were especially acute. But the Troubles forms little more than background noise in the book, and the conflict is largely treated as a distraction from issues of class prejudice and incompetent municipal government. More than fifty years later, this depiction of the city clearly still resonates with some living and working in Belfast today. The point here is not that this latter depiction of the city is any more 'correct' than one which foregrounds its ethno-communal struggles, and the territories associated with them. The point is that there are a wide variety of different ways to describe Belfast (as is the case with any city), which shape, and are shaped by, perceptions of the relative importance of ethno-communal forms of territory and division for the city's politics.

To explore these dynamics certainly requires understanding Belfast's ethno-political territorial 'chequerboard' as Stewart (1997) describes it. The game is not just played on this chequerboard but is also *about* the chequerboard too; politics in Belfast is not simply confined, as Anderson (2008) puts it, to questions of which 'territorial framework or shell' democracy is to take place within. Instead, as O'Dowd and Komarova (2013, p. 541)

⁶ For a more theoretical discussion on the idea that territories are historically specific see Elden (2013).

recognise – in one of the few papers to engage deliberately with Belfast’s many forms of space – engaging with the city’s multiplicity shows that ‘Belfast’s various aspects of transition are [not only] manifested and performed through conflicts over space but that they are structured around conflicting spatialities.’

The evident significance of ethno-communal territory – or more broadly, space – for politics in Belfast, and its socio-political transitions, makes Belfast a particularly interesting city to explore the geographies of public formation associated with attempts to try to encourage transitions towards more sustainable urban futures. Geographical work is increasingly demonstrating the potential importance of place-based forms of climate action, or connections to community territory, for shaping public engagement with climate change (Devine-Wright, 2013; Devine-Wright et al., 2015; Escobar, 2018; Praskievicz, 2022; Quimbayo Ruiz, 2020).⁷ But there is a potential dark side to this kind of territory-based form of climate politics too; as Bruno Latour (2018) writes in his call for a territory-based form of climate politics, in order to create new climate publics, ‘the whole difficulty’ lies in encouraging this return to territory without ‘confusing it with what the Local has added to it: ethnic homogeneity, a focus on patrimony, historicism, nostalgia, inauthentic authenticity’ (Latour, 2018, p. 53). Belfast is a particularly good place to explore this ‘dark’ side of place-based forms of political action, and community territories; this is a city where many want to escape, rather than form more intimate connections with, territories and the histories they are imbued with.

The best example of academic work which has considered this ‘dark’ side of connections to places and territories in the city is Slevin and others’ (2022) account, of setting up the city’s climate-change working group; in their brief account, they reflect on the ‘challenging’ community context in the city. They do not reflect substantively on the actual *geography* of this community complexity (in part because their account describes a project conducted partially during the COVID-19 lockdown). Meanwhile, as touched upon in the introductory chapter, existing work on the city has explored how ‘greening’ the city can serve to remake its territories, and thereby might serve to create new forms of public space – specifically ‘shared space’ – in the city (Abdelmonem and McWhinney, 2015; Lang and Mell, 2020; Mell, 2019; Mell et al., 2022b). But this literature isn’t substantively focussed on the climate impacts of these kinds of changes to the city’s territories, nor, more broadly, does it think about how establishing a relationship between greening and the creation of more sustainable futures might affect the capacity of these types of initiatives to remake publics. In addition, this is a body of literature which focusses on conflicts *over* space, rather than *about* ‘conflicting spatialities’ (O’Dowd and

⁷ The elision between the terms ‘place’ and ‘territory’ is deliberate here. Some of the most interesting work regarding the relationship between urbanisation, territory, and sustainability has been conducted in Latin American geographies (some untranslated into English) and bears close overlap with the work regarding ‘place-based’ forms of climate action conducted in their Anglophone counterparts. This point of resonance is, in part, because, as Roger Haesbaert, p. (2013, p. 147) writes ‘[p]lace is to Anglo-Saxon geography what territory is to “Latin geographies”’.

Komarova, 2013, p. 541). This prematurely forecloses opportunities to explore how making urban space green might configure the parameters for conflicts about what urban space actually is, rather than just about how it is portioned out. This, in turn, forecloses opportunities to think about how these types of conflicts shape the creation of new publics, as new spatialities are established and contested, through the city's political transitions.

Attending to this political geography requires, then, recognising that there are multiple types of space which matter for Belfast's politics, rather than beginning from the premise that the city's ethno-communal territories are the most important form of political space in the city, because the city is a 'divided' one. And yet, it is precisely because space, and in particular, ethno-communal territories, have been made to matter so much for so long in the city's politics that it is a particularly interesting place to go, in order to study public formation, and its relationship with transitions towards more sustainable futures. The next section explains the methodological approach used in this thesis, to at once recognise the importance of, yet not begin from particular premises about, the city's ethno-communal territories, and their relationship with the city and its publics, as they are remade through attempts to try to engender more sustainable urban futures.

2.3 Methodological Design

As sub-section 2.3.1 explains this thesis' methodological design is based upon pragmatist foundations, which place an emphasis on beginning with particular empirical problems 'in' the world, rather than theories or concepts which claim to provide descriptions 'of' it. This provides a set of useful tools for engaging with the contextual complexities set out above, particularly regarding the question of what territory is, and why it might matter, for public formation during political transitions in the city. To remain attentive to the city's multiplicity, as sub-section 2.3.2 explains, this thesis makes use of a comparative approach; specifically, it makes use of an 'intra-city' comparison. But bringing these approaches together poses something of a tension; on the one hand, pragmatists' approaches to research tend to advocate for deep engagement with political struggles, whilst an intra-city comparison requires being able to move between different urban worlds. But in a place like Belfast, embed oneself too deeply within a particular struggle and it might become impossible to step smoothly across the city's political boundaries. This is a tension, as the rest of the chapter makes clear, which I had to continually carefully negotiate throughout my fieldwork.

2.3.1 Post-war Urban Pragmatism



Figure 2.8: Loyalist graffiti, Dewey Street, Upper Shankill

One option for engaging with the challenge of at once recognising the importance of space for public formation in Belfast, without beginning from particular premises as to why, or what types of space are most important, is to take a ‘Pragmatic’ attitude towards research, which aims to push against the tendency of ‘the normal science of social inquiry [to] all too often produce concepts that allow us to see certain things whilst ignoring others, and, in a circular and self-reinforcing process, [reproduce] prevailing ideas or generate new ones that feed the cycle anew’ (Willis and Lake, 2023, pp. 4–5). For Pragmatists, breaking out of this cycle requires beginning with problems in the world rather than ideas about it, investing energy in the ‘particularities of situated inquiry rather than in the futile quest for generalities, abstractions and absolute “truth”’ (Willis and Lake, 2023, p. 12). As Dewey argued, to ‘to set up a problem that does not grow out of an actual situation is to start on a course of dead work ... Problems that are self-set are mere excuses for seeming to do something intellectual, something that has the semblance but not the substance of scientific activity’ (Dewey, [1938] 1986, p. 12; cited in Willis and Lake, 2023, p. 12)

This push against what Dewey called a ‘quest for certainty’ is part of what makes Pragmatism a philosophy so well fitted to the context of contemporary Northern Ireland; it is a philosophy which pushes hard against the kinds of ideological absolutism associated with the most violent and sectarian branches of Northern Irish politics, past and present, like the ‘No Surrender’ in the graffiti in Figure 2.8 – this is a long-standing famous PUL political slogan, denoting an unwillingness to accommodate CNR political demands. More specifically, Pragmatism, combined with ideas from Science and Technology Studies, has served as an important point of inspiration, for ‘assemblage theory’ urbanists (Farías and Blok, 2016; McFarlane, 2011), pushing against the idea that cities are singular stable objects, towards a sense that ‘there is no city as a whole, but a multiplicity of processes assembling the city in different ways’ (Farías, 2011, p. 369). Geographers and anthropologists working in this tradition have often lent upon, and promoted, ethnographic studies of the urban, which involve following actors and the socio-material networks which they establish between them as they assemble, and are assembled into, publics (Barry, 2013; Latour, 2007; Tsing, 2015; van Veelen et al., 2021).

One of the key benefits of this approach in a place like Belfast is that it does not begin from particular understandings about the divisions that matter in social and political life – such as those between the state and the public (Mitchell, 1991) or between nature and culture (Latour, 2004a; Mitchell, 2002) or perhaps even between Protestants and Catholics. Instead, it treats these divisions as things which are always historical creations, which must be made through particular forms of socio-spatial organisation. The question then is how and why these divisions are effected, and how and why they support or challenge particular forms of politics.

More specifically, this is an approach which aligns with a sense that territory ‘should not be invoked as an explanatory principle that itself needs no explanation’ nor is it ‘some kind of socio-political first cause’ (Painter, 2010, p. 1093). Instead, this is an approach which lends itself to thinking about territory as an effect which, which ‘like other enduring and seemingly solid features of our world [...] can best be understood as the outcome of networked socio-technical practices’ (Painter, 2010, p. 1093). Approaching Belfast’s territories in this way means beginning from what actors actually do, as they go about trying to (re-)make publics in the city, and exploring the territories which they effect, and then in turn exploring the implications of these territorial effects. In other words, this is an approach which offers a means of recognising and attending to the importance of the city’s territories for its politics, without beginning from them. This means, for example, exploring how a project like a greenway creates particular territorial effects and exploring the implications these have for the city’s publics, rather than beginning from the premise that the city is a divided into ethno-communal territories, and exploring how a project like a greenway disrupts them.

But, Farías (2011) argues that if we want to understand the formation of *democratic* urban publics, it is not sufficient to just ‘follow the actors.’ Instead, we must also follow their *inquiries*; we must understand how different urban publics come to particular understandings of what the city and its potential is, and what particular urban concepts mean. This might mean, for example, exploring how particular publics in Belfast come to particular understandings of the city’s ethno-political territories, and how they come to understand them as being – or not being – of significance for tackling climate change through the urban. One tried and tested methodology for ‘following inquiries’ is to engage in participatory action research, which in its Pragmatic form means that researchers:

‘[...] work with particular communities, in order to ‘facilitate inquiry’ into a particular situation or concern, in order to help ‘collectively develop the ideas and associated practices needed to produce a desired change. This means shedding *a priori* expectations of what comprises a ‘social problem’ and instead working with people to define what, from their perspective, constitutes an issue, problem or priority, which may look very different from the long list of public policy issues that regularly feature as recognised public concerns.’ (Willis and Lake, 2023, p. 6).

There is a risk which comes with this type of research, particularly in a place like Belfast; embed oneself closely into the particular political struggles of a particular community, and it might become impossible to move through the city’s different urban worlds. This is not necessarily problematic; rich singular case studies can themselves have a multiplicity to them. Flyvbjerg (2006), for example, argues that they can be multidimensional if one a) selects cases which are particularly extreme examples of a phenomenon or are particularly likely/unlikely to prove a particular idea, and b) writes these cases up in a ‘thick’ style. But urban theorists have also long made use of comparisons, in order to engage with, and unpack the multiplicity of the urban. The next section sets out why intra-city comparison of rich case studies might be particularly useful, yet challenging, in a place like Belfast, particularly if one is *also* trying to follow the inquiries of particular actors engaged in political struggles.

2.3.2 Intra-City Comparison

Debates about the merits and potential of comparative urbanism have been strongly shaped by post-colonial critiques of urban theory, which note the tendency of urbanists to begin research from institutions in, and ideas about, cities in Europe and North America (Lancione and McFarlane, 2016; Mcfarlane, 2010; McFarlane and Robinson, 2012; Nijman, 2015; Peck, 2015; Robinson, 2011). For advocates, urbanism might, through comparison, become more attentive to the actuality and diversity of urban lives around the planet. This is an idea closely associated with Robinson’s call to treat all cities as ‘ordinary’ rather than engaging with them on the basis of *a priori* presumptions about what they are (Robinson, 2013). But here, in practice, comparative approaches have sometimes run up against something of a contradiction. It is precisely thanks to their

placement 'within' particular 'residual' categories – like 'divided' city – that certain cities are often made comparable (that Belfast is presumed to be comparable with places like Beirut, Berlin, Cape Town or Mostar as opposed to, for example, Newcastle-upon-Tyne). This tends to foreclose opportunities for more closely interrogating exactly what these cities are (Angelo and Goh, 2021; Robinson, 2022; Schmid et al., 2018).

One possibility for reckoning with this shortcoming is to make use of an intra-city rather than an inter-city comparison. As McFarlane and others (2017, p. 24) note, 'in the rush to map and contest different urban political, economic, cultural and ecological relationalities and to produce new comparative forms of thinking and methodology, the tendency has often been to downgrade the potential of comparison within a city, rather than take these comparative methodologies and apply them within specific urban contexts.' They suggest that intra-city comparisons 'can contribute to the comparative urbanism project by specifically illuminating how a city is less of a unitary construction and more a space of many urban worlds.' (McFarlane et al., 2017, p. 3). As they remind us '[l]ooking within, at different contexts and trajectories in different parts of the same city, can reveal precisely the kinds of heterogeneities that we find by looking across different cities' (McFarlane et al., 2017, p. 5). In other words, it might help us to unpack the multiplicity of a city like Belfast, rather than flattening it out, by confining the city into a singular category. This is not to argue *against* inter-city comparisons, but simply to note that any urban theory which aspires to be worldly yet tends to treat cities in the singular, in order to allow for comparison between them, will forever miss the multiplicity of urban worlds which exist *within* any city; a multiplicity which is perhaps best captured through focus, and comparison, within a particular place (McFarlane et al., 2017).

Robinson (2022) provides an alternative suggestion, in an explicit attempt to update her ideas about comparison to reflect contemporary academic debates which are challenging traditional definitions of the city. Rather than beginning with cities, she argues, comparison should instead begin with urban territories, expanding 'the potential to subtract from extant conceptualisations, inviting us to engage with the fullness and complexity of distinctive urban outcomes.' (Robinson, 2022, p. 331). More specifically, this should allow us to 'rethink extant "theorisations" of urban politics in response to empirical trends in urbanisation as well as the great diversity of urban forms across the planet' (Robinson, 2022, p. 342). To some extent this is an argument written in dialogue with ideas about planetary urbanisation, where the use of the term 'urban territory' is often used to move past easy distinctions between cities and their outsides. But Robinson is careful to avoid being too prescriptive about the types of territory which she is describing instead arguing that we must 'remain open to the diverse outcomes and processes which coalesce in different territories and initiate analytical insights across distinctive urban formations' (Robinson, 2022, p. 348).

To some extent this thesis draws these two ideas together. As the introductory chapter outlines, at the core of this thesis is a comparison of two projects which have different relationships with the urban and democracy. Both of these projects are in Belfast – in fact, they are concerned with almost exactly the same patch of space (the Mackies site). This is very much an ‘intra-city’ comparison. But these projects also have different relationships with the city, and with urban space. One of these projects – the Forth Meadow Community Greenway (FMCG) – is a project which is trying to remake Belfast’s urban territories, and the communities associated with them, in order to try to create a public which aligns with the institutions of urban democracy in Northern Ireland. The other project – the Take Back the City (TBTC) coalition – is trying to facilitate a more ‘urban’ form of democracy, created by and responsive to the changing needs of urban life. In a sense then, this is a comparison between two projects which have different relationships with urban territory, even though they are in exactly the same literal geography. This makes these projects particularly useful for thinking about the city’s potential multiplicity, and about the way which ‘conflicting spatialities’ (O’Dowd and Komarova, 2013, p. 541) might play a role in creating publics, as part of urban transitions towards more sustainable futures, and as part of attempts to try to engender public engagement with climate change through the urban. Put differently, because these projects are in exactly the same location, they are particularly interesting comparators for exploring the holding in place or disruption of understandings about what urban territory is, and why this matters for the city when it comes to engendering transitions towards more sustainable urban futures by encouraging public engagement with climate change through the urban.

Comparing projects located in the same city has practical benefits; there’s less literal travel involved, for example. But it also has its challenges, for it requires a different kind of travelling; it requires an ability to ‘breach’ between different urban worlds. The word ‘breach’ is borrowed, here, from China Miéville’s novel *The City and The City* (2009), which describes two cities which occupy the same physical space, yet are kept socially and politically apart, as residents of each are taught to ‘unsee’ the other. To ‘breach’ the boundary between the two cities often requires little more than an adjustment of one’s vision. But doing so is strictly forbidden and punished harshly. The novel thus ‘allows us to see the tremendous labor invested in systems (of thought, of discipline, of traffic control, of legal order, of power supply, etc) that reproduce [urban] divides and their unseeing.’ (Cowen, 2017, p. no pagination). It is also a good allegory for Belfast; understanding the distinctions between the city’s urban worlds is vital for entering into and safely navigating through them, yet these distinctions can at times be almost imperceptible to those not familiar with the city; the socio-spatial demarcations highlighted by hegemonic representations of the city sometimes blind those not familiar with the city to the more subtle distinctions which actually matter for political life within it. Building from ideas in the novel, Schubert and Sumich (2025) argue that by undertaking

this kind of breaching, urban research might be able to better understand how particular urban worlds, and their socio-ecological effects, are unseen. But doing so is potentially risky. *The City and The City* (2009) is based around a PhD student who is murdered after going looking for a third ‘undivided’ city (after being derided by her academic colleagues for doing so). Less melodramatically, this kind of ‘breaching’ might require both being very sensitive to, yet also require the capacity to shed, existing preconceptions of what the city is and could be.

2.4 Positionality: Back to Belfast

My ability to achieve this kind of ‘breaching’ – or, more specifically, to move between and engage with Belfast’s various urban worlds – was facilitated by my positionality, as explained in sub-section 2.4.1. This positionality – or more specifically, my own preconceptions about what it might take to ‘improve’ Belfast and make it sustainable – also played a role in the selection of the case studies which lie at the core of this thesis, as sub-section 2.4.2 sets out.

2.4.1 Attempting Escape

My Troubles reared parents left Belfast in the 1990s, moving to Dublin in search of a brighter future, so I was born south of the Irish border. We returned back North to Belfast as the Peace Process progressed, and I spent my secondary school years living near the city centre in an area my parents selected as being both ethno-religiously and socio-economically mixed. I then headed to England for university believing – like many of my peers – that I’d find better prospects on the far side of the Irish sea.

My formative years, then, were spent criss-crossing the various borders which dissect the British Isles. This makes it easier for me to cross the various ethno-sectarian borders in Belfast’s geography. But it also makes it easier for me to understand the subtle demarcations of difference which are used to draw boundaries around the city’s different urban worlds. Catholic/Protestant, Republican/Loyalist, Nationalist/Unionist are not identities perceived easily by people from outside Northern Ireland; as Seamus Heaney once put it, this is ‘land of password, handgrip, wink and nod, // Of minds as open as a trap’ (Heaney, [1975] 2018, p. 43), where a variety of verbal and non-verbal cues are used as signifiers of political identity. An outsider to Belfast might be able to cross the city’s borders without challenge, but without some knowledge of these subtle cultural markers it might be difficult to enter deeply *into* these different urban worlds.

After university I worked in London, Delhi, and Belfast, in a variety of infrastructure planning and consultancy jobs related to the creation of more sustainable cities. During this period the ideas for this thesis gestated, as I became increasingly frustrated with what appeared to be a pervasive contradiction at the heart of many projects aiming to ensure urban sustainability; although they promised to create sustainable futures in a democratic fashion, in actuality those delivering these projects often seemed to

disqualify public views, on the basis that the public were too interested in the here and now to make 'good' decisions about what the world might need in the future. I was confident someone had thought about these issues before me and so took some time off work and enrolled in a master's programme, where I conducted research which brought me into contact with 'La PAH' – La Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca (People Affected by Mortgages) – a housing activist movement, based in Barcelona. Left with more questions than answers post-masters, a PhD proposal followed. This background has helped me to move between another, different set of urban worlds in Belfast; between those of 'mainstream' city council policymakers, planners and politicians, and more radical 'fringe' political movements (put differently, I can talk convincingly about both spreadsheets and seedbombs).

The point here is not to somehow claim that I am unbiased, nor that I somehow have a 'perfect' position vis-à-vis Belfast's many urban worlds – even though I think it has helped me to slip in and out of them, in a way which would be challenging for others (Rose (1997) provides a good, classic critique of this idea of 'perfect' positionality). If anything, it was my biases – or perhaps better, presumptions – about the city which drew me back to it.

2.4.2 A Gateway Back

It wasn't my initial plan to return to Belfast to develop this thesis, but at a conference in 2023, I bumped into another doctoral student from the city. Recognising each other's accents, we started talking about our research interests. He cut me off and pulled out his laptop, showing me two maps. One was of what I now know is the FMCG, the other was an interactive mapping interface set up by the Take Back the City Coalition TBTC.

I was immediately intrigued, and over the next few weeks started digging into the cases remotely. My basic intrigue was with the location of these two cases; as touched upon in the introduction, these projects had collided – and some public acrimony had resulted from this collision – in the Mackie's site (see Figure 2.9 to Figure 2.12 for context). As outlined in the introduction to this thesis, this site is one of the most storied patches of land in Belfast, in part because it lies right on the city's largest and most symbolically significant Peace Wall. It is also a site which is anomalous; although it lies in an area where Belfast's ethno-communal territories are effected with particular intensity, it is also a patch of land which lies somewhat 'outside' Belfast's standard territorial demarcations. This makes it a site where, at times, these demarcations are realised with violent clarity (it is a popular site for rioting, for example). But it is also a site where these demarcations come undone. This makes it a site of political possibility, where the city's territories and publics are broken down and remade. It is thus an excellent site for studying the geography of urban public formation.

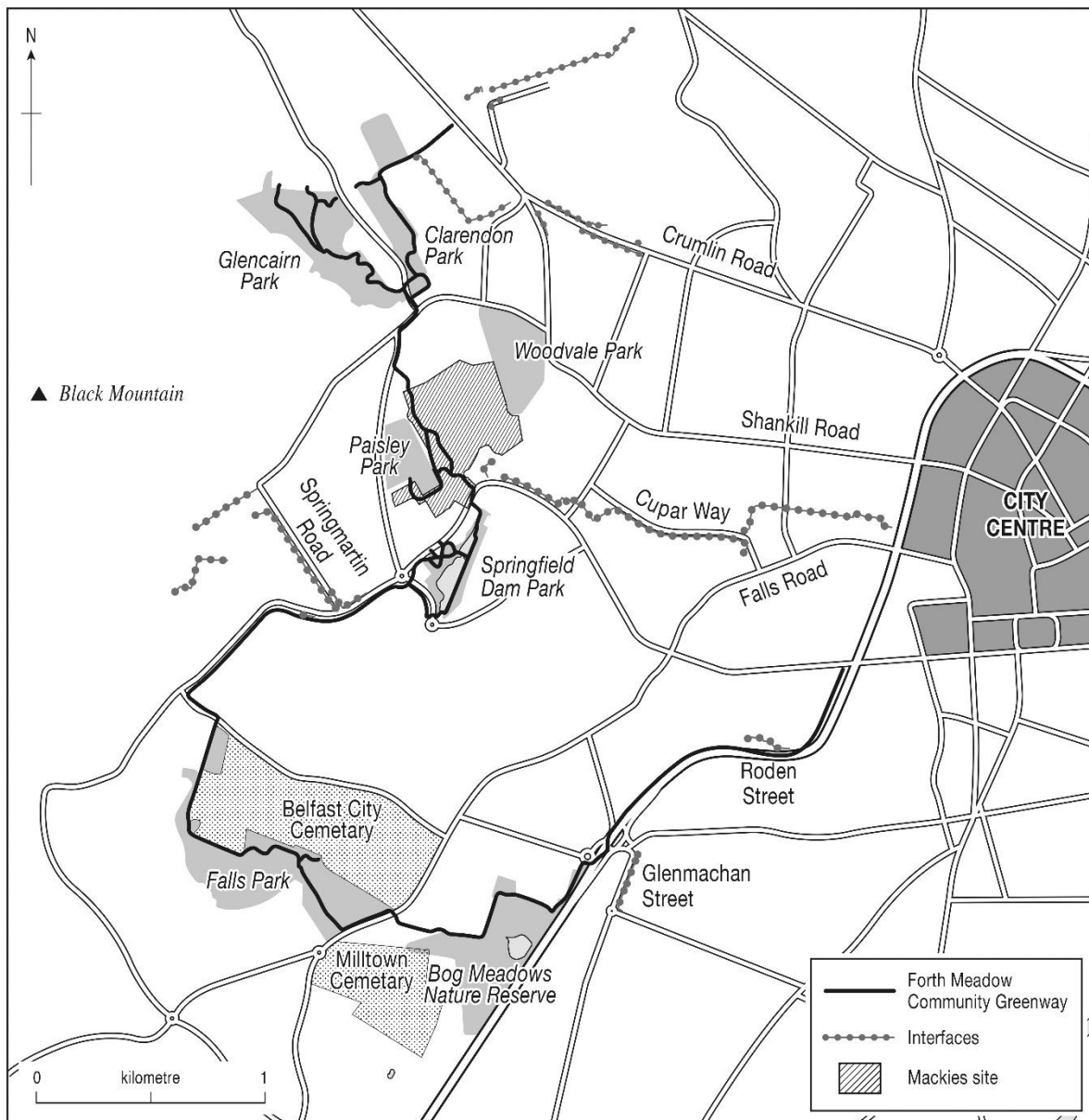


Figure 2.9: Map of the FMCG and Mackies Site. Source: Durham University Cartography Unit

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West Belfast: Councillors approve greenway development

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Lyndsey Telford

BBC News

Belfast City councillors have voted for the development of a greenway through the old Mackies site in west Belfast.

Figure 2.10: BBC News Headline describing the approval of the FMCG. Accessed 07/11/2025



Figure 2.11: Field Context: Mackies site facing West with the Black Mountain beyond. (Source: the author)



Figure 2.12: Field Context: The FMCG as it passes along the edge of the Mackies site. Photograph facing South. Note building (innovation factory) as in picture above. (Source: the author)

The second layer of intrigue came from the challenges which these cases offered, to my own presumptions (or understandings), of what it might take to make new democratic publics in the city and encourage public engagement with climate change through it. These initial ‘presumptions’ are summarised in Table 2.1. As this table sets out, my basic initial presumptions were that the FMCG was far more likely to create new democratic publics and facilitate democratic engagement with climate change through the urban than the TBTC; presumptions based around three central tenets.

First, growing up in the city, I’d become very aware that struggles over housing lie at the heart of the city’s ethno-communal territorialisation, in part because of historical inequities in housing provision between CNR and PUL communities, but also because controlling who lives where is a key means by which ethno-communal territories (and the political potential they contain) are created and maintained. As an infrastructure literally designed to draw people together across ethno-communal lines, I expected that the FMCG would, consequently, do a much better job of creating a new and potentially more democratic public than the TBTC.

Second, a sense that those who are more immediately embedded in everyday urban concerns are less likely to be concerned about long-term issues of sustainability – a presumption often held by my former colleagues, as mentioned above – lingered in my mind. Specifically, I found it hard to believe that a project like the TBTC, made up of people concerned with the very immediate, material issues of the housing crisis would be more interested in sustainability than a project created by the Northern Irish Peace Process; a long-term governmental programme, specifically set up to try to care for and ‘secure’ a Northern Irish public.

Third, given the ‘environmental’ nature of green infrastructure projects like the FMCG, I presumed that this project would offer more climate benefits than the TBTC’s housing plans and that this kind of green infrastructure would offer better opportunities for public engagement with climate change through the urban, thanks to the fact that it might have a less ‘technical’ side to it than a low-carbon housing scheme. More specifically, as touched upon in the introductory chapter, there are precedents for green infrastructures forming new climate publics in the city – the Connswater greenway, mentioned in the introduction, is the best example – whilst new housing estates have, instead, a history of simply causing new forms of public division.

Meanwhile though, there was a figure on the TBTC’s website – shown in Figure 2.13 – which almost exactly contradicted these three presumptions. I was intrigued. Could these claims being made by the TBTC really be true? If so, how and why had a group like the TBTC developed a form of engagement with the city which was more democratic, sustainable, and climate-focussed than the Northern Irish Peace Process? And what might this say more broadly, about the relationship between the urban, democracy, and climate change? This looked a lot like the kind of real ‘problematic situation’ which

pragmatist researchers might be interested in attending to. But it also looked like a case which might shed interesting light on existing geographical thinking. The next section of this chapter explains the methods I set about developing and using, in order to engage with these cases.

Table 2.1 Perception of FMCG and TBTC prior to study

PERCEPTION OF CASES PRIOR TO STUDY		
Project Outcomes:	A city-council peace-focussed Greenway is more likely to achieve these outcomes because:	A community-led Housing project is less likely to achieve these outcomes because:
Disrupt Belfast's existing urban territorial system.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > It is being led by professionals who, as part of the state, are separated from and can transcend the city's partisan territories. > The Connswater Greenway in East Belfast has famously helped to disrupt sectarian territories in that part of the city. > Green space is something which is needed and can be used by everybody in the city (i.e. the general public). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > It is being led by people who are situated within, and have connections to, the city's existing communal territories. > There are long-standing associations between the demarcation of sectarian territory and housing in Northern Ireland. > Housing is a 'public good' which is needed disproportionately by particular publics within the city (in particular, the city's working-class Catholic population).
Facilitate the creation of a sustainable city in the future.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > It is being led by those with the time and space to step back from everyday concerns and plan for the future. > The Peace Process is a future-focussed project, which aspires to encourage the sustenance of life in the city. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > It is being led by those who are busy with immediate everyday concerns and so can't reasonably be expected to be interested in planning for the future. > It is focussed on very immediate everyday needs (the need for a house to live in).
Improve opportunities for democratic engagement with climate change through the urban.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Creating green space helps to protect local natural environments, meaning that in aggregate creating green spaces has a positive impact on global environmental problems. > Creating green space is a relatively non-technical process, so it should facilitate more widespread public participation in the process of urbanisation. > Green projects need constant maintenance, thereby providing repeated opportunities for public engagement with the (re)creation of urban space. > By disrupting the city's territorial system, this project should disrupt existing circulations of power, allowing for broader public engagement with problems through the urban. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Creating housing usually entails the destruction of local natural environments, meaning that in aggregate it has a negative impact on global environmental problems. > Creating 'hard' infrastructure projects is a technical process, and is therefore something which narrows opportunities for engaging in urbanisation to those with professional skills (e.g. engineers). > 'Hard' infrastructures require less maintenance than their softer 'greener' counterparts, limiting opportunities for repeated public engagement with the (re)creation of urban space. > By cementing the city's territorial system, this project will likely hold in place existing circulations of power, preventing the broadening of public engagement with problems through the urban.



COUNCIL DUTY-BEARERS

FIVE POINTS OF FAILURE

- ✗ Reinforcing sectarianism and segregation
- ✗ Contributing to climate collapse
- ✗ A "private sector first" agenda for housing
- ✗ Ignoring homelessness by massaging statistics
- ✗ Wasting valuable public land and resources

[READ MORE](#)

TAKE BACK THE CITY COALITION

FIVE OBVIOUS SOLUTIONS

- ✓ Creating inclusive homes for everyone
- ✓ Building sustainability into the design
- ✓ Exploring alternative housing models
- ✓ Ending homelessness by building homes
- ✓ Creating public good from dormant spaces

[READ MORE](#)

Figure 2.13: Screenshot of Take Back the City Coalition claims of 'failures' and 'solutions.' Source: Take Back the City 'competition' webpage, accessed 15/04/2026

2.5 Methods

Data collection primarily took place between September 2023 and October 2024. In the most basic terms, I aimed to follow the FMCG, and the TBTC, through both space and time. In the FMCG's case, this largely (but not entirely) meant following the project across the city, as this is a project which has already 'produced' an infrastructure (a greenway) which can be followed, whilst in the TBTC's case, because this is a project which has yet to produce much infrastructure in the city, this meant following the campaign as it moved around (this brought me as far as London, for a meeting between the TBTC activists and a group of investors and architects). Following the projects through time meant, in plainer terms, tracing their history, trying to figure out when they had become clearly defined projects in themselves and, where possible, tracing their precedents (an approach well demonstrated by Latour's (1996) study of an infrastructure project in Paris). In practice, this data gathering approach allowed – and necessitated – generating knowledge of two particular places. First, this data gathering approach meant that I spent many hours traversing North and West Belfast, on foot, by bicycle, in a car and occasionally by bus, between community centres, community gardens, the city hall, park warden's offices, cafes, up and down the Black Mountain, and into the occasional pub (see Figure 2.12 and Figure 2.14 for illustration of field context). Second, to better understand these two projects I ended up examining a third object – the Mackies site. This took me as far back as the mid-18th century, and as far away as a house on an island in Strangford Lough, where one of the Mackies heirs now lives. Section 2.5.1 sets out how I actually structured this process of data collection, whilst section 2.5.2 explains how I set about analysing this material and turning it into a thesis.



Figure 2.14: Field Context: Upper Shankill facing East towards City Centre (in distance). (Source: the author)



Figure 2.15: Field Context: Edge of Black Mountain facing South with West Belfast in the valley below. (Source: the author)

2.5.1 Data Gathering

Data was gathered through a multi-methods approach, centred around interviews, ethnographic engagement, focus groups, and document analysis. I primarily collected data in three sets of notebooks; rough 'field' notebooks, a 'research diary' containing typed up field notes and reflections, and a thematic journal structured around common themes (a derivation of the notetaking method popularised by Latour (2007)).

I aimed to interview all of the key stakeholders associated with the FMCG and the TBTC (this included stakeholders in community groups who had been consulted by these projects) or have a clear reason as to why I was not able to interview a particular actor. This meant that the vast majority of my interviews were with relatively 'elite' actors (in the context of their particular urban worlds). As (Ellersgaard et al., 2022, p. 674) note, when engaging with these kinds of 'elite' interviewees the researcher is 'placed in a dilemma, how to both account for context of each case and complex power relations and at the same time avoid offending individuals in powerful positions, who presumably have a lot to lose.' This is particularly true in 'sensitive' political contexts (Lancaster, 2017; Lee and Lee, 2012; Saunders et al., 2015), like North and West Belfast, where people are often reticent to give their political views to relative strangers, especially thanks to the extensive history of covert state surveillance in this part of the world; this is a place where the phrase 'whatever you say, say nothing' has become part of the popular lexicon. This political sensitivity was amplified by the nature of the projects I was looking at. Although the FMCG is a relatively 'mundane' project, anything to do with the Peace Process is considered 'Political' (with a capital 'P') and therefore sensitive in Northern Ireland. The TBTC, meanwhile, have repeatedly challenged the Northern Irish political status quo; this is a campaign that is deliberately, overtly, political.

One traditional way of dealing with these challenges is through anonymisation. This is a practice which always involves losing some detail from recorded data, be this a name, context, or ethno-political background (Lancaster, 2017; Lee and Lee, 2012). It is also not something which can be undertaken in a 'blanket' fashion; anonymisation means different things in different contexts (Lee and Lee, 2012). The 'relevant question [...] is therefore – what is gained by the promise of anonymity?' (Ellersgaard et al., 2022, p. 682). Typical potential benefits are that it can help to make it easier to secure interviews and encourage interviewees to be more open. Both of these benefits were evidenced in my interviews; almost all of my interviewees only agreed to interviews on the basis that they were anonymised and sometimes prefaced their answers with questions, to double-check that what they were saying was going to be 'properly' anonymised. But there was also a more contextual benefit to anonymisation of my sources: it helped me to cross between Belfast's different 'urban worlds.'

Belfast is a small city, and one where 'surveillance' occurs through a wide variety of different channels; several of my interviewees told me that they'd heard about me (or

charted my movements through the city's different urban worlds) through their own 'sources.' Consequently, there was no way – even if I'd wanted to – that I could have hidden the fact that I was engaging with actors on opposing sides of various political battle lines. Sometimes this meant that actors asked me for information about their political adversaries. For example, during a walking interview with one of the city council's ecologists, we came across an area of the city which had been 'seed bombed' by the TBTC. The ecologist knew I was in contact with the TBTC and asked me who was behind the seed bombing. I replied that I couldn't say, because I was obliged to protect their anonymity, just as I would protect the ecologists' anonymity if the TBTC had asked me for information about them. This wasn't the answer the ecologist had hoped for, but ultimately helped me to build rapport with them, as it evidenced my ethical commitments, and assured them that I was serious about anonymity (or, more broadly, protecting the identities of my 'sources'). This type of exchange was one which happened repeatedly during my research. Promises of anonymity thus both opened doors into particular political worlds for me and helped me to move across the boundaries between them.

A list of interviews used in this research is provided in Table 2.2. The first set of interviews were conducted with interviewees whose contact details were publicly available, or who I contacted through Queens University Belfast (QUB). I then contacted subsequent interviewees through what is usually called a 'snowball' method; I asked interviewees who I should contact next, and sometimes they were able to either provide me with contact details or put me directly in touch with the relevant actors. There are three particular strengths to this method. The first is that it does not begin from a set of presumptions, about who might be important in a particular case, nor why. Instead tracing the connections between interviewees becomes a means of figuring out how particular actors are assembled together, and how this is related to particular power-dynamics. For example, one 'snowball' followed a chain of key community stakeholders who had been engaged with by a set of conflict mediators and public consultation specialists (who I also interviewed), contracted by the FMCG. Following this chain helped me to better understand how the FMCG had, and had not, linked these different actors together.

The second is that the interview sample itself becomes a piece of data. For example, as I interviewed current and former leaders of the TBTC, it became apparent that the campaign's leadership had shifted, from initially being largely composed of white men, to a much more racially heterogenous group of women, many of whom are migrants. Interview refusals are also pieces of data. For example, one of the most consistent themes voiced by interviewees in the city who had interacted with the EU's PEACE funds – such as civil servants, or community workers – is the time-pressured nature of this funding, and the tendency of those who work for the body who distributes this funding (the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB)) to arrive into the city, deliver a project, and

leave never to be seen again, whilst those in the city have to pick up the pieces. After many months of trying to secure an interview with the SEUPB, they eventually told me that they thought I'd already spoken to the relevant actors, and that their team had been broken up in the wake of the PEACE IV funding cycle (see Figure 2.16 for copy of e-mail correspondence). This corroborated the views of the SEUPB I'd already heard in other interviews.

Table 2.2: Table of Key Recorded Interviews

INTERVIEW ID	INTERVIEW DATE	INTERVIEWEE DETAILS	INTERVIEW TYPE	NUMBER OF INTERVIEWEES
1	26/09/2023	Sustrans - Greenway Team	Semi-structured	1
2	27/09/2023	TBTC	Semi-structured	1
3	28/09/2023	TBTC	Semi-structured	1
4	28/09/2023	Ulster Wildlife Trust	Walking	1
5	03/10/2023	Volunteer now - Greenway Team	Semi-structured	1
6	25/10/2023	City Council Green Economy Team	Semi-structured	1
7	25/10/2023	TBTC	Semi-structured	1
8	26/10/2023	City Council - Greenway Team	Semi-structured	1
9	14/11/2023	Shankill Women's Centre	Semi-structured	1
10	15/11/2023	Sinn Féin	Semi-structured	1
11	16/11/2023	Greater Village Regeneration Trust Community Worker	Semi-structured	1
12	22/11/2023	TBTC	Gardening	1
13	24/11/2023	Connswater Greenway	Semi-structured	2
14	05/12/2023	TBTC	Semi-structured	1
15	10/01/2024	Shankill ACT Activist	Semi-structured	1
16	10/01/2024	Local Orange Order	Semi-structured	1
17	11/01/2024	Greenway Consultation Team	Semi-structured	2
18	12/01/2024	Greenway Historian	Walking	1
19	12/01/2024	Shankill ACT Activist	Walking/Driving	1
20	17/01/2024	Highfield Community Worker	Walking	1
21	18/01/2024	City Council Greenway Team	Semi-structured	1
22	20/01/2024	TBTC Activist	Semi-structured	1
23	25/01/2024	City Council Greenway Team	Semi-structured	1
24	25/01/2024	Innovation Factory Manager	Walking	1
25	19/02/2024	City Council Greenway Team	Walking	1
26	20/02/2024	St James' Community Farm Managers	Semi-structured	2

INTERVIEW ID	INTERVIEW DATE	INTERVIEWEE DETAILS	INTERVIEW TYPE	NUMBER OF INTERVIEWEES
27	22/02/2024	Local Government Community Relations Officer	Semi-structured	1
28	05/03/2024	Benview Community Centre	Semi-structured	1
29	07/03/2024	City Council Gardener	Walking	1
30	07/03/2024	City Council Gardener	Semi-structured	1
31	08/03/2024	West Belfast Community Partnership Board	Semi-structured	1
32	08/03/2024	Local Mural Artist	Semi-structured	1
33	11/03/2024	Woodvale and Twadell Community Worker	Semi-structured	1
34	11/03/2024	Belfast Hills Partnership	Walking	1
35	12/03/2024	City Council Good Relations Unit	Semi-structured	1
36	20/04/2024	TBTC Ecologist	Walking	1
37	22/04/2024	BUILD Activist	Semi-structured	1
38	23/04/2024	Black Mountain Shared Space Managers	Semi-structured	2
39	24/04/2024	City Council Planning and Ecology Team Managers	Walking	3
40	24/04/2024	Ballysillan Community Centre Managers	Semi-structured	2
41	25/04/2024	Clonard Residents Association Representatives	Walking	2
42	01/05/2024	Lower Falls Community Worker	Semi-structured	1
43	01/05/2024	BUILD Activist	Walking	1
44	02/05/2024	Highfield Community Worker	Walking	1
45	02/05/2025	Ulster Wildlife Trust	Walking	1
46	07/05/2024	Belfast City Council Gardener	Walking	1
47	09/05/2024	City Council Greenway Team	Semi-structured	1
48	13/05/2024	Belfast Bike Campaign	Cycling	1
49	14/05/2024	Reclaim the Commons Campaign	Semi-structured	1
50	03/06/2024	TBTC	Semi-structured	1
51	04/06/2024	Police Service Northern Ireland	Walking	1
52	06/06/2024	Belfast Bike Campaign	Cycling	1
53	06/06/2024	Sinn Féin Councillor	Semi-structured	1
54	24/06/2024	Department for Infrastructure Director	Semi-structured	1

INTERVIEW ID	INTERVIEW DATE	INTERVIEWEE DETAILS	INTERVIEW TYPE	NUMBER OF INTERVIEWEES
55	26/06/2024	Sinn Féin Councillor	Semi-structured	1
56	01/07/2024	Black Mountain Shared Space Managers	Semi-structured	2
57	14/07/2024	Brink! Garden Leader	Semi-structured	1
58	15/08/2024	City Council Greenway Team	Walking	1
59	15/08/2024	City Council Ecology Team	Walking	1
60	21/08/2024	TBTC	Semi-structured	1
61	27/08/2024	Sinn Féin Councillor	Semi-structured	1
62	28/08/2024	TBTC Activist	Semi-structured	1
63	30/08/2024	TBTC Activist	Semi-structured	1
64	02/10/2024	TBTC Activist	Semi-structured	1
65	03/10/2024	TBTC Activist	Semi-structured	1
66	17/01/2025	Belfast City Council Climate Team	Semi-structured	1
			Total	75

[EXTERNAL EMAIL]

Hi Robbie

I know [REDACTED] had been helping with your enquiry, but I thought I would come back to you. Unfortunately, due to staff turnover and the closure of the programme there isn't anyone who worked directly on the Greenway in the team any longer. The feeling is that you probably have the information you need from [REDACTED] as they were the direct funder who drew money down from SEUPB.

I am sure you have already looked at our website but the guidance there is what PEACEIV projects would have based their development on, alongside any additional guidance that BCC may have had. <https://www.seupb.eu/current-programmes/peace-iv>

Many thanks for your enquiry and I hope this is helpful.

With best wishes

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Special EU Programmes Body

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Comhlacht na gClár Speisialta AE
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Figure 2.16: Copy of e-mail correspondence with names redacted. E-mail received 15/02/2024

The third is that this is a method which can open doors which would otherwise remain closed to 'outsiders', as once one has engaged with a particular 'chain' and is being referred along it, one is often introduced through the reference of an already trusted 'insider.' I often found this to be the case and found it to be useful not just for engaging interviewees, but for collecting documents too; most of my interviewees had caches of documents which they were willing to share with me, once I was trusted (for example, planning documents from the city council's greenway team). Documents which I analysed for this thesis included but were not limited to: minutes from Belfast City Council meetings; SEUPB PEACE fund documents; Belfast City Council planning documents stretching back to 1945; Belfast City Council Planning documents relating to Green Infrastructure, Housing Policy, Climate Change Policy, and Sustainable Transport; court documents from disputes over the Mackies site; consultation records from the FMCG; engineering design and planning documents from the FMCG; consultation

presentations from the FMCG; TBTC Campaign Documents; Hansard records; and Northern Irish government legislation.

One potential disadvantage of this snowball method is that it can allow for gatekeeping by those who are already powerful within a particular ‘world’, if particularly elite actors in that ‘world’ become aware of one’s presence within it, and wish to control access to it (Parker et al., 2019). For example, on two separate occasions I was invited into rooms in community centres containing groups of men who I quickly realised had strong paramilitary connections, who asked me to explain who I was and what I was doing. On other occasions I had leaders of ‘community groups’, who were either famous ex-paramilitaries or were reputed to have paramilitary links invite themselves to be interviewed by me. In practice this meant that these actors were in effect interviewing me, wanting to know more about my work. Here it was helpful that I could leave Belfast and cross the Irish Sea; I was able to place these interactions in the ‘interesting’ rather than ‘intimidating’ category and treat them as examples of the way in which these actors try to control the flow of people and knowledge into and out of their respective territories (i.e. my ‘insiderness’ helped me to identify who these actors were, what they represented, and read between the lines of what they were saying, yet my ‘outsiderness’ allowed me to keep going with my research more easily than if I had been part of the community they were attempting to control). Given the context then these interactions – and attempts at gatekeeping – were themselves informative. They were also informative in a more straightforward sense; these are actors with a deep interest in, and knowledge about, the areas they are from and attempt to control. Some, for example, showed a strong interest in learning more about environmental justice whilst others provided me with some helpful reading recommendations.

Fortunately, these interactions came after I’d already conducted substantial data collection and did not substantively prevent me from following my ‘snowballs.’ They also encouraged me to try to step more deliberately outside the ‘elites’ who made up the body of my interviewees. I was afforded good opportunity to do so when a leader of a women’s group refused an interview on the basis that the community leader didn’t feel she could ‘represent’ those in the group. Using a variety of ideas from literature on doing research with groups ‘excluded’ from political power (Cannella, 2022; Heron and Reason, 2006; Pickering and Kara, 2017), I developed a focus group session (delivered with the aid of a portable PowerPoint projector), which I successfully used with that women’s group, and repeated with other women’s groups in the Highfield Estate (a PUL estate, on the FMCG route and adjacent to the Mackie’s site), and the Lower Falls/St James’ (a CNR area, on the FMCG route and adjacent to the Bog Meadows nature reserve). These groups were very useful for providing understandings of the city’s territorialisation, the forms of power associated it, and the various urban ecologies which these women felt made an impactful difference to life in the city; understandings which were notably different from predominantly masculine ‘elite’ views I was hearing in some of my interviews.

Wherever possible, I tried to encourage interviewees to select a space for our interview which they thought was useful for understanding the topics we were going to discuss. In particular, where appropriate I asked interviewees if they wanted to conduct a ‘walking’ interview, as this method is renowned for being particularly useful for understanding territory, and the way in which traumatic memories are related to territory and place (Evans and Jones, 2011; Mitchell and Kelly, 2011). Some refused but proposed other forms of ‘travelling interview’; I conducted a walking/driving interview, for example, with an ex-British soldier with PTSD, who wanted to show me around several areas of the city, but refused to walk through CNR areas (we drove through these areas and walked through their PUL counterparts). By contrast, a disabled cycling activist proposed we go for a ‘cycling interview’, helping me to better understand the embodied experience of moving through space for someone with different physical capacities to my own (cycling is increasingly being recognised within geography as a useful method precisely because of the way which it allows for embodied engagement with space (Bennett et al., 2025)). More broadly, these interviews were often very useful for exploring why space matters, in a literal material sense. This is perhaps best illustrated by the example of Figure 2.17, the site of a walking interview with the wellington-booted figure at the top of the image. Having laughed at my attempt to cross this patch of ground in my trainers, the interviewee (an ecologist) and I then had a long and detailed discussion, about what exactly it meant to be ‘connected’ to nature, and how different forms of space – and politics – could best facilitate this connection.



Figure 2.17: Walking/‘Squelching’ Interview (Source: the author)

To some extent, the use of travelling interviews like this blurs the boundaries into ethnography, which I also used more deliberately as a data-collection method. This was not a ‘pure’ form of ethnography, in the classical sense, but instead a form of multi-sited ethnography, moving from site to site, as the centre of the action associated with each of these projects shifted (Crang and Cook, 2007; Marcus, 1995; Van Maanen, 2011). I also sometimes found myself learning lots in decidedly unexpected interactions; it turns out that you can learn a lot about the role of social media in organising fights on the Mackies site – and therefore about the relationships between publics and space – whilst waiting to get your hair cut in busy barber shops on the Falls or the Shankill on a Friday afternoon. In addition, where possible I tried to partake enthusiastically in the activities which particular actors in these cases were involved in, whether by community gardening, working with park wardens, accompanying activists on door-knocking campaigns,

shovelling manure on urban farms, looking for pine martens on the Black Mountain with local ecologists, or attending public consultation sessions (see Figure 2.18 for illustration). This, of course, helped to provide me with a richer understanding of the activities in question, but it also helped with building rapport. When asked about the ‘impact’ of my research, for example, I was able to point to the dirt on my fingers and the manure which I’d shifted; an answer which often went down far better than one hedged in academic terms.



Figure 2.18: Attending a TBTC Public Consultation session; author in orange shirt in front row. 10/09/2024 (Source: PPR, 2024)

One of the great benefits of being literally integrated into these urban worlds was that it made it possible for me to recognise better – and sometimes be surprised – when they overlapped. For example, whilst at the reception of the SEUPB offices (trying, repeatedly, to secure an official interview) the receptionist slipped me a report by an anti-capitalist community gardening organisation, who have been key to coordinating community gardens across historical sectarian lines. Sometimes this placed me in the middle of clashes between some of my research participants. Most memorably, one night in the Springfield Community centre, I found myself seated quite literally between members of the TBTC, local politicians, and community workers, as they argued heatedly about the city’s future development. I never tried to position myself as an interlocutor in this type of situation and was always very glad that I’d refused either to ‘join’ the TBTC – who tried,

multiple times, to get me to join their campaign – or to agree to be a more official evaluator for the FMCG – initially the City Council wanted me to evaluate the project in an official capacity, as they'd had their funding for this evaluation cut off due to SEUPB timelines.

By refusing to join either project and by explaining to different parties that I was speaking to their 'enemies' (for want of a better term) I inevitably compromised some of the 'richness' of my data collection, by ensuring that certain doors remained closed to me. But it was also essential, for allowing me to cross between different urban worlds in the city.

2.5.2 Data Analysis and Testing

Throughout my fieldwork I avoided drawing a hard line between 'data collection' and 'data analysis' for three core reasons. First, most practically, because many of my PhD colleagues told me they regretted not doing some data analysis *whilst* conducting fieldwork; doing so, they explained, would have allowed them to identify gaps in their material earlier, or core themes which they could have explored more deeply. Consequently, throughout my fieldwork I tried to write reflective pieces – not simply 'notes' – which offered basic analyses of my findings. I also started to revise my data as soon as I had collected to it, re-reading my research notebooks, and listening to recorded interviews whilst out running, cooking dinner, or driving in the car. This was useful, primarily because it ensured that I didn't miss any 'loose ends' which I'd identified in early periods of fieldwork, but also because I could conduct some early data 'testing' whilst still collecting data; quite often at the end of my interviews people would ask me for my view on a particular issue or dynamic, and by revising my data I was able to give more informed views, effectively allowing me to test possible concepts and conclusions, deepening my understanding of them. By way of simple example, I was sometimes asked for my view on 'shared space'. I started suggesting that perhaps shared 'places' rather than shared 'spaces' are what the city really needs to create democratic publics, which invariably opened up interesting discussions about the nature of the distinction between these two ideas.

The second reason for taking an iterative approach to data analysis and testing was because the boundaries, between my 'field site' and 'the university', were decidedly blurred. In the most basic terms, this arose because I was researching the city where I am from; inevitably my inquiries leaked into my personal life as the issues I was exploring came to be debated over various kitchen tables of friends and family, just as contacts from my personal life leaked into my fieldwork. But this blurring was magnified because many of my research subjects are, themselves, some form of urban researcher; I was interviewing and engaging with academics, ecologists, architects, and participatory action researchers, many of whom work in university settings and/or have a good grasp of urban theory. Through the winter of 2023/24, for example, I enjoyed an extended e-mail

exchange with a city council employee, who had previously worked in an academic setting, about the utility of Michel Foucault's writings for understanding Belfast's urban geography. There was no clear distinction here between 'empirical' and 'theoretical' worlds, just as I found myself conducting 'fieldwork' interviews in university offices. Specifically, here, although I was hugely aided by, and will be forever thankful for, the support provided to me by Queens University Belfast (QUB), it was also quite useful that I was based at a university on the far side of the Irish Sea: some of my research participants in North and West Belfast are distrustful of QUB because they are a key powerbroker and landowner in the city. At the same time, several members of the TBTC are activist-researchers based at QUB; they helped me with my research, whilst *also* being the subjects of it – a dual relationship which, I think, was easier to achieve thanks to the distance between me and QUB. The blurring of the boundaries between 'the field' and 'the university' means it is challenging for me to put a hard and fast number on how many hours I spent actually doing fieldwork (if you can't neatly delineate the boundary of the field, it is hard to know when you cross into or out of it) and it feels decidedly arbitrary to do so. This is before one even begins to try to answer the question of whether waiting at the Mackies site, for hours on end, for the arrival of a Loyalist band stuck behind a police barricade, counts as *worthwhile* fieldwork. This is a challenge which geographers – and particularly feminist geographers – have long recognised (Katz, 1994; Rose, 1997). It is also something I became more relaxed about after a graduate seminar with anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli in Durham's geography department on 14/04/2023, where she laughed at my question about the boundaries between the field and the university, saying that she thought ideas about the field being a neatly bounded thing were a bad hangover from a time when anthropologists still wore pith helmets.

In addition to this iterative approach to data analysis, I also made use of more 'classical' methods of analysis once I had returned to Durham in October 2024, using NVivo to code my interviews and notes, to clarify my core themes, and outliers/points of contradiction. My iteration, or testing of the data then took on a different tenor and primarily occurred through interaction with my supervisors. But because I consider Belfast home I have also continued periodically returning to the city as I have written up this thesis. This means I have also enjoyed two further rounds of more explicit data testing as my results have developed. In the first, I returned to several of my interviewees, who had asked me to provide them with feedback, bringing with me a PowerPoint with my key findings. The response to this was mixed; some found this very interesting, whilst others told me that I was just repeating back to them what they already knew (particularly those in community centres) in more complex language. I was glad of this critique, as it made me think more carefully about how to adjust my messaging for different audiences. My second round of testing occurred in a different way, and it involved trying to overcome a problem I had come across in my research; the struggle which community groups in the city often have identifying and clarifying what power is and what it might take to change

it. To engage with this challenge, in collaboration with a student from QUB and several Belfast-based community groups, I applied for a small research support grant and helped to organise a ‘power mapping’ workshop in March 2025. Again, this was an imperfect process, which I learnt a lot from, but it turned out to be more successful than my earlier attempts to disseminate my research findings in a more direct fashion.

Since starting to write the thesis in earnest, I have become reluctant to re-engage with Belfast and its politics; the city is ever-changing, and this thesis can only ever provide a snapshot of it, which is immediately out of date. Yet, of course, this thesis aspires to provide a more enduring contribution to geographical ideas. This is a dissonance which, to some extent, I have only been able to overcome by placing some distance – literally, but also in time – between me and the city. In other words, I have felt a need to leave the city’s urban worlds, in order to feel ready to engage with it in an intellectual fashion. This is challenging: listening back to recorded interviews immediately transports me back to Belfast. But it is something which has become easier as this thesis text has stabilised, partly thanks to the anonymisation of my data, which places something of a gap between the text here and life in the city. I have no doubt that, to some extent, this limits the utility of this text for those engaged in Belfast’s politics. But, just as all forms of anonymisation are a compromise (Ellersgaard et al., 2022; Saunders et al., 2015), perhaps the imposition of a distance from city life is necessary in trying to create a piece of work which does more than simply react to the city and its problems, but instead actually says something new about what it is, and what its possibilities might be.

2.6 Conclusions

‘But most of all, cities are the meeting places of stories. The men and women there are narratives, endlessly complex and intriguing. The most humdrum of them constitutes a narrative that would defeat Tolstoy at his best and most voluminous. The merest hour of the merest day in the merest of Belfast’s citizens would be impossible to render in all its grandeur and all its beauty.’

Eureka Street, Robert McLiam Wilson (1997, pp. 215–216)

No single story, nor any single research project, could ever do any single city justice, never mind the vast heterogeneity of urban worlds on our urbanising planet. But this chapter has set out a method which aspires to do its best to hold on to as much of Belfast’s multiplicity and complexity (and maybe even magic) as possible. This method begins by moving away from a focus on ‘The Problem’ or ‘The Solution’ of the city, which section 2.2 suggests prematurely narrows understandings of what the city is, what its politics are, and what these things might become. Instead, section 2.3 proposes intra-city comparison of detailed case studies of projects which are attempting to create more democratic, sustainable futures, as a means of trying to remain open to, and learn from,

the city's multiplicity. Section 2.4 explains how I came to be engaged with two such projects; an engagement inevitably shaped by a lifelong relationship with Belfast and its politics. The final section of the chapter – section 2.5 – set out the details of how I actually went about gathering, and analysing, the data at the core of this thesis; a process which inevitably required different forms of compromise, such as those associated with anonymisation, which I negotiated through the course of my fieldwork.

But if all representations of the urban kill off some of its multiplicity and magic, why make them in the first place? The simple answer is, of course, to provide an answer to the research questions set out in section 1.4 of the introductory chapter. But, as touched upon in the introduction, in a climate-changing, urbanising world, where the political potential of the city is increasingly in question, perhaps it is not enough to provide instrumental answers to simple questions, about the way cities should be 'improved' in order to make them more sustainable. Perhaps, instead, research should destabilise our habitual ways of seeing and knowing the city, or more specifically, help us to recognise all of the ways in which we, ourselves, 'unsee' (Cowen, 2017; Schubert and Sumich, 2025) urban worlds which lie right in front of us, or which we may even play a part in (re-)creating.

The way in which this thesis approaches this task, as set out here, is by following the inquiries of others trying to negotiate and understand the city. The next chapter begins this process, by tracing out the way which Belfast's ethno-communal territorial divisions and climate change have become entangled, by actors who are attempting to try to create more democratic futures in the city.

3 Belfast: What's Your Problem?

'It's all Belfast's fault. Something should be done. Belfast shouldn't be allowed to get away with this kind of thing. Belfast has to be stopped. Its time will come.

I hope.'

Ripley Bogle, Robert Mcliam Wilson (1989, p.31)

3.1 Introduction

This chapter explores how those involved with delivering the Northern Irish Peace Process, and its critics, have come to understand Belfast's ethno-communal, territorial divisions as being a problem which need to be engaged with, as part of efforts to engage with climate change through the city. This is increasingly something of a 'common sense' position for actors engaged with the city's politics, and builds on broader, longer-standing sentiments, that resolving Belfast's ethno-communal divisions might help to create better futures for those who live in Northern Ireland. But this is a political idea which itself has a history. This chapter doesn't aim to try to trace it back to its genesis – a favourite activity, and source of contention, for political actors associated with Northern Ireland – but instead begins in the late 1990s, when the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) was signed, and the 'Peace Process' was set in motion, beginning a programme of socio-spatial transformation, designed to try to further democracy in Northern Ireland. This programme remains ongoing today, and it from this programme that the FMCG was developed. Many actors of various types have disagreed with the Peace Process through the years; this chapter also traces the origin story of the TBTC (Take Back the City) coalition, which is an offshoot of an NGO called PPR (Participation and Practice of Rights), set up to act as a kind of 'critical friend' to the GFA, ensuring that its promises were realised in practice.

In a more theoretical vein, this chapter draws inspiration from an argument advanced by urban geographers Barnett and Bridge (2016), that there is a need to think about the city and the urban 'problematically', exploring 'what it is that makes knowing about cities and urban processes important in particular conjunctures' (Barnett and Bridge, 2016, p. 1188). It also follows Ignacio Farías' argument that if we want to understand urban democracy we must 'follow [the] inquiries' (Farías, 2011, p. 367) of actors aiming to remake the city, as 'inquiry is what underlies the possibility of an active democratic public' (Farías, 2011, p. 367). Both Barnett and Bridge (2016), and Farías (2011), build their arguments regarding problematisation by bringing the work of Michel Foucault and John Dewey together, on the basis that Foucault and Dewey both 'asserted and affirmed that thinking arose in problematic situations; that it was about clarifying those situations, and that ultimately it was directed towards achieving a degree of resolution of what was

problematic in the situation' (Rabinow, 2011, p. 12). But Foucauldian and Deweyan notions of problematisation also have differences, and the interpretation of problematisation advanced by Barnett and Bridge (2016) (which brings Foucauldian and Deweyan ideas together) is a distinctive one. The first part of this chapter (section 3.2) outlines Barnett and Bridge's (2016) particular understanding of problematisation in more depth, and places it alongside an understanding of problematisation advanced by Foucauldian scholar Tania Murray-Li (2007a); an understanding which she has developed through ethnographic analysis of governmental programmes similar to the Northern Irish Peace Process. The chapter then lays out the 'Guns to Greenways' history of this Peace Process (section 3.3), before explaining how the TBTC has developed from long-standing critical engagement with this Peace Process (section 3.4). The chapter then draws these different theoretical and empirical threads together, demonstrating the utility and limitations of the different forms of problematisation described by Barnett and Bridge (2016) and Murray-Li (2007a), and exploring the implications which these differences have, for thinking about climate politics in Belfast (section 3.5). As the conclusions summarise, although both of these projects understand the city's ethno-communal territorial divisions to be a climate change problem, the details of the chapter demonstrate that each of these projects has very different understandings as to what kind of problem this is, and how it should be tackled.

3.2 Problematising the City

Barnett and Bridge (2016) develop their argument that the city needs to be considered 'problematically' against two background conditions. First, a rising sense that cities and the urban might play a critical role in resolving a range of socio-ecological problems. Second, debates within urban theory about what exactly the urban and the city are and can do. As the introduction to this thesis sets out, these debates remain live today. In response, Barnett and Bridge (2016) suggest that there is a need to pay attention 'to what is at stake in the reframing of so many issues as 'urban' in some sense or other' (Barnett and Bridge, 2016, p. 1188), and to attend 'more carefully to why it matters to know about urban issues in specific situations' (Barnett and Bridge, 2016, p. 1201).

Their argument that the city must be thought about *problematically* is developed from the conceptualisation of problematisation set out in Michel Foucault's writings and interviews; in a late interview he describes problematisation as 'a movement of critical analysis in which one tries to see how the different solutions to a problem have been constructed; but also how these different solutions result from a specific form of problematization' (Foucault, [1984] 1991, p. 389). As Foucault explains in this same interview, understanding problematisation is important because to 'one single set of difficulties, several responses can be made' but 'what must be understood is what makes them simultaneously possible' (Foucault, [1984] 1991, p. 389):

It is problematization that responds to these difficulties, but by doing something quite other than expressing them or manifesting them: in connection with them, it develops the conditions in which possible responses can be given; it defines the elements that will constitute what the different solutions attempt to respond to. (Foucault, [1984] 1991, p. 389)

Within secondary Foucauldian literature – and specifically, within secondary Foucauldian literature focussing on governmentality – the term ‘problematization’ is sometimes used in a more specific sense, as sub-section 3.2.1 explains. Tania Murray-Li’s (2007a) writings present one of the best examples, and her thinking around problematization is useful because she develops it in relationship with governmental programmes akin to the Northern Irish Peace Process. But Barnett and Bridge (2016) are at pains to point out that Foucault’s explanation of problematization ‘is a much less rounded or coherent idea than it often presented in secondary commentaries (Barnett, 2015)’ (Barnett and Bridge, 2016, p. 1190). Specifically, they explain, problematisations do not ‘necessarily arise from a purposeful strategic intervention, as is assumed in certain strains of Foucault-inflected social theory’ (Barnett and Bridge, 2016, p. 1194). Instead, problematization is also something which occurs as a kind of response to everyday life and the problematic situations which unfold through it; an idea which, as sub-section 3.2.2 explains, they develop in relationship with Dewey’s notion of ‘inquiry’, as a means through which ‘problematic situations’ are engaged with (Dewey, [1938] 1986).

The main body of this chapter explores the utility of these related yet different notions of problematization, when it comes to thinking about the way which the city and the urban come to be understood as ‘problems’, and the political implications which this has.

3.2.1 Governmental Problematization

Foucauldian analyses of governmentality are based upon a series of lectures Foucault delivered in the late 1970s (Foucault, 2007). In these lectures, he argues that modern government developed from sovereign forms of rule, which he describes as being essentially ‘circular’ (Foucault, 2007, p. 98) in nature, in that their ultimate end is ‘the exercise of sovereignty’ (Foucault, 2007, p. 98). In contrast, in his conceptualisation, government is concerned with the ‘population’, aiming to try to ‘secure’ and ‘improve’ it, by aiming at ‘a series of specific finalities’ (Foucault, 2007, p. 99), to be achieved by arranging or disposing ‘things to achieve [particular] different ends.’ (Foucault, 2007, p. 99). This focus on population is associated with what Foucault terms ‘biopolitics’; a concern with ‘man as species’, where the population serves as both target and means through which government is achieved (Foucault, 2003). Government in this conceptualisation is something which is facilitative and productive; famously, Foucault suggested that whilst sovereign forms of rule often operated through spectacular forms of killing and discipline, modern forms of government instead aim to operate by or

encouraging certain forms of life to flourish, whilst letting others die (Foucault, 2003, p. 241). Government here is also not ‘the preserve of a monolithic state operating as a single source of power’ (Li, 2007b, p. 276) but instead draws upon and is situated within particular assemblages, or *dispositifs*, made up of ‘the system of relations’ within a ‘heterogenous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions - in short, the said as much as the unsaid’ (Foucault, 1980, p. 194).

Foucault explains that a *dispositif* always ‘has as its major function at a given historical moment that of responding to an *urgent* need’ but that any given *dispositif* is also always invested with a ‘strategic function’ (Foucault, 1980, p. 195) which, in Tania Murray-Li’s analysis of governmental programmes, is best understood as ‘the will to improve: the attempt to direct conduct and intervene in social processes to produce desired outcomes and avert undesired ones’ (Li, 2007c, p. 265). This will to improve is translated into governmental programmes, in her analysis, through two interconnected practices. First, problematisation, which she describes as ‘identifying deficiencies that need to be rectified’ (Li, 2007a, p. 7), and second, ‘rendering technical’, which she describes – by drawing on Nikolas Rose (1999, pp. 33–34) – as representing ‘the domain to be governed as an intelligible field with specifiable limits and particular characteristics...defining boundaries, rendering that within them visible, assembling information about that which is included and devising techniques to mobilize the forces and entities thus revealed’ (Li, 2007a, p. 7). Put differently, to render a set of processes ‘technical and improvable an arena of intervention must be bounded, mapped, characterized, and documented; the relevant forces and relations must be identified; and a narrative must be devised connecting the proposed intervention to the problem it will solve’ (Li, 2007a, p. 126).

Her work is particularly helpful for thinking through problematisation, not only because she foregrounds it in her analysis of governmental programmes, but also because her work crosses over from the development of governmental rationalities and plans, into the ‘witches brew’ which emerges when these interventions ‘become entangled with the processes they would regulate and improve’ (Li, 2007a, p. 28). Three elements of her analysis, on this basis, are particularly useful when it comes to understanding the relationship between problematisation and programmes like the Northern Irish Peace Process. The first is that, she argues, the ‘identification of a problem is intimately linked to the availability of a solution’ (Li, 2007a, p. 7); this is not a case of problems preceding the creation of governmental programmes, but particular domains being rendered problematic as particular governmental programmes are assembled and reconfigured in order to try to realise the will to improve. Second, ‘the practice of “rendering technical” confirms expertise and constitutes the boundary between those who are positioned as trustees, with the capacity to diagnose deficiencies in others, and those who are subject to expert direction’ (Li, 2007a, p. 7); put differently, the process of

drawing a boundary around a particular problematic domain serves to constitute a distinction between those tasked with government and those to be governed, or between consultants and consultees, or experts and the inexpert. Third, the forms of boundary drawing associated with problematisation and rendering issues 'technical' ensure that representation of the domain to be improved is always 'incomplete' (Li, 2007a, p. 18), especially because this process tends to exclude questions of political economy (Li, 2007a, p. 18). This means that governmental programmes frequently tend to 'fail' to achieve the results they desire and/or produce results which are contradictory.

However, although governmental programmes tend to draw boundaries around particular domains to be governed, bounding and constituting them in particular ways, Foucault also points out that government is something which can be 'centrifugal', particularly when it comes to trying to 'secure' the population (Foucault, 2007, p. 44). Where attempts to discipline subjects attempt to 'regulate everything' aiming to allow 'nothing to escape', attempts to secure the population, by contrast, 'let things happen' (Foucault, 2007, p. 45), encouraging particular forms of encounter and circulation in lieu of others in order to increase the likelihood of certain expeditious outcomes. Security 'therefore involves organizing, or anyway allowing the development of ever-wider circuits' which in turn means that new 'elements are constantly being integrated: production, psychology, behaviour, the ways of doing things of producers, buyers, consumers, importers, and exporters, and the world market' (Foucault, 2007, p. 45). He illustrates his argument through the example of the removal of Caen's walls, showing that this is related to a shift from trying to achieve control through disciplinary means towards an attempt to try to secure the population through circulation; this is an example which has, unsurprisingly, subsequently proven to be popular with urban theorists (Barnett and Bridge, 2016; Magnusson, 2011). The implication is that attempts to try to secure the population may at once be expansive, or centripetal, constantly drawing new domains into their remit, and at the same time delineate or 'bound' these domains in particular ways, which make them governable on the basis of existing solutions of governmental programmes. This is particularly important when thinking about the way in which long-standing governmental programmes attempting to 'secure' the population, like the Northern Irish Peace Process, come to engage with relatively 'novel' emerging problems, such as climate change.

But the understanding of problematisation which Barnett and Bridge (2016) advance is different to that advanced by Tania Murray-Li. Specifically, their understanding of problematisation is one which is developed by bringing Foucault's writings into relationship with the writings of John Dewey. The next section explains this alternative understanding of problematisation in more depth.

3.2.2 Situational Inquiry

The conceptualisation of problematisation advanced by Barnett and Bridge (2016) is one developed, in part, through a reading of Foucault's later works and interviews, where he approached the term explicitly. As they point out, here the term is not necessarily explicitly associated with attempts to govern but is instead 'concerned with disruptions to patterns of action, that is, with difficulties, obstacles and uncertainties that unsettle established patterns of engagement with the world' (Barnett and Bridge, 2016, p. 1198) which are then 'taken up by thought' (Barnett and Bridge, 2016, p. 1192). This different understanding of problematisation, in their view, opens up a 'point of contact between Foucault's notion of problematization and Dewey's account of the logic of social inquiry' (Barnett and Bridge, 2016, p. 1192); more specifically, they posit, 'the shared emphasis in both cases is the creative relationship between *thought*, in Foucault, and *inquiry* in Dewey, and its generative conditions' (Barnett and Bridge, 2016, p. 1192).

For Dewey 'the object and occasion of thinking was an experience of problems in the world that catalyzed inquiry into those problems in order to clarify and resolve them' (Rabinow, 2011, p. 12). Specifically, for Dewey, inquiry is a process which begins from a problematic or indeterminate situation, meaning a particular situation which is 'disturbed, troubled, ambiguous, confused, full of conflicting tendencies, obscure, etc.' (Dewey, [1938] 1986, p. 109); such situations 'interrupt forward motion and deflect it into inquiry' (Fesmire, 2014, p. 87). The term inquiry itself involves, in the Deweyan idiom, 'the controlled or directed transformation of an indeterminate situation into one that is so determinate in its distinctions and relations as to convert the elements of the original situation into a unified whole' (Dewey, [1938] 1986, p. 108). As Fesmire, p. (2014, p. 89) puts it, '[a]ctive reflection—inquiry, in Dewey's lingo—thus occupies "an intermediate and reconstructive position" between an unstable situation and a temporarily controlled one.' But Dewey was always clear that the 'knower is an active participant in what is known, not an outside spectator of it or passive receptacle' (Fesmire, 2014, p. 86). Inquiry, then, is not something which involves a kind of withdrawal from the world but is about operating 'into and within specific conditions, not outside them (Rabinow, 2011, p. 14); it is about actively acting in and reflecting upon a problematic situation, in order to try to effect its contingent stabilisation.⁸

As Barnett and Bridge, p. (2016, p. 1193) point out, for Dewey, problematic situations are specific instantiations of more 'extensive and enduring' situations, unfolding over longer temporalities and over broader spatial scales. This is important, in their analysis, because this means that Dewey 'explicitly articulates something that remains at best only implicit in Foucault's account [of problematisation], namely the continuity between the patterns of inquiry that go on in everyday practices *and* in more specialised fields of

⁸ For this reason, Dewey's work has gone on to provide philosophical inspiration for participatory action researchers, who aim to learn by engaging with issues (see Willis and Lake, 2023 for examples)

thought' (Barnett and Bridge, 2016, p. 1194 emphasis added). This sense that inquiry is something which 'in which not only urban students' or governmental actors engage, but 'also what concerned groups, civic society, urban movements do' (Farías, 2011, p. 376), underlies Farías' (2011, p. 367) sense that 'inquiry is what underlies the possibility of an active democratic urban public' and his argument that if we are to understand urban democracy we must follow the inquiries of these actors, as they go about engaging with the city, in order to understand it and its problems.

In addition, there is a difference in emphasis between Foucault and Dewey's understandings of where inquiry should lead: where 'Dewey uses a vocabulary of repairing troubled situations [...] Foucault is orientated towards freeing up and exploring the possibilities opened up by new problematizations' (Barnett and Bridge, 2016, p. 1194). Dewey's reparative focus is particularly important, when it comes to understanding the *political* implications of his thought.

As touched upon in the introductory chapter, for Dewey a public is not simply a group of people who are affected by an issue but is 'all of those who are affected by the indirect consequences of transactions to such an extent that it is deemed necessary to have those consequences systematically cared for' (Dewey, [1927] 2016, p. 69). However, as Marres (2015) explains in her close reading of the Lippmann-Dewey debate, 'issues' – as she terms them – which draw publics into being are difficult to systematically care for, precisely because they resist being neatly defined as object-problems. Consequently, they are 'a type of trouble which is resistant to familiar strategies of problem solving' (Marres, 2015, p. 46). For the pragmatists, then, publics come into being 'when actors become implicated in problematics that they cannot control as individuals. This is why they require some form of collective action. But neither can these problems be solved by instrumental action on the institutional level' (Marres, 2015, p. 46). This means, Dewey argues, that a new public 'cannot use inherited political agencies' in order to realise itself, because the 'latter, if elaborate and well institutionalized, obstruct the organisation of the public' (Dewey, [1927] 2016, p. 84); consequently to 'form itself the public has to break existing political forms' (Dewey, [1927] 2016, p. 84). Here Dewey's thinking runs close to the arguments of more contemporary political theorists, who have argued for the necessity of the 'part which has no part' to rupture existing forms of political settlement, in order to further democratisation (Rancière, 2010). And yet, in the Deweyan understanding, publics can also draw attention to issues which are in need of systematic care, and can therefore help to 'envision supplemental institutional and legal appendages that need to be added [to existing arrangements] to address the concerns of a particular public' (Rogers, 2016, p. 41). This means, for Dewey, that there 'is not sharp and clear line' which demarcates 'where a public comes into existence which has interests so significant that they must be looked after and administered by special agencies, or governmental officers' (Dewey, [1927] 2016, p. 107). Instead, the 'line of

demarcation between actions left to private initiative and management and those regulated by the state has to be discovered experimentally.’ (Dewey, [1927] 2016, p. 107).

This is a different type of relationship between boundary-drawing, politics and problematisation to the one described by Tania Murray-Li (2007a) in the preceding section; this is not problematisation in order to stabilise the distinction between those who are agents in, and those who are subject to, government, but instead is a means of ensuring that existing governmental ‘agencies’ – as Dewey calls them – do not become ‘ossified’ (Rogers, 2016, p. 41), in the sense that they become rigid and inflexible, losing their capacity to adapt to and cater for an ever-changing world.

The next two sections of this chapter set out the histories of the Peace Process (and the FMCG), and the TBTC, empirically charting how they have come to understand the kind of problem which contemporary Belfast presents. This sets the foundations for the analysis which follows, where this empirical material is analysed using the related but distinct forms of problematisation described here.

3.3 From Guns to Greenways: the reconfiguration of Northern Ireland’s Peace Process



Figure 3.1: Republican Mural from St James’s area of Belfast, denoting evolving forms of political struggle. (Source; the author)

Generally, the political history of the Northern Irish Peace Process is narrated as a transition from bombs to ballots, or from armed struggle towards representative

democracy (see Figure 3.1 for an example of a public mural denoting this history). When described in these terms, this history revolves around the actors and political organisations most closely associated with the perpetuation of political violence in Northern Ireland, and their gradual corralling into the governmental institutions. The creation, perpetuation, and faults of the consociational ‘power-sharing’ model associated with Northern Irish representative democracy is often placed at the centre of this story (McGarry and O’Leary, 2006a, 2006b, 2004).

But the Peace Process has also involved trying to (re-)create a society which can both support these institutions, and which can be governed through them. In other words, the Peace Process has also been about creating the conditions in which democratic self-government might flourish, creating the conditions in which those who live in Northern Ireland might make themselves into ‘free’ liberal subjects. It is the history of this process – in which the European Union’s Special EU Programmes Body (or SEUPB) has played a crucial role – which is of most relevance for this chapter and thesis, because it is of particular relevance for understanding the contemporary dynamics of public formation in Belfast.

Picking a starting date for this process of socio-spatial transformation is challenging – trace the genealogy of the term ‘transformation’ through the Peace Process, for example, and one ends up in the prison cells of Loyalist paramilitary prisoners in the late 1980s, who developed this concept to describe the types of changes to Northern Ireland’s political economy which they thought were needed to eradicate the conditions which had created political violence (McAuley et al., 2009; Mitchell, 2011; Shirlow and McEvoy, 2008).⁹ A more useful starting point for this chapter, though, is the moment when these ideas – and the Peace Process more generally – started to emerge ‘beyond the wire’ in the 1990s, as paramilitary prisoners were released into mainstream society, the GFA was signed, and the EU’s PEACE funds commenced their operation. This section of the chapter uses the history of these funds as a guiding line through the history of the Peace Process, using them as a means for exploring how the rationale underpinning it has changed through time (this is not, in other words, an examination of the *effects* which this programme has actually had on Northern Irish life). By charting the way which this process itself has changed it becomes possible to see how a governmental programme initially set up to deal with issues like the decommissioning of paramilitary weapons

⁹ During my fieldwork I was provided with a box of material from the ‘Shankill historian’. Along with assorted rubber bullets, paramilitary insignia, and photo albums from the Loyalist wings of Northern Ireland’s prison camps, were several series of pamphlets developed and self-published by Loyalist ‘think tanks’ in the late 1980s and 1990s. These pamphlets set out the early gestation of ideas about how Northern Ireland’s political economy should be ‘transformed’ in order to try to root out the sources of political violence. A more readily accessible history of these ideas can be found in Shirlow and McEvoy’s *Beyond the Wire* (2008) which provides excellent empirical context, and analysis, of this more ‘subaltern’ history of the ideas which lie behind the inception of the Peace Process.

gradually came to concern itself with the transformation of the urban environment, through projects like the creation of Greenways.

3.3.1 Transformation to Reconciliation: Peace 1 and 2

The first round of PEACE funding, delivered between 1994 (when the first major paramilitary ceasefires were declared) and 1999, aimed ‘to promote social inclusion of those who are at the margins of social and economic life’ and ‘to boost economic growth and advance social and economic regeneration’ (SEUPB, 2026a, p. no pagination). Northern Ireland’s ‘border regions’ were an area of particular geographical focus (including regions with ethno-sectarian divisions ‘within’ Northern Ireland, like divided areas of Belfast), as were political prisoners. The former were the geographies where political violence had been most intensively focussed, and the latter were the actors who had tended to perpetuate it. In addition, prisoners often were easy for the PEACE funds to engage with, because they were easy to track down by merit of being ‘in the system’, had experience of education and training programmes, and often had few alternative options for re-engaging with ‘mainstream’ society (McAuley et al., 2009; Shirlow and McEvoy, 2008). Prisoners also tended to occupy a curiously ambivalent position in Northern Irish society, hated by some communities, revered as leaders and heroes within others (Mcevoy and Shirlow, 2009). This at once justified engagement with them and meant they could serve as useful points of contact, between the ‘new’ Northern Irish government and communities which might otherwise have been disengaged from the Peace Process. PEACE 2 – which was delivered from 2000 to 2006 – leant into this ambivalence, aiming not only to transform ex-combatants and ex-prisoners, but expecting them to become agents of transformation, who would help to engender broader societal transformation (Mitchell, 2011).

These first two rounds of funding became renowned for two key features. First, they quickly gained renown for their bureaucracy; in particular, they demanded that local community actors produce extensive sets of ‘outcomes and indicators’ identifying areas of focus and demonstrating their effects (Hayward and Murphy, 2012). Second, the funds became associated with a ‘partnership model’ which aimed to blur the boundaries between local, national, and international actors, private and public sectors, and state and community bodies (McCall and O’Dowd, 2008). For advocates, this working style was necessary to overcome Northern Ireland’s institutional, political, and geographical boundaries; for critics, it represented a shift from ‘government’ to ‘governance’, mirroring shifts happening across the EU in the 1990s, whereby critics argued traditional forms of politics were being replaced by technocratic, private sector led alternatives (Mitchell, 2011).

In theory, the PEACE funds provided opportunities for public participation in, and so critique of, the Peace Process. In practice though, critics argue, these participatory forums often only provided opportunities to criticise and discuss the technical details of

particular projects, rather than offering opportunities to fundamentally question the rationale and/or overall aspirations of the Peace Process (Mitchell, 2011). In Northern Ireland this space for critique was further shut down because the leaderships of Sinn Féin – which increasingly stood at the top of a pyramid-like Republican political structure – and the main Unionist and Loyalist political groups had bought in to the particular vision of peace associated with the mainstream Peace Process. Mitchell (2011) describes these structures and this period as being associated with a process of ‘long division’, whereby those who refused to fit into these political structures, or disagreed with the Peace Process, were cast as ‘remainders’, or more specifically ‘dissidents.’ These dissidents were often, in turn, eliminated from public life – often quite literally.¹⁰

But the particular vision of war and peace encapsulated in PEACE 1 and PEACE 2 were slightly different; where the former had focussed largely upon reconstruction and socio-economic transformation (in line with the ideas advanced by paramilitary actors in the 1980s, about what it might take to remove the conditions which had produced political violence in the first place), the latter became increasingly focussed upon ‘reconciliation.’ For some – and particularly ex-combatants – this was a negative shift. Although often firmly committed to the project of building a peaceful society – and often engaged alongside former antagonists in the hard, slow, sometimes dangerous work of doing so – these actors were often willing engage in this work thanks to recognition of, and respect for, ideological differences, rather than on the basis that these differences should or could be reconciled (Byrne et al., 2009a; Mcevoy and Shirlow, 2009; Mcevoy et al., 2006; Morrow, 2023). In addition, for some, the term ‘reconciliation’ disavowed the underlying historical factors – such as colonialism and the collapse of industrial capitalism – which had precipitated political violence, instead implying that the conflict was solely an ideological clash between two ethno-national sectarian groups. This was reflected in the PEACE fund’s increasing focus on ‘cross-community’ projects, which required that actors position themselves as being either ‘CNR’ (Catholic/Nationalist/Republican), or ‘PUL’ (Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist), and engage on this basis (Byrne et al., 2009b; Mitchell, 2011). Refusal to engage with these types of projects was taken as a rejection of ‘peace’ – and/or as evidence of continued refusal to create a plural society – rather than a rejection of the particular system of identification that the PEACE funds required, the framing of the conflict which this system of identification implied, and the system of political representation that it was creating and supporting. And so, critiques of the particular vision of war and peace associated with the PEACE funds were used as evidence of the need to deepen, and broaden, the Peace Process, rather than as a

¹⁰ in the late 1990s and early 2000s to express critical views of the Peace Process was to run the risk of physical violence. For example, in 1999 the British secretary of state Mo Mowlam described murders conducted within CNR and PUL political worlds, perpetuated as part of attempts to bring those who ‘dissented’ from the mainstream Peace Process ‘into line’ as ‘internal housekeeping’ meaning it did not count as ‘breaking the ceasefire.’ The domestic metaphor is suggestive here, of the sense that this is not an issue of ‘public’ concern.

resource for readjusting the way which the project of building a peaceful society was being pursued (Mitchell, 2011).

In the first decade of their existence then, the PEACE funds shifted from a focus upon issues of political economy, towards a concern with problems which the GFA, and the institutions associated with it, were designed to tackle – the problem of governing a society divided into internally homogenous but distinctive (and symmetrically balanced) PUL/CNR blocs, affiliated with particular national identities, in need of ‘outside’ support to encourage reconciliation, and so governable through a system of inter-national cooperation and governance. These trends would both become clearer, and shift, in the period from 2007 onwards, during the delivery of the next two rounds of PEACE funding, where both the urban and ‘natural’ environment would enter the frame as important targets for governmental action.

3.3.2 Spatialisation and Environmentalisation: Peace 3 and 4

In 2002 the Northern Irish power-sharing executive collapsed, and in 2003, the Northern Irish electorate returned a vote which rewarded Republican and Unionist extreme parties Sinn Féin and the DUP, to the detriment of their more moderate counterparts, the SDLP and the UUP. Faced with the possibility of the collapse of the GFA and an apparently fragmenting polity, the UK government commissioned two pieces of policy work, which would go on to become touchstones for the next decade of Northern Irish government and which would markedly shape PEACE 3 and PEACE 4. First, a piece of research, conducted by a pair of academics (Kelly and Hamber, 2004), which aimed to provide a ‘working definition’ of the term ‘reconciliation’, which would go on to be incorporated in the evaluation the PEACE 2 fund and would shape the subsequent development of the PEACE 3 fund’s objectives. Second, a policy paper, officially published by the Office for First and Deputy First Minister in Northern Ireland, but in practice driven by the then Labour government, who had assumed ‘direct rule’ of the province. The report declares that **‘[s]eparate but equal is not an option. Parallel living and the provision of parallel services are unsustainable both morally and economically’** (OFDFM, 2005, p. 41) before outlining a vision for an inexorable progression towards a shared society, noting, for example, that although ‘some single identity work promotes real confidence [...] some merely serves as an excuse to avoid the inevitable’(OFMDFM, 2005, p.41) . In four deft sentences the document discounts both history and political economy as providing any kind of explanation for Northern Ireland’s socio-political problems, stating instead that:

The **underlying difficulty is a culture of intolerance**, which we will need to remedy if we are to make Northern Ireland a more ‘normal’ society - the sort of society we would all be proud to live in. (OFMDFM, 2005, p.8)

Achieving this ‘normalisation’, the document posits, could begin by recognising people as individuals, who share a common humanity, rather than as ‘cyphers’ of communities.

The document also argues that the state did not, and should not, play a role shaping Northern Irish culture, arguing instead that the state should be 'neutral between competing cultural claims.' (OFMDFM, 2005, p.9). However, the document posits that the state could work upon space; by creating 'shared space' the state could help to foster new quasi-spontaneous forms of relationship, between individuals, and between communities, to help reduce political tension, and promote reconciliation.

These ideas and themes would be developed, almost verbatim, in the guidelines for PEACE 3 funding which commenced in 2007, and whose core aims were 'reconciling communities' and 'contributing to a shared society' (SEUPB, 2026b, p. no pagination). The programme's rationale was underpinned by two theories: the first, described as the 'individual change theory', posited that peace would come 'through transformative change of a critical mass of individuals' through 'training, personal transformation/consciousness raising workshops or processes, dialogues and encounter groups or trauma healing.' The second was described as the 'healthy relationships and connections theory' which posited that peace would emerge 'out of a process of breaking down isolation, polarisation, division, prejudice and stereotypes between/among groups' (SEUPB, 2007, p. 23). The report would describe these theories as being supported by 'academic literature' – in fact, these two theories were culled from a list of ten possible theories for change in post-conflict societies, described in a report by an American think tank, on the basis of a paper which appears to have never been published in a peer-reviewed journal (See Church and Rogers (2006) for the original unpublished paper).

A key way the programme would aim to deliver these objectives was through the creation of 'Shared Space' – an idea which the programme would develop and refine through a relationship with the Belfast City Council 'Good Relations' team under a scheme called 'Transforming Contested Space' which 2011. These schemes would develop a set of qualitative principles, colloquially known as the 'WAGS' principles, which argued that shared space should have the qualities of being 'Welcoming', 'Accessible', 'Good Quality' and 'Safe' (Belfast City Council, 2018, p. 31) (Shared space, this policy suggested, should be achieved through a combination of urban design, and by working upon those who used these spaces through training programmes, (mirroring the ideas about individual change and 'connection' set out in the PEACE 3 rationale). Shared space projects consequently increasingly became the flagship schemes associated with the PEACE fund. The quintessential example was the Girdwood Community Hub, built on the site of a former Army Barracks on an interface in North Belfast (De Young, 2023). The relationships which the City Council built through the delivery of this project (and other smaller projects like it) marked the beginning of a distinct 'urbanisation' of the PEACE funds, which increasingly focussed upon the provision (or removal) of urban infrastructures.

In the meantime, the power-sharing system in Northern Ireland had become increasingly crisis-ridden, culminating in a series of major protests and riots in 2012, regarding the number of days on which the Union flag would be flown over Belfast City Hall, orchestrated by a variety of PUL groups. This was potentially embarrassing for the British government: the international G8 summit was due to be held in Northern Ireland in 2013, marking 15 years of ‘peace’ in the province. Against this background a ‘policy on community relations (Together: Building a United Community (T:BUC) [...] was hurriedly pushed through the Executive by DUP and [Sinn Féin] Ministers, reiterating the new orthodoxy that “Peace is now firmly established with stable political structures that are delivering for local people.” (Morrow, 2023, p. 53)

‘T:BUC’ was largely a continuation of the trends established in the 2005 Shared Future policy and provided particularly strong support for the idea of creating shared space: the main headline from the document was that the NI executive intended to bring down all of the province’s interfaces, or Peace Walls, by 2023. To many observers this goal seemed audacious; since the official conclusion of the conflict in 1998, ethno-national territorialisation had, arguably, become more rather than less prevalent in urban areas, as evidenced by the continued expansion of Peace Walls across Belfast. To bring these walls down, the document explained, the NI government would **‘work to ensure that good relations principles are a core component of regeneration and town/city centre management.** Good relations, equality of opportunity, reconciliation, mobility and connectivity [should be seen] as central design principles provid[ing] the framework for a more shared, open, inclusive society’(OFMDFM, 2013, p. 68). In other words, the rationale of reconciliation and connection would, the document hoped, become embedded in all aspects of urban government in Northern Ireland; just as the peace process was becoming increasingly focussed on urban infrastructures, transformations to urban environments should focus on creating the kind of society aspired towards by the peace process.

These ideas would be closely reflected in the objectives for the PEACE 4 programme which, like its predecessor, placed a strong emphasis on the creation of ‘shared space.’ In addition though, for the first time, in PEACE 4, conflict transformation and environmental sustainability would be woven together:

‘The [PEACE 4] Programme will support the development of capital build projects that demonstrate tangible progress in developing shared space and building a shared society. Projects will be designed to have a transformative effect locally as well as having a regional significance. Projects will incorporate high quality design and sustainable development principles, including measures to minimise carbon emissions.’ (SEUPB, 2018, p. 31)

Meanwhile, whilst PEACE 4 was being delivered, Belfast City Council were developing the idea that environmental sustainability and conflict transformation could be woven

together through the creation of new shared spaces. This relationship was developed most significantly through a connection between the C40 ‘Resilient Cities’ programme and the City Council – the funding and support this programme provided allowed the city council to develop a new team, which would be the first team in the city’s history to focus upon socio-ecological issues stretching beyond local ecology (Interview, City Council Climate Change team, 17/01/2025). This team, in turn, enjoyed a close relationship with the city council’s ‘Good Relations’ team, in part because C40 had selected Belfast as a ‘Resilient City’ thanks to its history as a ‘conflicted’ city. The Resilience Strategy, published in 2020 – which in effect has become the city council’s climate strategy – consequently aligns closely with the city’s ‘good relations’ plans. As the report puts it:

‘It is not a coincidence that Belfast’s Resilience Strategy and its Good Relations Strategy have both prioritised “connectedness” as a major problem to be solved. If Belfast is to thrive in the face of unexpected challenges, it must do so as a united, socially cohesive city.’ (Belfast City Council, 2020, p. 49)

When interviewed, those from the Good Relations team explained that this alignment was deliberately fostered, in part because:

‘The conflict is a history project for a lot of young people and it's not in their lived memory. So, whenever people talk about Community relations and issues, I think most people understand, yes, we need to build better community relations. But how can you maximise that then? And how can you make it relevant, particularly to young people? So, the environment is probably the main area where you can make it relevant, where you can build.... So, you see, for me I’m selfishly using the environment to build good relations, but see my colleagues in the climate team? They’re selfishly using good relations to promote the issue of the environment.’ (Interview, Belfast City Council Good Relations Team, 12/03/2024).

Those in the city council’s climate change team corroborated this view: when funds from the Resilient Cities programme ran out the climate team were, one of their members explained, ‘lost’ for a few years, trying to figure out where exactly they fitted into the city council, and so were encouraged to forge and maintain relationships with a variety of different teams, including the Good Relations team and the local Ecology team, before building their own identity as a team focussed more specifically on decarbonisation (Interview, City Council Climate Change team, 17/01/2025). Building upon this collaboration, in 2024 the City Council released a policy document describing the mutual relationship between ‘Segregation and the Environment’ – here the latter term is taken to mean both the human, and non-human, environment. The report charts a wide variety of different negative impacts which physical environmental segregation can have, ranging from flooding to poor health outcomes, and describes the potential for ‘environmental’ actions to draw people in the city together, and the potential this has to help with decarbonisation (Belfast City Council, 2024). This sense that the city’s physical divisions

are what underlies its incapacity to tackle the problem of climate change was echoed in interviews with the City Council's climate change team:

'This City is so disconnected physically and then obviously that has implications for our carbon impact as communities are more separated, there's less social capital, the governance is really tricky, we duplicate services and the cost of that is extortionate. So, even for example, for us in climate, we're trying to bring down the energy use or [de-carbonise] and stop using fossil fuels in all of our buildings. But we would have [for example] far more leisure centres because of all the peace walls and the divided communities and stuff so, the ability to get to Net Zero is just so much harder, and so... yep.' (Interview, Belfast City Council Climate Change Team, 17/01/2025).

This is a perspective which chimes with that of the city's Good Relations team:

'So, what we're trying to do is create the argument that if you want to be serious about tackling the climate crisis, and Belfast meeting its net zero targets, then we have to seriously start considering how to address segregation in all of our public service delivery. [For example] we're already at a segregation handicap, if you want to decarbonize public buildings, because we have twice as many than anybody else.' (Interview, Belfast City Council Good Relations Team, 12/03/2024).

This interviewee would cite the FMCG as a kind of 'microcosm' of the intersection of these ideas; within the city's 'Environment and Segregation' report it would be cited an example of a project where attempts to reckon with the city's divisions and environmental projects were being brought together. The next section explains how the project itself originated.

3.3.3 Origins of the FMCG

The FMCG was funded by PEACE 4 and reflects many of its priorities; to create shared space, bring down peace walls, and help to make the city more sustainable. As described in the preceding section, these are also priorities associated with the broader urban development, climate change, and 'good relations' objectives being pursued by Belfast City Council. Consequently, one might expect that this is a project developed on the basis of its alignment with these planned priorities. But in actuality, when asked about the way in which the project was developed, interviewees explained that it was first created when a senior civil servant (who, by 2024, had retired), drew a line on a map, which visually connected together a range of different green spaces across the city's North and West (Interviews 6, 8, 21). As this senior civil servant himself explained:

Interviewee: There was another round of PEACE came out: we says, look, we'll make an application. And some of the PEACE people in the council went with some small beer stuff, really, that's what the Europeans said, in and around the city centre, and [the Europeans] said 'we want something tangible'. They came to

us, so we said ‘look, why don’t we go for the longest peace line in the city, which is this one right along the Springfield Road here, and we’ll go for that’. But we had to give a proper context. So, having the experience of the Connswater Greenway and what it had done in East Belfast, we put a large map together from Cave Hill, through Ardoyne, West Circular here, out here [Springfield Dam], up into the top of the Falls, down the Whiterock, down Westlink and into the new train station. So, the initial bid to the Europeans was: look, we can actually get a big semi-circle Greenway around the West and North of Belfast. Areas that suffered the most from the Troubles, has the most Peace lines, etc. etc. If we can do something here it’ll really make a bit of a difference. At the same time, we got money... There’s a peace line down here, Cupar way, know it?

Me: Yeah.

Interviewee: So we got money for the Shankill Women’s centre, which is under construction [on Cupar way]. We also were doing St Comgall’s, at the other end of the peace line, on the Falls Road, Divis Street, facing that International Wall. And up here, at the Black Mountain, there’s another shared peace thing. So we sorta got a map out, and I said look: these are happening in this area. This is about trying to get North and West Belfast some sorta Peace dividend. (Interview, City Council Greenway Team, 19/02/2024)

More specifically, the senior civil servant explained, the route itself had been largely decided through his long-term experience of developing a variety of different projects across the city over the course of more than thirty years. Later many in North and West Belfast would express frustrations that the project had not been developed through consultation with those living in the city, despite claiming to be a ‘community’ project. These criticisms were noted but discounted by those involved with the project, as one of its protagonists explained:

‘I remember way back, actually, one of the community saying to me ‘this didn’t come from us.’ And you sort of thought ‘well in a way it did.’ [...] Because, through our Belfast Agenda, it’s about an inclusive, connected, shared city. It’s about addressing the inequalities. [...] So, this helps do that. [...] And it goes back to, where I said, sometimes it is for council and, you know, other statutory agencies to have a more strategic vision. ‘Cause everyone does get quite focussed upon, you know, that myopia: ‘this is mine and this is what is wrong with me.’ (Interview, City Council Greenway Team, 18/01/2024)

As they went on to reiterate:

‘Sometimes, I think this is the thing – and I know that council were in for a bit of criticism about Forth Meadow – sometimes there needs to be that strategic vision, for the city, and that’s where I see the likes of council, the community plan, having

that strategic plan for a connected city.’ (Interview, City Council Greenway Team, 18/01/2024)

Beyond this claim of a strategic vision for the city, those involved in the project also needed to try to present a more substantive case for the EU funding. This was problematic, first, because it is hard to quantify ‘sectarian culture’ and the way which it is shaped by the configuration of urban space, and second – as a variety of senior Belfast City Council civil servants explained to me – because the City Council often does not have the data needed to make evidence-based decisions at the speed funders desire (Interviews 21, 23, 29, 39). In response, the City Council commissioned a consultant to make a report, using of a variety of visual methods, to try to help qualify the project’s necessity. Mapping formed a particularly important aspect of this work; the initial line on a map drawn by the senior civil servant would be developed from Figure 3.2, to Figure 3.3, to Figure 3.4. Feasibility reports would also make extensive use of a photo-mapping exercise, conducted in order to illustrate the city’s physical divisions, as shown in Figure 3.5.



Figure 3.2: Map of Greenway, from Procurement report, May 2018, provided by Belfast City Council

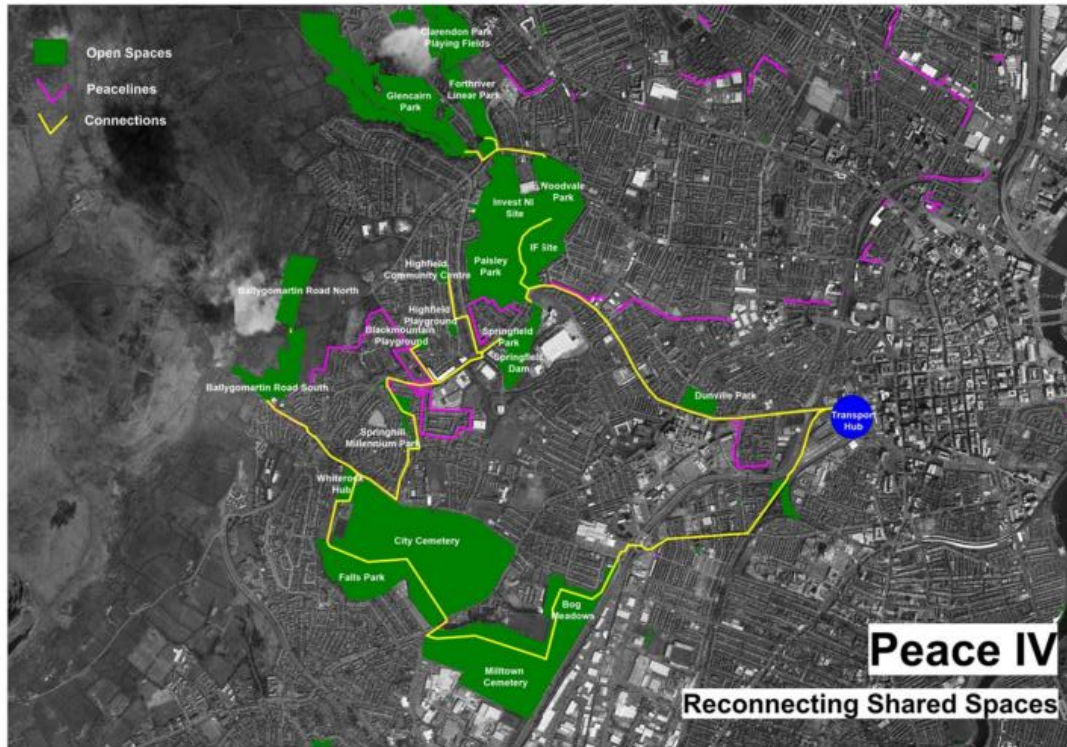
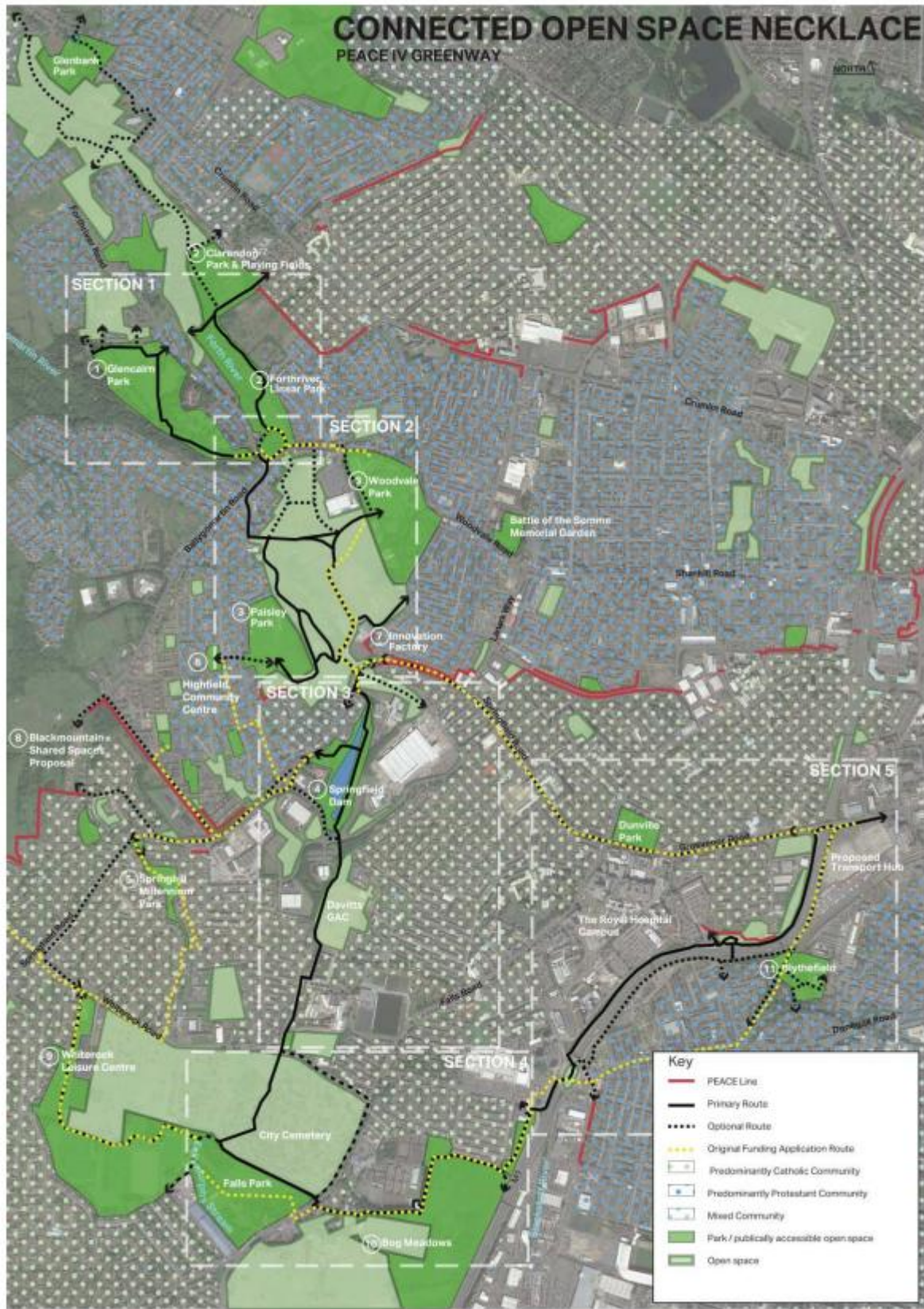
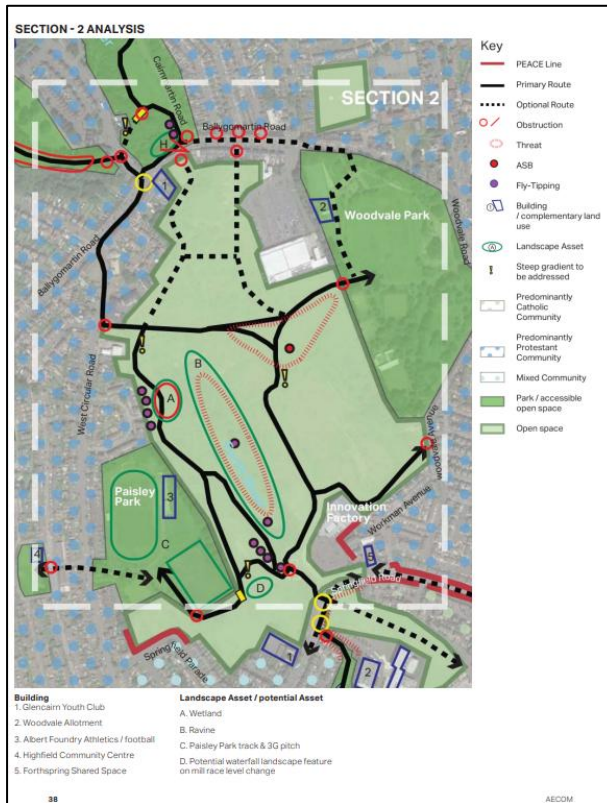


Figure 3.3: Map of Greenway, from Procurement report, May 2018, provided by Belfast City Council



6 AECOM
Figure 3.4: Map of Greenway, from Greenway Feasibility Report, AECOM September 2018, provided by Belfast City Council



Section - 2 Ballygomartin Road to Springfield Road



OBSTRUCTIONS TO BE REMOVED

- No major obstructions but there are a number of impediments to access. Existing on footway section along Ballygomartin Road is narrow.
- New entrances are required through boundaries on Woodvale Park and Paisley Park.
- The Springfield Road junction with the InvestNI site is exceptionally wide with exception delay at five crossings for pedestrians.
- Invisible barriers with evidence of territoriality could be removed through the opening up of the whole area to wider use.
- Boggy ground to the north west and north of Fort River would need to be gabion lined to allow passage of water.

NEW CONNECTIONS TO BE MADE

- A new bridge is required over old mill races
- Both existing controlled crossing points on Ballygomartin Road and main Springfield Road / Innovation Factory junctions should become puffin crossings.
- Uncontrolled crossing / raised table would be an advantage along the Ballygomartin Road to four junctions providing traffic calming and enhanced pedestrian priority.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

- Accessible A frames will be required on all entrances onto this section to counter scambler access.
- Springfield Primary School extension should be factored into emerging designs.
- Proposed plans for the 10 acre InvestNI site needs careful planning to ensure land use proposals and employment opportunities are sensitive to the location and create a pluralist environment without cultural division.
- Fly tipping / invasive species particularly prominent in hot spots throughout the site.
- Naturalistic ravine landscape to be retained and invasive species eradicated.
- Post industrial waste land should be planned and designed to complement Woodvale Park.
- Habitat diversity of existing and new wetland / bog areas should be extended and maintained as wetland.
- New development opportunities should be designed to maximise public access and strong parkland / campus aesthetic so it can integrate with its setting.
- River restoration and flood alleviation works are not part of this study but should be considered as part of the detailed design for reasons of public safety. Access to existing culverts and screens needs to be maintained. The major culvert in the DFC land at the Innovation Factory needs to be made safe and made more visually attractive. It could become a viewpoint where the concrete structure is clad and planted. NW / Rivers Agency agreement to works would be required.



Figure 3.5: Example spread from Photo-Mapping survey from Greenway Feasibility Report, AECOM September 2018, provided by Belfast City Council.

Finally, the feasibility report associated with the project conflated the city's physical divisions with a range of other social and ecological issues; health outcomes, mental health, antisocial behaviour (taken as a proxy for sectarianism); climate change, and urban sustainability. In aggregate, the feasibility report argues in its introduction, this makes it clear that Belfast '[...] has mental 'walls' as well as the obvious physical ones; both need to be systematically dismantled, along with other infrastructure of enclosure and segregation' (AECOM, 2018, p.13). The city, in other words, has exactly the problems that the FMCG can resolve.

3.4 Dissidence but not Dissidents

The TBTC is a project which has emerged out of a long-standing critical engagement with the Peace Process, led by an organisation called 'Participation and Practice of Rights' (PPR). This organisation emerged:

'[...] out of like a coalition of groups and organisations saying this Good Friday Agreement is worth fuck all to us without a community organising model, right? It's worth nothing unless we can get those people whose rights are being denied and organise them, to effectively hold the state to account, against these new standards, which is the equality legislation and all that.' (Interview, TBTC activist, 21/08/2024).

In practice, this means that PPR have often voiced views dissenting from the Northern Irish political mainstream, yet have needed to carefully avoid being labelled 'dissidents' or 'anti-peace'. As set out in section 3.3.1, treading this fine line can be challenging in Northern Ireland. To do so they have made use of and developed a particular community organising model, upon which the TBTC is ultimately founded, as set out in the following section.

3.4.1 PPR and the Peace Process

At the core of PPR's work is community-led research, which begins, as one of their organisers explained, with the following question:

'Our first question in communities is 'what is the problem?' We're never gonna tell you what the problem is. And every single time you'll hear a problem of inequality articulated in a really specific and meaningful way. So if you ask 'what is the problem with Busses?' it will be probing down then into costs, something [to do with school] uniform, schoolbags...' (Interview, TBTC activist, 21/08/2024).

As they went on to elaborate:

'So, [...] the strong thing about that approach is it's always talking to Robbie and going 'Robbie, what is it? How do you experience that problem?' 'Well I've got damp on the walls. That's my housing crisis.' And then: 'do more people like you

have that problem? how can you find out?’ And Robbie will go ‘well I’ll talk to my neighbours’ and we’ll go ‘would a survey help? or do you wanna get audio? or do you want to take photos?’ And then action research teams evolve, and they carry out [research], and they become absolute experts on the situation. I mean, they’re already experts on their individual circumstances, but then they become profound experts, in the community circumstances, and then when they’re in an engagement with power, it isn’t a power imbalance. Know what I mean? It’s a, ‘we know what the problem is cause we were there, we took the photos, and we talked to a load of people. What have you done?’ know what I mean?’ (Interview, TBTC activist, 21/08/2024).

PPR have used this organising model in both Loyalist and Republican areas of Belfast, as well as in Edinburgh and the Republic of Ireland. Campaigns around housing have become a central focus of their work, partly because of the fact that it ‘ties everything together’ (Interview, TBTC activist 30/08/2024) – it is an intersectional issue which they have repeatedly found to be central to the problems associated with neoliberal urbanism. One of their first housing campaigns was based in the Lower Shankill – a staunchly Loyalist area of Belfast – where PPR facilitated a campaign which delivered the first batch of post-GFA social housing in the area. Since, they have helped to facilitate the creation and organisation of campaigns linked to housing in a range of different areas of Belfast, each with a different title – the Seven Towers Campaign, Build Homes Now, and ‘Equality Can’t Wait.’ Although each of these campaigns has had a slightly different focus, and has focussed on different areas of Belfast, at the end of each campaign PPR have taken the learnings from each and used them in their future work. Moreover, each time PPR have conducted a campaign, have come up against a new and different ‘excuse’ for not building social housing; first that there was no need, next that there wasn’t sufficient funding, and finally that there was no land available for building housing. This final assertion clashed with the views of PPR members and those in housing need who they were helping, based on their experiences of the city and its post-industrial urban fabric, which they felt had lots of obvious vacant gaps. To substantiate this feeling, PPR helped a group of actors associated with the ‘Equality Can’t Wait’ campaign to conduct a photo-mapping exercise, using camera phones to document vacant land across the city. These photos were then cross-referenced with maps of the city’s public land (see Figure 3.6 and Figure 3.7), which would become a report delivered to the Belfast City Council.

in PPR to focus more closely on the city's ethno-territorial divisions. As one of their activists explained:

'You want to address the housing crisis? Show us where you can possibly do this in Belfast, because if you're talking about available land or even – I hate the term – the kind of lowest hanging fruit you would clearly go for public land that could be moved quickly as opposed to having to, you know, get it off a private developer or purchase something again. So, when you look at it in those terms, where is there? Well, in Belfast that tends to be interface areas. So, [the question becomes] what are you going to do with the interface areas?' (Interview, TBTC activist, 05/12/2024).

This interest in interface areas led PPR into confrontation with the PEACE 3 fund and their Shared Space plans at the Girdwood hub, which used a site on an ethno-territorial interface in an area of acute social housing need for the development of a leisure centre – a confrontation described in eloquent detail by De Young (2023). In the view of PPR activists, their campaign for housing on the site was stifled because in Belfast it is presumed that there is more acute need for social housing in the city's CNR population than in its PUL population, meaning that the construction of social housing in interface areas is seen as being a territorial 'loss' for PUL politicians and communities. But PPR's activists argue that this perspective does not reflect the lived reality – and perspectives – of those living on the city's margins:

'We're doing housing drop-in clinic things, and we have been for quite a long time. People who come to those who are in danger of eviction, or are living with damp and mould going up their walls, and their kids are coughing and sick all the time or, you know, people who have been served noticed to quit or, you know, are in a hostel and desperate to get out, or are in a place that they don't feel safe and are desperate. I mean, all of these issues.... They're sitting next to each other on seats and handing each other tissues and, you know, passing the biscuits and, you know, talking to each other. People... people in need really don't give a monkeys about whose turf this is and whose it isn't. I mean, it's not... you know?' (Interview, TBTC activist, 22/11/2023)

PPR have, consequently, increasingly argued that there is a need to move away from allocating housing on the basis of ethno-religious background, but this is a perspective which is often refused (or falls on deaf ears). For example, at a discussion about the city's housing needs in Queens University Belfast, one of the TBTCs activists – a migrant from South Sudan – explained that when she arrived in Belfast, she had been allocated a social house with (as she later discovered) paramilitary graffiti on the door. As she explained, she went to the neighbours to ask about it and ask more generally about the safety of the local area; the neighbour was friendly, but asked whether the TBTC activist was a

Protestant or Catholic. ‘Muslim’, the TBTC activist replied. ‘But are you closer to being Catholic or Protestant?’ the neighbour asked again.

After the TBTC activist told this story, a representative from a local housing association stood up, and explained that this was exactly why they didn’t care whether it was Irish Protestants and Catholics, or ‘Ethiopian Protestants’ or ‘Italian Catholics’ or anything else, just so long as there was equal representation on a CNR/PUL/Other basis. In the corridor afterwards, the TBTC activist explained to me that it was exactly this kind of inability to see beyond a CNR/PUL/Other lens that she’d been trying to illustrate with her story but which the housing association representative had, clearly, failed to grasp (field notes, 19/09/2024).

PPR voiced this kind of challenge throughout the community engagement and consultation meetings for the Girdwood forum, but found these engagements provided little opportunity to open up fundamental conversations about how public land should be used, and who it should be used for. Consequently, for their next campaign – which has become the TBTC – they decided to change tactics.

3.4.2 Creating a Coalition

The TBTC was founded both specifically in response to the ‘failure’ of the PPR-supported campaign at the Girdwood site, and thanks to a broader realisation amongst those in PPR that their tactics were no longer working, as one activist explained:

‘When people hear PPR they’re like ‘right, we know what’s coming next here, they’re gonna try and put us in a room alongside residents. They’re gonna make us account for ourselves to poor people. We’re going to have to explain things that we don’t know how to explain.’ And so then... then all the chicanery and manoeuvring all becomes different. So, in the in the north, in Belfast, we’ve started moving towards like the creation of our own entities. I wouldn’t call them institutions just yet but it’s moving in that direction; we want to create alternative institutions.’ (Interview, TBTC activist, 21/08/2024).

The idea of building a ‘coalition’ was one which a TBTC activist developed, after being provided with the funding to travel to South Africa and learn about housing activism there. The name the ‘Take Back the City’ was developed when a different activist travelled to a squat in Dublin, protesting against the housing crisis, in order to show solidarity. In spite of the semantic similarities then, this is not an attempt explicitly to realise a kind of Lefebvrian vision, for a Right to the City, but instead a more bespoke attempt to try to reckon with the particular challenges of Belfast’s urban environment. Specifically, PPR decided that they would try to focus the energies of the groups they were working with under housing stress on the largest piece of unoccupied public land in the city – the Mackies site. The campaign ‘basically just took all of [PPR’s] thinking at that time and put it on steroids if you get me?’ (Interview, TBTC activist, 21/08/2024). The campaign was

first launched through a series of webinars, delivered during the COVID-19 pandemic, which attracted actors ranging from homeless people to asylum seekers, to academics, the then infrastructure minister, and a variety of politicians. These webinars were important because they encouraged the TBTC to broaden their understanding of the housing crisis in Belfast today:

‘I think what [the webinars did] was, like... we were running this campaign, and it was like, right: so there's people on the housing list; there's homeless people; there's public land. We need housing there. And we need to put pressure on public authorities to build that housing. And that's what it was. And then, what they were coming up against; what we were coming up against with Mackies is... It's basically, sectarianism.

Whereas what the webinars did, was it allowed us to imagine a vision that was broader than that, and kind of beyond that, and to bring in climate breakdown, biodiversity loss, into that story, and the fact that actually, even if they build public housing on that site, the social housing system is broken. So why would we want to do something within a broken system?’ (TBTC Activist, 05/12/2023).

In addition, the campaign released an interactive map, which built upon the photo-mapping exercise and described in section 3.4.1, pooling together a variety of data sources ‘to provide communities, activists, professionals, public servants and politicians with a visualisation that will help us to respond equitably and resiliently to the challenges facing the city, challenges such as homelessness and climate change.’ (TBTC, 2025, no pagination). The map allows those using it to layer different data sources over the city, visualising and developing new understandings of how different problems intersect within it; see Figure 3.8 for an image of its opening interface.

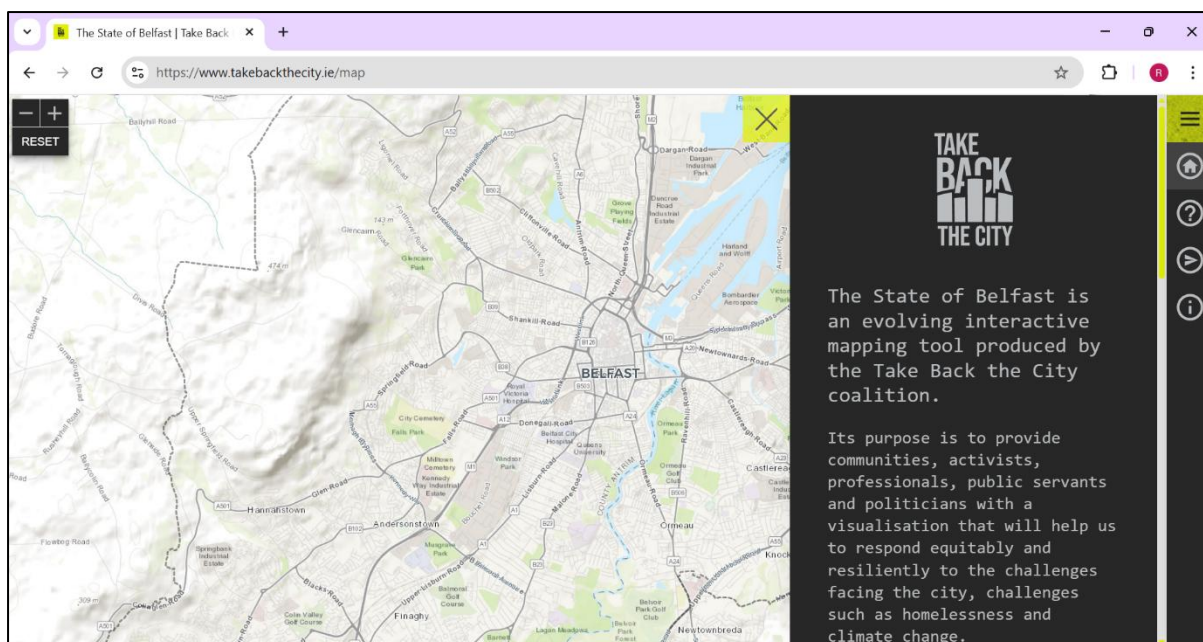


Figure 3.8: Opening Page of Take Back the City Mapping Interface, source (TBTC, 2025).

From this point, the campaign has grown rapidly, gathering together an ever-expanding array of actors, making use of an ever wider array of media to convey its message – from rap music, to the creation of an opera, to the painting of murals, to the creation of community gardens – and attracting an ever broader array of visions, as to what the Mackies site (and the city more generally) is and could be.

Sometimes, the campaign makes use of antagonistic tactics in order to advance its ends – in 2020, for example, they were associated with a campaign by a group of American pranksters called the ‘Yes Men’, which caused a ‘security alert’ at the City Council.¹¹ But these types of events are the exception rather than the rule; for example, when asked what it might take to change understandings of what the city is and could be, one activist explained that it began not with vocal protest, but with listening:

‘You just keep listening. You keep listening and you keep seeing what works, and most of all you keep listening. And you talk to people and you work out who are your allies, who is capable of leaving their ego at the gate, you know? I’m not interested in that whole ‘we’re amazing, you’re shit, we need to get funding, fuck you all.’ Like, I just think that’s past now. We can’t be doing that cause, you know, we’re all going to die if we don’t figure out how to work together. We’re social creatures; human beings are social creatures. But all our structures – capitalism, and the way this city is planned, it’s all designed to keep us apart. So, we need to work out ways of people being together and breaking down that kind of power dynamic in this city.’ (TBTC Activist, 05/12/2023).

¹¹ Officially, the TBTC have publicly denied a direct connection to the Yes Men, due to the risk of legal action, but there are many close points of overlap, resonance, and connection.

This is not, then, a campaign whose central focus is on realising the right to the city as a kind of ‘cry and a demand’ (Lefebvre, 1996, p. 158), nor is it a campaign whose central ethos revolves around attempts to try to achieve forms of ‘dissensus’ (Rancière, 2010), nor some combination of these two things (Davidson and Iveson, 2015b). Instead this is a campaign which is aiming to try to create, and provide, tools and forms of connection, which might allow for deeper forms of participation in urban life, through the formation of communities; this is a campaign which aligns with, as Dewey puts in the final paragraph of *The Public and its Problems* (Dewey, 2016, p. 233) ‘[v]ision [makes one] a spectator; hearing [makes one] a participator.’ The next section provides closer analysis, of the way which this type of engagement with the city, as compared to that used by the Peace Process and FMCG, shapes how it comes to be understood as a problem.

3.5 So, what’s the problem?

Perhaps the Peace Process could be understood solely as a kind of ‘governmental problematisation’ (see sub-section 3.2.1) in contrast with the ‘situational inquiry’ (see sub-section 3.2.2) being undertaken by PPR and the TBTC. But, as sub-section 3.5.1 below explains, it’s not quite that simple and there is richness to be gained by reading each of these projects against each of these different understandings of problematisation. More specifically, as sub-section 3.5.2 goes on to elaborate, doing so helps to provide a richer understanding of the way in which the city’s climate politics are being remade, through engagement with its politics. More broadly, as the final sub-section 3.5.3 sets out, these different approaches help to provide deeper insight into how different forms of engagement with the urban shape understandings of what the city’s political potential might be.

3.5.1 Problematisation and Reflection

In many ways the history of the Peace Process – and the FMCG – aligns neatly with the framework set out in sub-section 3.2.1, which draws heavily on an understanding of problematisation as it functions in governmental programmes, developed by Tania Murray-Li (2007a). Since emerging from ‘behind the wire’ this programme has shifted away from disciplinary modes of control, towards attempts to try to ‘secure’ the population, by producing self-governing subjects. After starting with a concern for those most directly involved in the conflict, the programme has gradually but inexorably expanded, centripetally drawing new domains into its remit; first the population more generally (especially in North and West Belfast), then the built environment, now the ‘natural’ or non-human environment too. As the immediacy of political violence has faded into the past, the addition of new domains of Northern Irish life into the Peace Process has helped to ensure its continued relevance to contemporary public concerns. The addition of climate change into the Peace Process is perhaps the clearest example; as the member of the Good Relations team quoted above puts it, for many people today the conflict is a ‘history project’ (Interview, Belfast City Council Good Relations Team,

12/03/2024), but adding climate change into the Peace Processes' remit has helped to keep it 'relevant' to the 21st century.

Meanwhile, whilst expanding, this programme has also reconfigured these domains, problematising them in ways which allow for their governance through Northern Ireland's institutions; entities which do not fit into these particular framings have been eliminated from public life. More broadly, the Peace Process started aspirations to achieve a kind of 'transformation' – a concept linked to ideas developed by those directly involved in the conflict, who recognised the entanglement of politics and the economy, and described a need to 'transform' this system in order to root out the sources of violence. But over time this programme has itself become transformed, shifting towards a concern with 'reconciliation', as part of a turn towards a sense that the problem 'of' Northern Ireland is a cultural one, which requires working on norms, moods, and habits. Where once this was something primarily achieved through things like forums for public participation, today the Peace Process is increasingly trying to achieve these aims by working on the urban environment itself, through projects like the FMCG, which aims to bring down 'the mental walls' which are supposed to run through the city's publics. This is an intervention which aims to work on the built environment, and public perception of it, in order to try to prevent the realisation of certain negative futures (like a potential political insurgency).¹²

The creation of this project was itself associated with an attempt to try to to devise a narrative 'connecting the proposed intervention to the problem it will solve' (Li, 2007a, p. 126); specifically, as the senior civil servant quoted in sub-section 3.3.3 puts it, there was a need to give 'proper context' (Interview, City Council Greenway Team, 19/02/2024) for the project, by showing its alignment with a range of other governmental programmes and priorities. As the city council's policy documents – such as the *Segregation and the Environment* (Belfast City Council, 2024) report – come to describe projects like the FMCG as the types of projects needed to tackle climate change through the city, climate change is increasingly understood as a problem which must be engaged with through the creation of connections, across ethno-communal territorial divides, as part of a wider attempt to try to improve the city's resilience.

Configuring climate change in this way helps to ensure that the expertise of those who are already associated with the Peace Process – skilled in areas like conflict mediation, and the removal of spatial barriers – remains useful, for the socio-ecological problems of the 21st century. But this also means that climate change – and more broadly, various aspects of life in the city – are being defined on the basis of a governmental programme

¹² Anderson (2011) describes the emergence of types of 'environmental style' interventions as being an important part of US Counterinsurgency doctrine in Iraq, noting that these interventions do not only aim to act or work on the build environment, but also shape 'shape how that action will be perceived' (Anderson, 2011, p. 218)

which many living in the city feel no longer reflects the realities of life within it. For example, as one community worker and politician explained to me:

‘There’s like a presumption that... I don't know if it's like communities don't have the intellect to have developed relationships across interfaces, you know? But it's getting... it's getting beyond a joke now. Like a lot of us... Well, I'll speak for, say, for us here in South Belfast. We have a working relationship with South City that has been in place now for about 24 plus years, that we have managed to sustain and grow and nourish and [become] good friends. We here would be familiar with GVRT. We will contact each other, those sorts of things so... And I would assume there are other portions of the Greenway [where] it's probably similar. So don't assume like you're going into two warring factions. Because there's a bit of an assumption there that we haven't spent years building relationships.’ (Interview, Sinn Féin councillor and community worker, 06/06/2024) (NB: the ‘South City and ‘GVRT’ are PUL areas of the city, whilst this politician and community worker is speaking from a CNR area of the city).

In other words, defining the city and its problems today in order to ensure it aligns with the Peace Process is, some suggest, ensuring that the city and its contemporary problems are framed through associations with the past, rather than on the basis of present needs. The TBTC is, of course, a project which aims to combat this by beginning with the immediate challenges facing those who live in the city. Consequently, one might describe this project and its genesis as aligning neatly with the form of problematisation described under the term ‘situational inquiry’ in sub-section 3.2.2. Specifically, the ‘PPR method’ – also used by the TBTC, is one which begins by trying to figure out what exactly a problematic situation which disrupts everyday life is – damp on the walls, an inability to pay a bus fare – by helping people to go through a process of ‘inquiry.’ Specifically, by helping those affected by these problematic situations to form participatory research teams, PPR help those who are affected by particular problematic situations to understand how their own, personal problems are related to more ‘extensive and enduring’ (Barnett and Bridge, 2016) conditions; a patch of damp on the walls of a social house thereby *becomes* part of the housing crisis, as the person affected by this problematic situation comes to understand how their particular experiences are related to, and form part of, broader urban conditions. In doing so, PPR are aiming to try to help identify issues which are not being adequately catered for by existing forms of governmental institutions; the aspiration here is to try to at once identify an issue – and a public associated with it – which is not being adequately catered for by existing governmental institutions, and to try to encourage ‘systematic care’ (Dewey, [1927] 2016, p. 69) of it. This is a form of problematisation which is designed to disrupt the boundaries between ‘experts’ and the ‘inexpert’ – it aims to take the particular experiences of those living in the city and turn them into material which qualifies them as ‘experts’, so allowing them to challenge the already powerful. This is a means, then, of challenging existing

understandings of what the city's particular problems are, as well as a means of challenging the boundaries of the institutions which play a role in its governance.

Over time PPR have come to realise that the particular 'problematic situations' which face those who are afflicted by the housing crisis are related to a much broader set of conditions, associated with the system of political economy which currently underpins life in the city. This is a perspective they have developed through repeated attempts to try to resolve the various issues which are associated with the housing crisis; their 'inquiries' are not merely about understanding this issue but are an attempt to intervene 'into and within' them (Rabinow, 2011, p. 14). In response to their repeated failures to substantively shift this issue, they've increasingly come to the view that what's needed is a kind of 'transformative' change, which radically reconfigures the relationship between land, property, and the city's political economy; the Mackies site is an excellent site through which to potentially achieve this, because it is a site which raises questions about who the public is and how they should be included in the city's future. This is, in other words, an excellent site with which to conduct their next experiment, whereby they are aiming to try to spark this transformative change. Incorporating climate change into their efforts serves as a means of underlining the sense that a kind of radical transformation is needed to 'the system' in order to reckon with the 'particular' problematic situations which people face in their everyday lives. Incorporating climate change into their work is a means of building a sense that collective action and change is what is needed, in order for any one individual to enjoy a better life.

And yet, in actuality, it is not quite this simple in either case. In the TBTC's case, those who are a part of this campaign recognise that they themselves have become a kind of 'governmental actor', or at least a 'powerful entity' (Interview, TBTC activist, 21/08/2024) within the city's politics. Partly for this reason, they are aiming to continually 'refresh' the campaign and to keep bringing new ideas and actors into it, in order to keep it 'relevant' to the ever-shifting needs and concerns of the city (Interview, TBTC activist, 21/08/2024). Paying attention to this reveals that their engagement with the city – and their problematisation of it – bears some similarity to the forms of problematisation associated with the Peace Process; their project is, in many ways, a kind of 'centripetal' one, which has drawn new domains of Northern Irish life into its remit, and problematised them in ways which serve to support their understandings of the kinds of changes which need to be made in order to sustain the city's population. As in the case of the Peace Process, read this way the TBTC have drawn Climate Change into their work to evidence their pre-existing sense that the city must be transformed in order to be improved; this is a means of using climate change to support their pre-existing understandings of the city and its problems.

Meanwhile, as perhaps best shown by the example of the FMCG, those engaged with the Peace process also make decisions on the basis of forms of 'situational inquiry',

which begin from very embodied relationships with urban life and the problems it throws up. The FMCG has come to be retrospectively qualified, or evidenced, through the creation of maps, reports, and photographs. But when I asked the senior civil servant, who drew the line on the map where the project had come from, he told a story which traced through a history of the Girdwood project, football pitch redevelopments in North and West Belfast, and various other engagements with the European Union reaching back to the redevelopment of the city's gasworks in the late 1980s (all of which the senior civil servant had worked on) (Interview, City Council Greenway Team, 19/02/2024). One way of reading this history is as a kind of accumulated experience, of engaging with and overcoming the various 'problematic situations' thrown up by attempts to try to govern the city's urban environment through these projects.

Here there is a key point of difference between the two projects, related to the forms of 'reflection' undertaken by actors involved in them.¹³ Where those engaged in the TBTC are proactively aware of their 'governmental' qualities, those engaged in the Peace Process instead deny the significance of their experiences in the city, suggesting instead that it is their 'strategic view' of the city, which shapes their work, and qualifies their expertise, as it allows them to avoid the 'myopia' of those who are embedded within it (Interview, City Council Greenway Team, 18/01/2024); after recounting the way which the FMCG developed from his own personal experiences of living in and attempting to reshape the city, for example, the senior civil servant apologised as he thought this probably wasn't the sort of material I was interested in, as it didn't pertain to 'proper' questions of urban planning. Maintaining a boundary between these 'personal' experiences of the city, and the 'strategic view' which these actors apparently use to plan for its future is part product of, but also a necessary means by which, the boundaries between expert/inexpert are maintained; if, as the Peace Process documentation suggests, the city's problem *is* the relationship between publics and the urban environment, then it is only those who can separate themselves from this environment, gaining a distanced 'strategic view' of it, who should be qualified as those who can act on the public's behalf. For the TBTC, by contrast, being a public actor means first being part of a public, which in turn means understanding how the particular 'problematic situation' one faces is related those which others may be facing; this requires the formation of communities, and engaging in forms of inquiry, which clarify this 'problematic situation', by understanding its relationship with other aspects of urban life. Here one's embeddedness within the material problems thrown up by urban life and the social relationships which make up the city qualify one as a public actor. This is not an attempt to realise a particular 'strategic view' of the city, but instead one which is aiming to

¹³ Tania Murray Li (2007b) notes that discussions 'of reflexivity in the literature on governmentality tend to be rather abstract' but can be grounded by exploring them 'ethnographically by asking questions like 'Who reflects? What weight do the outcomes of previous interventions carry in their reflections?' (Li, 2007b, p. 277)

encourage a receptiveness, or responsiveness, to the city's problems and others' experiences of it; it is a project not based on vision, but on listening, as sub-section 3.4.2 concludes.

As the next section explains, these different forms of engagement with the city – and reflection regarding these forms of engagement – have implications when it comes to understanding what it might take to engage with climate change through the city or, more broadly, create more sustainable futures.

3.5.2 Situating Sustainability

As touched upon in the introductory chapter, the ideal of the sustainable city is increasingly coming 'undone' (Hodson and Marvin, 2017) and being replaced by a variety of different logics of 'climate urbanism' (Long and Rice, 2021), associated with the emergence of ideals like 'resilience' and 'transformation.' To some extent both the Peace Process (and FMCG), and the TBTC, are projects whose particular understandings of urban sustainability, in a climate-changing world, make use of these different ideals, but in quite different ways.

One way of reading the history of the Peace Process is as a shift, from transformation towards reconciliation and now towards resilience. The turn towards resilience could in turn be read as an example of the neat dovetailing of ideals of 'resilience' and the broader 'security' logics which underlie neoliberalism; critical scholars have pointed out that resilience bears many of the hallmarks of earlier forms of biopolitics, in that it does not aim to eliminate risk entirely, but instead to work with and modulate it, in order to try to ensure the continuation of the 'liberal present' (Braun, 2014; Chandler, 2014; Schmidt, 2015; Wakefield, 2018; Walker and Cooper, 2011). Green infrastructure projects, like the FMCG, are often associated with attempts to achieve resilience; their blurring of the boundary between the human and non-human environments, and capacity to facilitate particular forms of flow or circulation through the city, are purported to help ensure flexibility, adaptability and a capacity to recover, in the face of shocks or disturbances to urban life (Braun, 2014; Wakefield, 2018). The multifunctionality of these projects is a further potential resilience benefit; the FMCG is a project founded on a sense that, by encouraging people to walk and cycle through the city, not only might it be possible to lower carbon emissions, but it might also be possible to encourage the kinds of encounters and connections which help to discourage new forms of political insurgency.

But in actuality the shift from 'reconciliation' to 'resilience' has not happened through a neat dovetailing of these two logics – and, more broadly, the gradual integration of climate and 'peace' within the city council – but through various literally 'pragmatic' attempts, by governmental actors, to try to respond to various funding flows moving into and out of the city, which might help these actors to support and further their own particular objectives. More plainly, for these actors, positioning themselves with

reference to emerging priorities with funding attached to them – such as resilience – is a means of keeping their own teams relevant and well-funded within the city council. In a sense, the relationship between the ‘climate’ and ‘peace’ teams is one developed by actors in these teams in order to, themselves, develop a kind of resilience to this unstable funding environment.

Those who live and work within the city are well aware of the financial pressures which the city council is under and of the need, for those who are a part of existing governmental institutions, to keep funding flowing. On this basis, some are cynical about the ‘climate credentials’ of the FMCG; some suggest that it is little more than a kind of ‘political fix’ (Neidig et al., 2022) which has been designed in order to appease and secure the political status quo. Those in the TBTC explained to me, for example, that the FMCG was created through a ‘backroom deal’ between Sinn Féin and the DUP, in order to ‘kill’ the Mackies site, using up the space in order to try to shut down uncomfortable questions about what it should be used for, which might upset the political status quo. In some ways this is a reasonable presumption; Northern Ireland is, of course, a place where politics has long been shaped by unelected officials drawing lines on maps, and the Peace Process did originate as a series of ‘backroom deals’ between actors closely associated with sectarian forms of political violence. However, in spite of lodging many Freedom of Information requests, they have yet to uncover any actual evidence of a backroom deal between Sinn Féin and the DUP (my own research has also not demonstrated any evidence of this either). The only ‘backroom deal’ which seems to have happened is the one which occurred between the senior line-drawing civil servant and the SEUPB. But, as an experienced local government community relations officer, aware of but not directly involved in the development of the FMCG explained, just because there is not ‘smoking gun’ does not mean that the influence of Sinn Féin and the DUP did not factor into the project’s development. Specifically, he explained:

‘Sinn Féin and the DUP will agree how the money is gonna get spent out, where its gonna get spent out, what the themes are, and then the money just flows, and everybody steps back and goes ‘look it’s nothing to do with me. This is a funding scheme about Environmental Greenways? Well, here it is!’ (Interview, Local Government Community Relations Officer, 22/02/2024)

More specifically, he explained, in the case of the FMCG:

‘It suited the purposes of the funding and the politicians, because they could develop an environmental project, which the DUP are opposed to, because they don’t believe that environmentalism is a thing, it’s all something that trendy lefty-type people have conjured up to get access to money, and global warming and all that is just a load of ould nonsense. So they used that there to develop this project, and in the process, cutting through that Mackies site, they’re doing what they did to the Girdwood site; they’re repoliticising it, so now it’s not about housing it’s

about the environment. How could you want to build housing on an environmental project? You know, you're gonna bring climate catastrophe even further? And so for you to like, kind of say anything about that? Then you're being sectarian.' (Interview, Local Government Community Relations Officer, 22/02/2024)

The suggestion here is that the politics is folded into what Tania Murray-Li (2007a) calls the 'practices' of government; the way in which funding parameters are created, the setting of governmental priorities, and the types of relationships which are established between senior civil servants and funding bodies. Specifically, she suggests that governmental programmes like the Peace Process are not anti-political because governmental programmers fold the 'possibility of a challenge and its likely sources' into 'their calculations' (Li, 2007b, p. 277); politics here is 'not external to government but constitutive of it' (Li, 2007b, p. 277). Sinn Féin and the DUP may not have had a backroom deal, but nor did they literally need to be in the room as the line on the map for the FMCG was drawn, if they were already being considered in the thinking of the senior line-drawing civil servant and the SEUPB.

This is, of course, something which is almost impossible to actually prove retrospectively. Perhaps more important, however, is the fact that some believe that this is a possibility; there is a pervasive sense that the ethno-sectarian divisions which once structured political life in the province are now firmly embedded into the practices by which decisions about the city are made. The TBTC is a project which is founded on precisely this kind of premise; they're a project which is aspiring towards a kind of transformation, in order to try to root sectarianism out of the city's politics, as part of a broader attempt to try to spark systemic change. This is an understanding of what the city is and needs which they tend to relate as developing through a kind of iterative engagement with the city and the 'problematic situations' which emerge from urban life. More specifically, their transition towards 'coalition building' – or 'institution building' – is one which they associate with a growing frustration regarding the Northern Irish government's apparent incapacity to provide the institutions and infrastructures needed to sustain urban life.

And yet, the idea that transformation is needed in order to realise the promise of the GFA is not a new one; it is, as the history set out above, one associated with the origins of the Peace Process. PPR was initially founded to try to realise this promise; another way of seeing the TBTC's aspirations for a kind of systemic transformation, then, is to see them as an enduring attempt to realise the GFA's original promise, increasingly betrayed by the evolution of Northern Ireland's institutions. More broadly, the sense that the city needs transformation is one which at least some in the TBTC have come to through more 'global' readings of the kinds of problems facing democracy in a climate-changing world, as the following extended quote usefully sets out:

‘You get stuck in this place... like we we're very introspective like here. Like the world's fuckin small for us here, you know? What I mean by that is like – and I think that kind of stuff around the agreement and stuff afterwards, kind of really reinforces that kind of thing that ‘we're unique, and our conflict is unique.’ You know? So you look at the dysfunction of City Council, right, and you go ‘well, they're not doing anything about Climate Change, really.’ There's rhetoric and things, and you kindof go ‘this place is broken.’ Right?

But then you also kindof know that things kindof look good from afar. So you're sitting there looking – look at Barcelona, they're doing great. But [you know that] if you're in Barcelona you probably think ‘we're shit here’ [...]. So you're always kindof looking for best practice but knowing that if you were on the ground, you'd probably be the biggest critic too. And there's probably people doing that about us, around the world, you know?

So you kindof, on one hand, you've got to get over yourself and kindof go ‘you know, what we're facing here is kindof a global issue around governance, when it comes to these issues, with local characteristics. We'll have our own shit that stopping it, but this is kindof a bigger democratic issue, you know?’

But then another part of me like – and I think the segregation is critical here – [...] you're kind of going ‘this place is broken like.’ You know? Like you look at Stormont now. [...] Part of me like doesn't want [Stormont] to come back up because it's just going to be a repeat – repeat, rinse, run, repeat. All this sort of shit like you're kind of going: there needs to be a new dynamic here. And what I find is like, it's that new dynamic – whether that is talk about unification, border, poll, whatever. [That's what] the kind of the excitement lies in.’ (TBTC activist, 28/02/2024).

As the final lines of this quote suggest, for the interviewee, there's a kind of easy alignment between this aspiration for systemic change and traditional Irish Republican aspirations, for a united Ireland – more broadly, the sense that Northern Ireland is a kind of ‘failed’ state, and always will be, until the island of Ireland is united, is one which is rooted in Republican ideology. Some of those in the TBTC recognise this kind of alignment. For example, after very strongly outlining a sense that he thought many of Northern Ireland's problems come from a definition of politics on the basis of a Republican/Unionist dichotomy – and a need to begin not from these identities, but from the material problems afflicting people in everyday life – a member of the TBTC went on to explain that:

‘[...] for me when I look at the world and go, ‘what needs to be done?’ [I think of] decolonisation of institutions and practices, rewilding, and living in equilibrium. In order to do that, can you carve out a safe space for the Monarchy? Know what I

mean? Can you carve out a safe space for Global Capital? Can you carve out a safe space for Unionism? [...] And I think, naturally, most poor people find themselves happily fuckin' relating to decolonisation, rewilding, and human rights principles. And if that's the case, then you're not a fuckin' Unionist like. You're probably not a Republican either like. But [...] Unionism is an ideology rooted in colonialism, exploitation, control of land, control of property and creation of [an] agenda. And so...?' (Interview, TBTC activist, 21/08/2024).

Some of those associated with the TBTC are clear about the need to be open about the fact that their work more readily aligns with traditional CNR concerns and desires than their PUL counterparts. For example, the TBTC have published a set of maps on their online interface which show that there is marked inequality in housing provision in CNR and PUL areas of the city (see Figure 3.9 and Figure 3.10). When I asked the 'mapper' whether they had been concerned about putting these maps online, they explained that:

'No, no, and you know, I think that that what we've always done is: you can't shy away from it. You have to say it, because if it's not named, it's not a problem. But naming it isn't sufficient. It's like, we're not going to address housing and equality, unless we accept that there is something [related to housing provision], but that's not the full picture. So it's kind of putting this within a bigger context. That's really... and I think back in the Take Back the City we deliberately talk about trying to end sectarianism, promote sustainability, so its kindof everything. It's kindof facing up to the problems of the city. Which includes [this], because of our history of sectarianism, and inequality. [So its about] [n]ot shying away from that, because that's what the fucking agreement should have been about. So there's no reticence about putting it on. In fact, quite the opposite. It was wanting to show the absurdity, the actual absurdity of that. It's not just the peace walls. It's the fact that we've actually now created a system that accommodates that, that reinforces that and everything you know?' (TBTC activist, 28/02/2024).

And yet, there *is* reticence amongst some of those who are involved in the TBTC about these maps; some asked me to check the figures (I did), and were pleased when I could confirm that they were 'true.' These concerns – and this request – belie a broader desire by some in the TBTC, to present their work as a kind of 'technical' effort, to work towards goals like equality, justice, human rights, and sustainability. The architect who the TBTC have commissioned to draw up plans, for example, explained in an interview that because he was a technical expert from London, he was able to remain 'outside' the politics of the scheme, and that at public meetings 'when you hear me speaking, I'm just that's what that's in a sense, my job. It doesn't bother me. I'm just explaining the scheme. I'm not... That's my job. It's like talking to a doctor about a health problem [...]' (TBTC Architect, 05/12/2023).

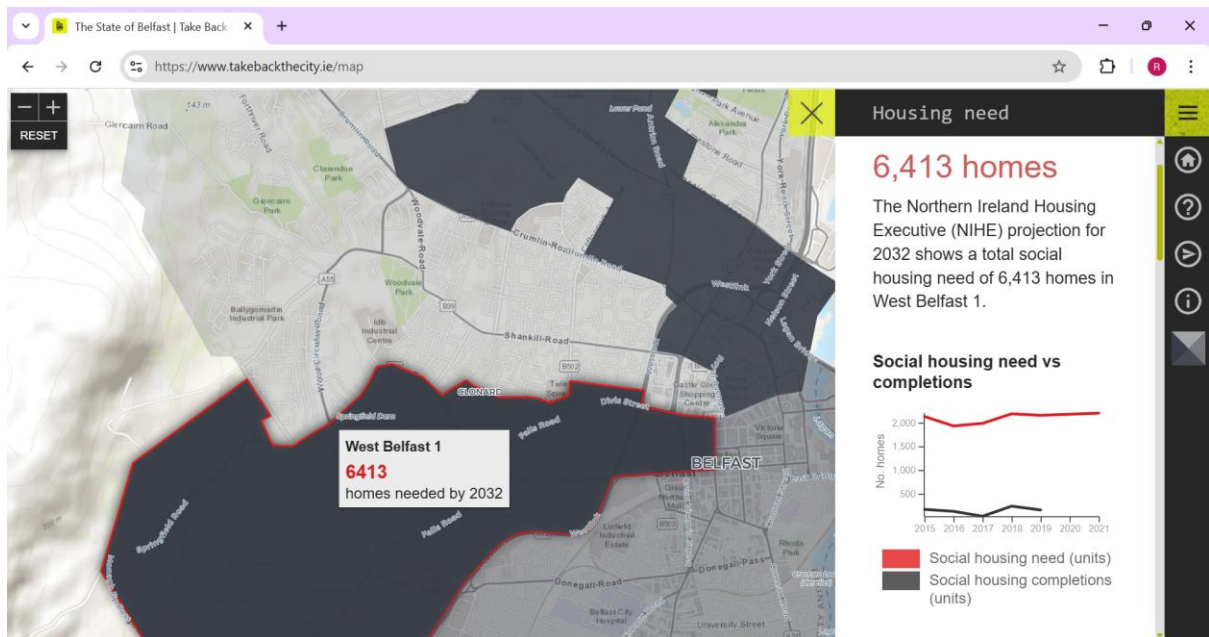


Figure 3.9: Take Back the City Map, Housing Need West Belfast 1 (Largely CNR area)

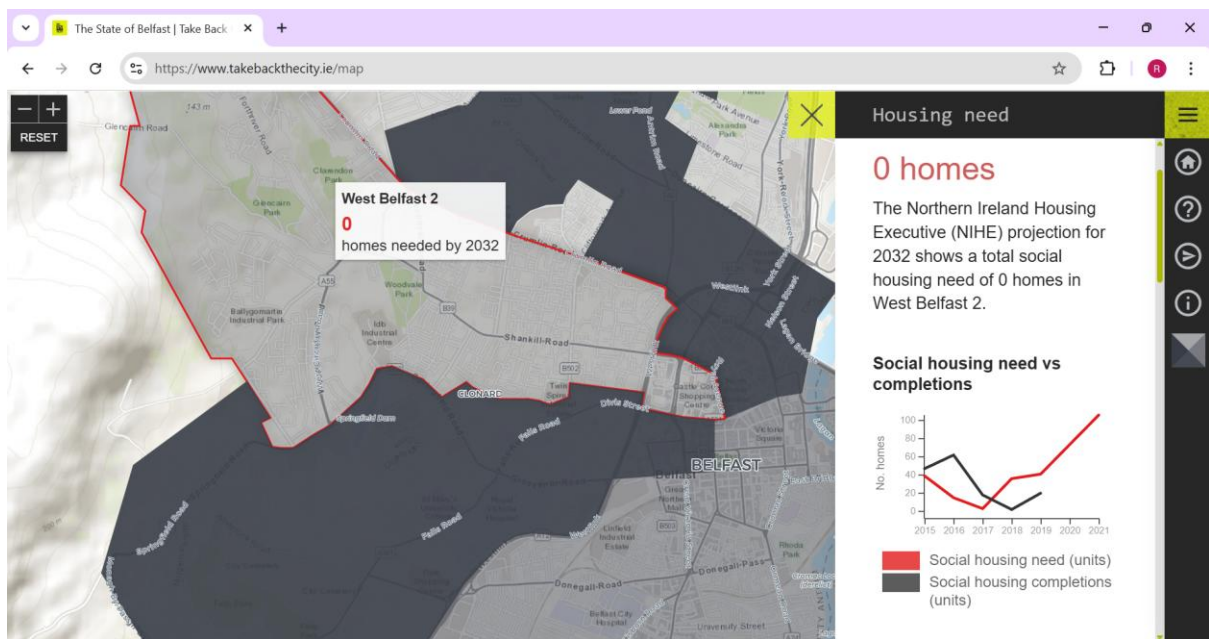


Figure 3.10: Take Back the City Map, Housing Need, West Belfast 2 (Largely PUL area)

These tensions within the TBTC are indicative of a broader challenge for the campaign; it must negotiate the parameters by which particular types of issues (housing, for example), and particular kinds of aspirations (towards transformation, for example), are themselves rendered 'political', on the basis of their relationship with the city's political past. It is not possible, in other words, to avoid these past forms of politics because they remain embedded in the present, in the urban fabric, but also embedded in potential futures, through what one might think of as the city's political 'consciousness.' But alignment with traditional political agendas does not mean continuity, or affiliation with them; partly for this reason the TBTC are scrupulous about 'transparency', posting the

methods and results of all of their research online, in order to demonstrate the ‘evidence-based’ nature of their work. The same architect who described his reticence to be considered a ‘political’ actor, for example, explained that he had never worked on a project where so much of the material was displayed ‘in public’ as the project was ongoing (TBTC Architect, 05/12/2023). More specifically, one of the TBTC’s members explained, the campaign has very carefully tried to avoid affiliation with any existing political parties in the city because:

‘Here’s the thing as well about our methodology; it needs to go without fear or favour. See if you get in a political alignment with a political party? You’re fucked. You’re finished. And like, you see if a group goes with you, and they pull on the string of accountability, and it pushes on the political party, and you have an alliance with them, and you suppress the group? It’s over.’ (Interview, TBTC activist, 21/08/2024).

In other words, the TBTC have positioned themselves ‘politically’ by deliberately forming – and not forming – relationships with other actors in the city. But as this section also shows, this political positioning is also the result of the way in which actors like the TBTC go about their work – about whether they do it ‘in public’ or not, for example. The history of the Peace Process and the FMCG also show that it is shaped by negotiations and reconfigurations *within* particular programmes or projects, as actors come to deliberately position themselves with reference to particular governmental aspirations. As both examples demonstrate, this has implications for the way in which climate change becomes political. Both examples, in very broad terms, make clear that climate change’s politics are being (re)made as this issue comes to be engaged with in and through this particular urban context. But it is not a case of climate change, and different understandings of what it might mean to engage with it – resilience or transformation, for example – simply ‘landing’ atop this context or dovetailing neatly with existing governmentalities. Instead, climate change’s politics are remade as actors in the city go about negotiating particular political contexts; it is remade through the tactics being used by these actors, in other words, as they go about trying to engage with the city.

The next section explains, more broadly, how these different forms of engagement shape the way in which different actors come to understand the political potential contained within the city.

3.5.3 Urban Publics and Potential

One particularly interesting point of similarity between the FMCG and the TBTC, is the use of photography as part of attempts to try to evidence understandings of the city’s problems. These are not attempts to render the city ‘technical’ through extensive quantification and use of numbers, as traditional forms of ‘governmentality’ often have (Li, 2007a). Instead, this is closer to an attempt to problematise the city through

‘aesthetic’ means (Ghertner, 2010; Pow, 2018); identifying areas of the city which are problematic on the basis of how they look. In its original conceptualisation, the idea of ‘aesthetic’ forms of governmentality was developed in order to describe problematisation in contexts where data about urban populations, and the urban environment, was lacking; in Ghertner’s (2010) original conceptualisation this was a form of ‘calculation without numbers’ which he identified in Delhi’s slums. To some extent, this kind of ‘dataless’ context is the type of context which both the FMCG and the TBTC are trying to reckon with, but for different reasons.

The photographs associated with the FMCG were taken by a consultant, commissioned in order to try to build an evidence base, identifying problems which the FMCG would fix. As members of the city council explained, it is often challenging to build these kinds of evidence bases prior to funding rounds, in part due to a lack of general data available on the city. More broadly, this kind of attempt – to identify a problem for a solution which the Peace Process can offer the city – is common, Tania Murray Li (2007a) argues, to many governmental programmes, which problematise on the basis of available solutions deliverable by existing governmental actors.

Meanwhile, the TBTC’s photographs were taken as part of an attempt to try to better grasp the nature of the housing crisis problem. More specifically, these photos were taken by people facing the housing crisis, as part of a participatory action research team, in response to an assertion made by a politician that it was a problem associated with a lack of public land; the TBTC wanted to test out this proposition, and in doing so refined their understanding of the housing crisis, not only disproving this proposition, but also identifying the fact that most of the ‘empty’ public land in the city lies in interface zones. Here photography is being used as a tool for the kind of community-based inquiry which Dewey advocated, to try to better grasp a problem which remains ill-defined, and therefore unrepresentable through quantification alone.

As set out in sub-section 3.2.2 Barnett and Bridge (2016) suggest that where Dewey’s notion of problematisation is orientated towards ‘repairing troubled situations’ the Foucauldian alternative ‘is oriented towards freeing up and exploring the possibilities opened up by new problematizations’ (Barnett and Bridge, 2016, p. 1194). This aligns, ostensibly, with why these two different sets of photographs were taken; the TBTC’s photomapping exercise was part of an effort to try to better define this problem, so it can be more systemically cared for, whilst the FMCG’s photographs were taken in order to try to lay a set of foundations, for thinking about potential solutions to the city’s problems. But in actuality that is not how things have played out, as is perhaps best demonstrated by the differing ways in which each of these projects have gone on to develop understandings, of the potential which lies within the particular patch of land known as the Mackies site.

The photomapping exercise undertaken by the TBTC played a key role in identifying that this site was of potential importance for the city's housing crisis, and since the TBTC have started building a coalition around it, visions for this site's potential have proliferated. For example, Figure 3.11, Figure 3.12 and Figure 3.13 show a series of screenshots, from a video developed by an architect at QUB, from a workshop the TBTC ran with a group of children affected by the city's housing crisis. The workshop involved taking different types of housing stock, from famous cities around the world – Barcelona, London, Paris – and trying to fit them onto the footprint of the Mackies site.

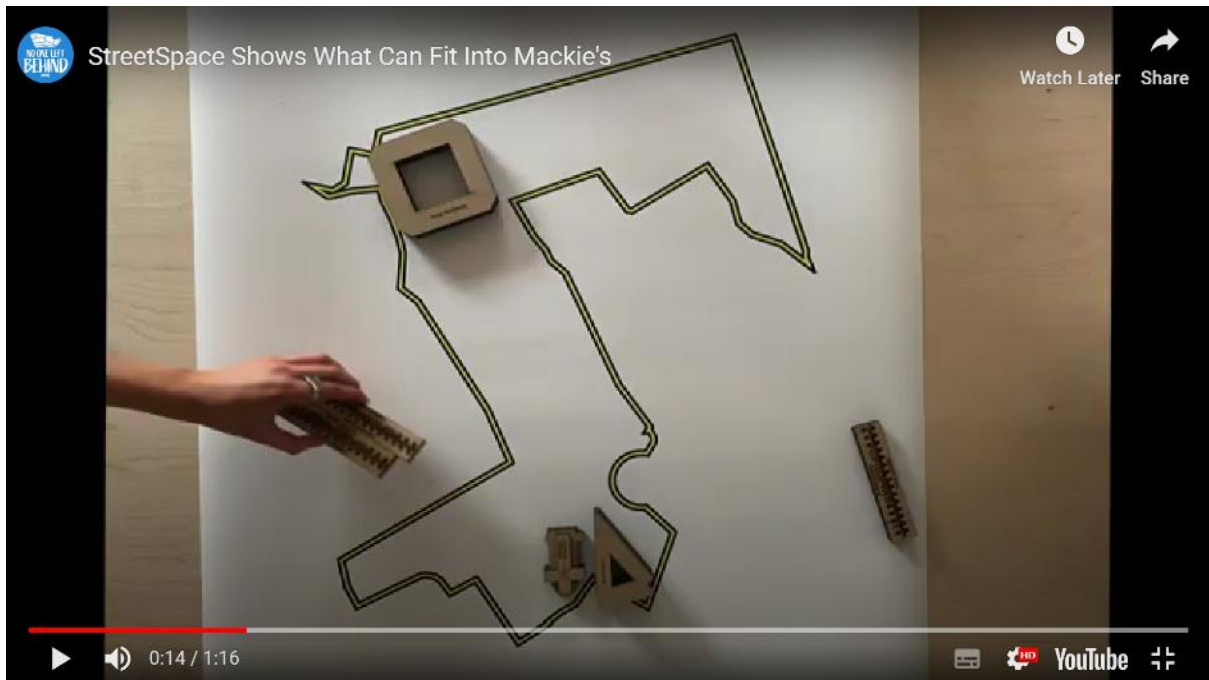


Figure 3.11: Screenshot 1 from Streetscape Video

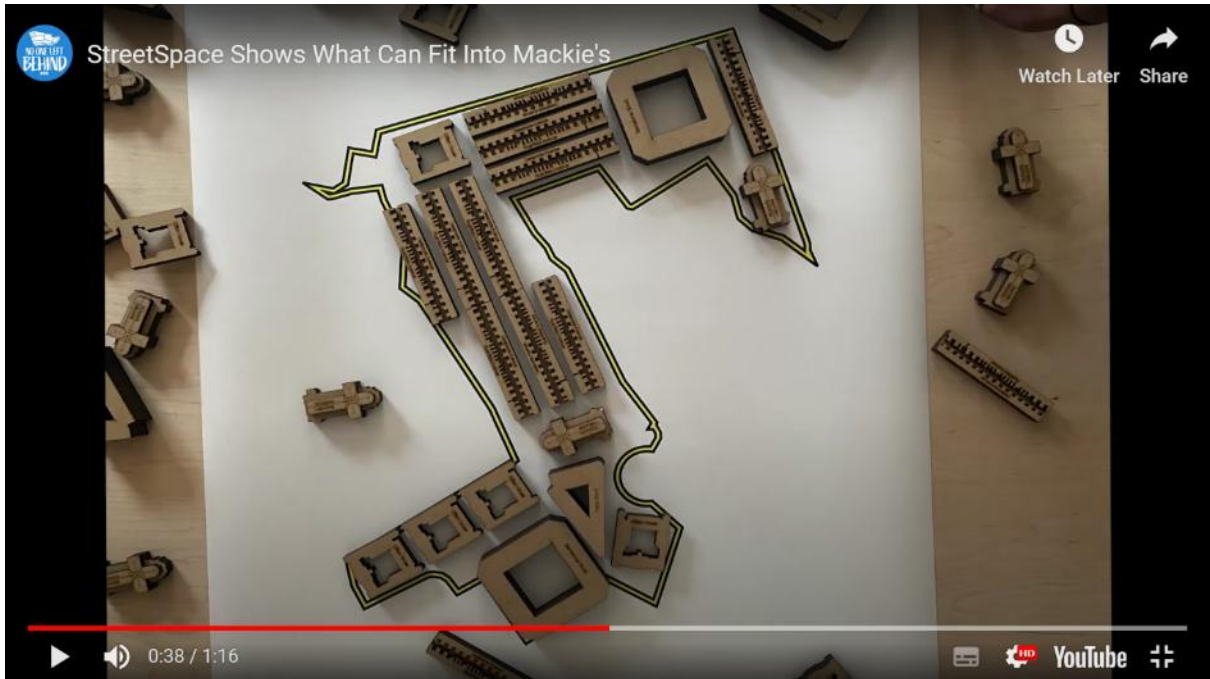


Figure 3.12: Screenshot 2 from Streetscape Video

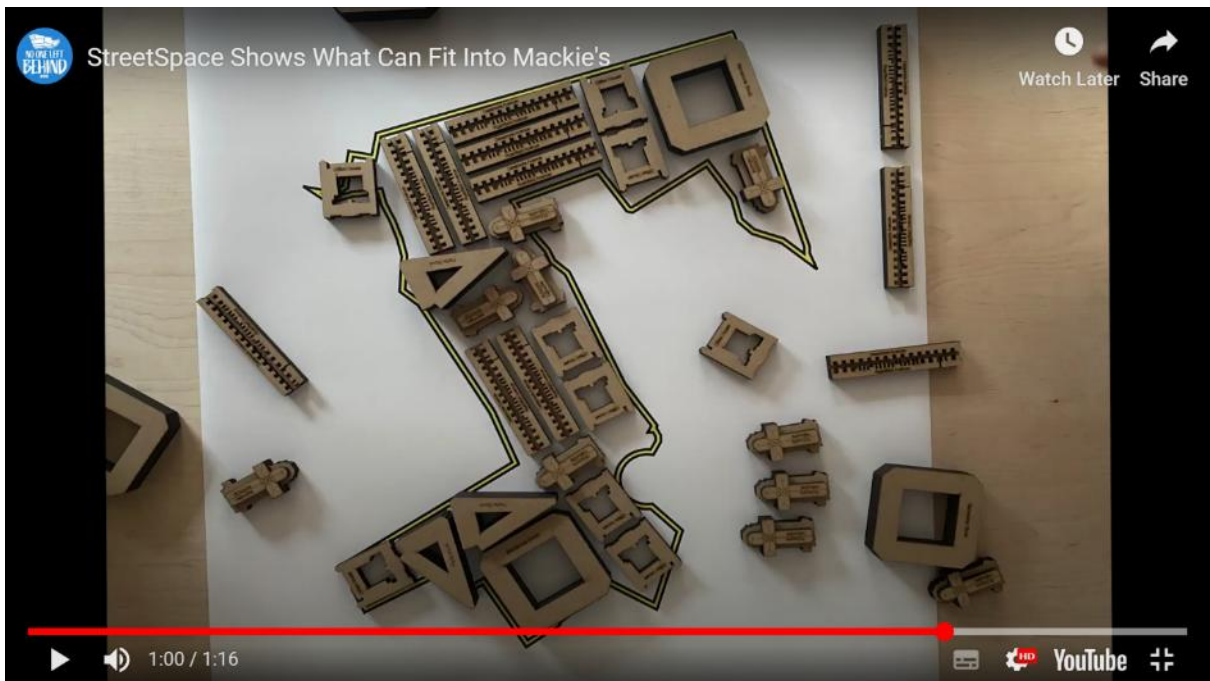


Figure 3.13: Screenshot 3 from Streetscape Video

In a simple sense, this is an exercise which is about demonstrating the literal size of the Mackies site. But this is also a means of demonstrating the many forms of potential which lie within this particular patch of space; the implication is that there are many possible cities which lie within the Mackies site. More specifically, one of the architects later commissioned to try to develop the plans for the site explained:

‘Imagine going there, at Mackies, in 20 years’ time. It would be revolutionary for Northern Ireland! So it’s not the standard. And here [in England] we’ve got masses,

thousands of houses being built in the south east in great, what we call in the vernacular ‘New London Brickwork’ you know that kind of language which is just... every architectural firm produces the same stuff. This [the Mackies site] can be democratic, diverse, there’s nothing that this can’t be and I... That’s kind of what I’d like to say about it. The opportunities here are just... If only the right people can get behind all of it.’ (TBTC Architect, 05/12/2023)

Meanwhile, within the FMCG’s feasibility report, the Springfield Dam’s potential is represented by the gap, between images of the site as it currently exists – see Figure 3.14 – and a vision created by a consultant commissioned by Belfast City Council – see Figure 3.15.¹⁴ This is not, then, a case of many potential cities existing within this piece of urban space, realisable if only the right coalition of people can come together to realise them. This is, instead, a piece of space whose potential is defined and limited by the vision which a consultant has, of what a ‘good’ urban environment is and should be. (It should be noted that the project delivery team did a very good job of realising this vision in reality – see Figure 3.16).

¹⁴ The Springfield Dam lies across the road from the Mackies site ‘proper’ but is in a sense a part of the same geography, as both are ex-industrial sites which were once part of the Mackies factory. Specifically, the Springfield Dam was once home to the ponds used in various industrial processes associated with the factory.



Springfield Dam

View looking north along the dam back to the Innovation Factory

Figure 3.14: Photo of Springfield Dam, from Forth Meadow Community Greenway Feasibility Report, photo from pre-2018, Provided by Belfast City Council.



Figure 3.15: Visualisation of Springfield Dam, from Forth Meadow Community Greenway Feasibility Report, 2018 provided by Belfast City Council



Figure 3.16: Photo of Springfield Dam, Taken by Author, Autumn 2023

These differences in approach are about more than just photography, or styles of visualisation. They instead denote different approaches to engaging with the potential futures which exist within the city. In the FMCG's case, helping the city to reach its potential means closing the gap between the 'strategic view' of the urban environment held by those tasked with government, and the reality of actual urban conditions. For the TBTC, by contrast, the potential which exists within the urban is multiple and unknowable, as it is contingent upon the way in which the city is being (re-)assembled in the here and now; realising a 'better' future thereby requires thinking more carefully about how one acts in the present, and relates to those who play a role in (re-)creating the city.

These differences have fundamental implications, for the way which each of these projects have set about trying to actually engage publics and encourage them to see and know the city anew. But this is a concern for subsequent chapters; before moving on to these public engagement processes, the conclusions below provide a summary of the material covered here.

3.6 Conclusions

The empirical core of this chapter charts how the idea that engaging with Belfast's ethno-communal divisions is a means of engagement with climate change has become developed and established. To do so, the chapter follows the 'guns to greenways' history of the Northern Irish Peace Process (section 3.3), showing how this process has gradually come to understand climate change as a problem which can be engaged with by helping to encourage forms of physical connection in the city, across old ethno-sectarian divisions. This is an understanding which has developed as the rationale underlying the Peace Process has changed, from one focussed on trying to engender 'transformation', towards 'reconciliation', and increasingly towards 'resilience.' Meanwhile, those who have acted as 'critical friends' to the Northern Irish Peace Process, like PPR and the TBTC, have also come to the conclusion that the city's ethno-communal territorial divisions are a kind of climate change problem (section 3.4). But this is because, for those involved in these groups, these divisions are emblematic of a 'broken' system of government, which remains fundamentally structured around and by ethno-sectarian divisions, more than thirty years after the conflict has ended. Consequently, these actors are increasingly calling for 'systemic' forms of change, or transformation, to these governmental institutions.

In setting out this history, and demonstrating these differences, this chapter shows how climate change's politics are being remade as they are entangled into the city, at once being remade by and remaking existing forms of urban politics. Specifically, the ways in which different actors are attempting to negotiate the city's political environment shape the way that they themselves attempt to make climate change a particular kind of political issue. Those involved in the Peace Process, for example, have tried to draw climate change into this governmental programme's remit as part of an attempt to keep

it 'relevant' to the 21st century, and in so doing have turned it into a problem which can be engaged with by actors whose expertise lies in areas like conflict negotiation. Meanwhile, those involved in the TBTC have also brought climate change into their campaign as part of a gradual expansion of their work, from a concern with particular problematic situations, towards a concern with broader 'systematic' change; bringing climate change into their work helps to build a narrative that what is needed is a fundamental 'transformation' regarding contemporary forms of urbanisation.

The theoretical core of this chapter is based around the Foucauldian notion of 'problematization', as developed by Tania Murray Li (2007a), and urban geographers Barnett and Bridge (2016); the latter, in particular, develop their notion of problematization by bringing Foucault's work into direct dialogue with the thinking of John Dewey. The chapter shows that both of these different understandings of problematization are useful, for understanding *both* governmental programmes and what might be called 'social movements' like the TBTC (and, by extension, PPR). Using these different theoretical approaches together adds richness to analysis of the way in which engagement with the urban environment shapes understandings of the kinds of problems which cities present. It also makes clear that even when governmental programmes like the Peace Process and movements like the TBTC oppose one another, they may also bear close points of resemblance, when it comes to *how* they engage with the urban.

One key point of difference which this chapter identifies, between the Peace Process (and the FMCG), and the TBTC (and PPR), is the degree to which actors involved in each reflect upon their own situatedness within, relationship to, and actions as part of, the city. Those involved in the Peace Process self-qualify their actions on behalf of 'the public' on the basis that they have access to a 'strategic view' of the city which ensures that they are not afflicted by the 'myopia' which occurs when one is situated within it. By contrast, for those in the TBTC, it is only when one comes to recognise oneself as being a part of a public that one becomes qualified as a public actor; this requires reflection on the way which one's particular situatedness within urban life is related to, and may be similar to or different from the experiences of others who are part of the city. For those involved with the Peace Process, the city can be 'improved' by bringing it closer to this 'strategic vision.' For those involved with the TBTC, improvement instead looks like developing imagination, by exploring the possibilities which exist in the urban, through acting in ways which might help to create better futures and learning from the experience of doing so.

As the following chapters set out, these foundational differences have important implications, when it comes to the types of public engagement which each of these projects develop, and the implications which this has for the types of publics which they have actually created.

4 Green, Grey and Orange Communities

He spread himself out in one of the seats. You see, it's like this, he began. It's all about community. Communities don't run themselves. Businesses like yours, they're vulnerable, you see what I mean? There's a lot of people out there who are not nice people and all we are really doing here, you know, if I'm being honest, is offering you our help. As a member of the community.

I know what community means, said Mo.

You do? said Kyle.

I know exactly what community means, said Mo.

To All Their Dues, Wendy Erskine, (2018, p. 7)

4.1 Introduction

This chapter examines the public participation processes associated with the Forth Meadow Community Greenway (FMCG) and the Take Back the City (TBTC) coalition, exploring how these processes have been shaped by, and in turn have shaped, these projects' visions for sustainable urban futures. As indicated in the introduction to this thesis, there are long-standing connections between the idea that 'greener' cities are more sustainable. More specifically though, Wachsmuth and Angelo (2018) argue that the contemporary sustainable cities discourse has become split into co-constitutive 'green' and 'grey' ideologies; in their analysis, green forms of urban sustainability are associated with the 'return of nature to the city in its most verdant form' whilst grey forms of sustainability are associated with 'the concept of social, technological urban space as already inherently sustainable' (Wachsmuth and Angelo, 2018, pp. 2–3). They suggest that this distinction may be important for shaping how publics are engaged with through urban sustainability projects, as the 'aesthetic simplicity of green urban nature encourages it to be taken at face value as inherently sustainable' whilst the greater 'aesthetic complexity of gray urban nature leads it to be considered a problem for technological optimization' (Wachsmuth and Angelo, 2018, p. 15). This 'threatens to render green urban nature the presumptive realm of popular participation in urban environmental politics and gray urban nature the presumptive realm of technocratic expertise (see, e.g., Finewood (2016))' (Wachsmuth and Angelo, 2018, p. 15). Consequently, they suggest a need to empirically explore the question: who "counts" as an environmental actor in formal environmental politics, and on the basis of what representations of urban sustainability?' (Wachsmuth and Angelo, 2018, p. 16).

This chapter does so empirically, examining how the relative 'greenness' and 'greyness' of the visions of a sustainable Belfast, created and deployed by the FMCG and the TBTC,

are shaped by and in turn shape the public engagement processes associated with these projects. To explore the relevance of these processes to urban democracy it builds upon an argument advanced by Daniel Aldana Cohen (2018) (in turn founded upon Angelo and Wachsmuth's thinking (2018)), that right to the city movements should be considered climate actors partly because they tend to advocate for the kinds of 'grey' urban ecologies – dense housing, good public transport – which cut carbon emissions, more than the 'green' urban ecologies favoured by urban elites. In addition, Cohen (2018) argues, these movements should be considered climate protagonists because they tend to push past the distinction between the green and the grey, making it clear that 'it is no longer possible (or desirable) to deeply distinguish social from environmental politics' because 'several core stakes of right-to-the-city struggles – especially housing, transit, and land use – are also the core stakes of low-carbon urbanism' (Cohen, 2018, p. 143).

More specifically though, this chapter examines how the FMCG and TBTC have developed their visions for a sustainable Belfast to reckon with the city's communal complexity, as part of their attempts to try to engage publics. Like greening, the term community is one which has long-standing associations with the ideal of the sustainable city; community engagement or participation is often considered a prerequisite for the creation of sustainable cities, whilst urban communities require sustainable urban worlds in order to endure (Pickerill et al., 2024). These associations are often based on more fundamental, positive associations with the term community; in his *Keywords*, for example, Raymond Williams states the term community is a 'warmly persuasive word to describe an existing set of relationships' which, 'unlike all other terms of social organisation (state, nation, society, etc.) [...] seems never to be used unfavourably, and never to be given any positive opposing or distinguishing term.' (Williams, 1988, p. 76). Thanks to these positive connotations, historically many 'socialists, anarchists, feminists, and others critical of welfare capitalist society [have] formulate[d] their vision[s] of a society free from domination and oppression in terms of an ideal of community' (Marion Young, 1996, p. 226).

But, as the vignette from Wendy Erskine's story 'To All their Dues' framing this chapter hints at, community is a term with complicated connotations in Belfast. The action in the story begins when a snooker ball comes firing through the window of Mo's new Invest Northern Ireland funded beauty salon, quickly followed by the arrival of the local paramilitary debt collector, Kyle, at her door. Kyle doesn't proclaim his paramilitary status, nor even really admit it to himself. Instead, he characterizes himself as a representative of 'the community'; he's out to protect her, he claims, and everyone else living in the area; he's one of the good guys, he says, who just needs a little cash in hand, to make sure that things stay exactly as they are. No more snooker balls. No more late-night knocks on the door. Provided Mo coughs up £20 in cash, weekly.

Put more plainly, in addition to association with the kinds of support and mutual aid which often arise when people come together into social groups, in Belfast the term ‘community’ is also associated with control, coercion and extortion, in part because much violence in the city was, and is, perpetrated through community structures and the paramilitary organisations associated with them (Murtagh, 2018; Murtagh et al., 2023; Shirlow, 2003). These community structures and paramilitary organisations have, in turn, long been entangled with the city’s governance and political economy, through a series of techniques and practices based around the demarcation, control, and mobilisation of ethno-communal territories (De Young, 2023; Murtagh et al., 2019). This is a city, then, where community can provide collective empowerment and support, whilst *also* serving to disenfranchise, divide, and cement hierarchical power structures.

To explore these dynamics, the chapter begins by exploring the terms community and public, examining them through a Pragmatist lens, and providing some basic context regarding their relevance for understanding Belfast’s politics (section 4.2). It then goes on to explore how, in practice, both the FMCG and TBTC have dealt with Belfast’s communal complexity through their attempts to ‘go sustainable’ (section 4.3). It then examines the political implications of these different approaches, reflecting on how they align with and deviate from the arguments advanced by Wachsmuth and Angelo (2018), and Cohen (2018), described above (section 4.4). The chapter concludes that understanding how visions for sustainable futures shape, and are shaped by, publics in the city requires understanding how these aspirations intersect with, and reshape, the existing relationships between communities and urban territory.

4.2 Contextualising Community

As the dialogue framing this chapter implies, the term ‘community’ means different things to different people in different settings. This complexity magnifies when differentiating between communities and publics; both vernacularly and academically the terms are sometimes used interchangeably. Rather than providing a definitive definition of the term community, this chapter engages with the term in a more contextual fashion, exploring how this idea has been developed and used by different actors in Belfast, to achieve particular political ends. In other words (as implied by the dialogue opening the chapter), this chapter takes the definition of the term, and its differentiation from the term ‘public’, to be both a means of exercising, and developing, particular forms of power.¹⁵

More specifically, this section explores the way which different definitions of community and public carry particular geographical presumptions with them, drawing on Pragmatist theory in order to do so. Sub-section 4.4.1 explores the way in which

¹⁵ An extensive review of the use of the term ‘community’, with specific reference to low-carbon transitions, is provided by Aiken (2016), where he highlights the wide diversity of potential uses of the term, corroborating a sense that there’s a need to remain open to and work with its complexity.

communities are often defined, and constituted, through ‘participatory’ forms of governance, which aim to facilitate and encourage community engagement in the development of governmental programmes, policies, and infrastructure projects. Sub-section 4.2.2, presents an alternative understanding of the term community – one much more closely aligned with the TBTC’s understanding of the term – where a community is a subset of a public, or ‘community of strangers’(Marres, 2015; Warner, 2002), who have come together in relation with a particular problem.

4.2.1 Public Participation, Urban Community Stabilisation

Public participation in government initiatives is often billed as offering opportunities for a kind of democratisation, through devolution of central government into the hands of populations living lives at a more ‘local’ level (Amin, 2005; Leal, 2007; Walker et al., 2015). In practice, in doing so these forms of governance subvert two critiques of public participation in governmental affairs articulated by Pragmatist Walter Lippman. First, for Lippmann, publics should only be called upon in governmental affairs when existing governmental institutions have failed to take care of public problems (i.e. when problems are too tough for government to deal with) (Lippmann, [1925] 2020, p. 35); by inviting the public in to deal with these problems, participatory forms of governance pre-empt this failure, placing the burden of responsibility for care of the population upon publics and communities, rather than on governments (Juhila et al., 2016; Peeters, 2013; Pill, 2022; Trnka and Trundle, 2014). Second, for Lippmann, it is hard for – and unreasonable to expect – members of publics to abstract themselves from the particular contexts they are embedded within, in order to concern themselves with more general ideas about public problems and the ‘public good’ (Lippmann, [1925] 2020). But in more participatory forms of governance, this embeddedness often *qualifies* actors for inclusion in governmental decision-making, because actors are presumed to have access to particular forms of ‘local’ place-specific knowledge, presumed to be otherwise inaccessible to ‘professional’ governmental actors (Li, 2007a; Michels and de Graaf, 2010).

To some extent, then, participatory forms of governance not only aim to offer governance *at* the local scale, but also to benefit from qualities which are presumed to exist within it, like local knowledge, opportunities for deliberative engagement, and – perhaps most importantly – the qualities which exist within local ‘communities’, which in this context are often presumed to be inherently small-scale, place-based forms of social organisation (Amin, 2005). In practice though, *community* governance specifically is rarely simply about allowing for community participation *in* government, but almost always about governing *through* communities; these are entities which are ‘said to have the secret of the good life (equitable, sustainable, authentic, democratic – however the good is being defined)’, but these forms of governance are also predicated around the sense that ‘experts must intervene to secure that goodness and enhance it.’ (Li, 2007a, p. 232). This is a form of governance which aims to engage, animate, and facilitate, in ways

which encourage particular outcomes in lieu of others, governing by conducting the conduct of populations, via community engagement and constitution, rather than through more overt forms of restriction or control (Li, 2007a; Rose, 1996). Yet this is also a form of governance which, to a certain degree, attempts to disavow its constitutive tendencies, claiming to get a grip on and work through facets of public life which pre-exist the practice of governing rather than, as is often in fact the case, producing something new as governing occurs.

Personal identity is one such facet of public life. As Nikolas Rose describes it, ‘the very condition of possibility for a community to be imagined is its actual or potential existence as a fulcrum of personal identity’ (Rose, 1996, p. 334). When centred around community, participatory governance plays upon ‘something that already exists and has a claim on us’, yet at the same time:

‘[...] our allegiance to [...] particular communities is something that we have to be made aware of, requiring the work of educators, campaigns, activists, manipulators of symbols, narratives and identifications. Within such a style of thought, community exists and is to be achieved, yet the achievement is nothing more than the birth-to-presence of a form of being which pre-exists’ (Rose, 1996, p. 334)

This ‘birth-to-presence’ of ‘natural’ community identities can take place through various forms of positive affirmation but, given the fact that ‘[c]ommunity is structurally produced through the figure of the stranger being violently excluded’ the production of communities often relies upon ‘exclusion, suspicion and the creation of danger.’ (Bulley, 2013, p. 272). As already explained in the preceding chapter, the PEACE funds, and the Peace Process more generally, have been closely associated with this kind of identity-focussed form of community constitution; participation in these governmental programmes (and, given their prominent role in remaking North and West Belfast, public, political life in this part of the city) is often predicated upon one’s willingness to accept one’s identification with a particular ethno-national community, classified as either CNR, PUL, or ‘other’ (De Young, 2023; Mitchell, 2011). Fear is laced through this form of community engagement: of ‘the other’ community; of reprisals within one’s own community should one not conform to its norms; within governing institutions, regarding the ‘potential’ of communities to enact violence, should engagement with them break down (Mitchell, 2011). The paramilitary is the figure which embodies this fear; a liminal personage, caught somewhere between communities and state violence; a figure which haunts Northern Irish culture, in the murals on gable end walls, in discussions in the public sphere, and in stories, such as the one framing this chapter.

Both in Northern Ireland and beyond, there now exist widespread critiques of these forms of community-based, participatory modes of governance. Specifically, for critics, rather than offering opportunities for democratisation, this kind of participatory

governance often serves as a means of constituting communities and publics in ways which facilitate their governance on the basis of potential threats within them, whilst permitting a kind of state withdrawal from responsibility to care directly for them (Cooke and Kothari, 2001; Miraftab, 2004; Peeters, 2013; Pill, 2022). The most frequently posited alternative to these kinds of ‘top-down’ invited processes are more insurgent, agonistic, forms of engagement with the process of government (Coulthard, 2014; Machin, 2019; Mouffe, 2005; Swyngedouw, 2010b). But, as already touched upon earlier in this thesis, these criticisms and alternatives have limitations in a place like Belfast, where dissensus is something which is a part of existing governmental systems, and division is a central facet of political life (Dryzek, 2005; Schaap, 2006).

Moreover, these critiques often fail to account for the spatialisation of community governance which, the preceding chapter explains, has played an increasingly important role in engagement with communities in Northern Ireland since the mid-2000s. Specifically, rather than solely working on publics in specific ‘forums’ for public engagement, government is increasingly associated with attempts to work on publics by targeting the spaces within which they exist, and the relationship between these publics and the built environment, by both working directly upon the physical environment (by pulling down walls, creating parks, developing pieces of ‘public art’) *and* working on the way in which people perceive their relationship to this physical environment (through community training, education, and animation). Framed in policy documentation as a reorientation of engagement processes on the basis of learnings from the past, this might be considered a tighter *focussing* of engagement processes, on the link between communities and space; not only should communities be engaged with because they have connections *to* a particular space, but it is precisely this relationship – between communities and space – which is now the target of governmental intervention.¹⁶ This presents the possibility of a contradiction; including a community in governmental programmes *because* they are presumed to have an intransigent connection to a particular space (such as an ethno-communally defined urban territory) makes the maintenance of stable communal connections to space a precondition of inclusion in governmental programmes, whilst these same governmental programmes aspire to rework (or even dissolve) these same connections. This kind of contradiction should, perhaps, be unsurprising; as Tania Murray Li (2007a, 2007c) has demonstrated, and Audra Mitchell (2011) has charted in the Northern Irish Peace Process, this kind of contradiction is typical of governmental ‘improvement’ programmes, and provides them with their self-propelling momentum, as the problems they create provide future

¹⁶ Here I’m suggesting a form of government similar to one described by Anderson (2011), in his analysis of counterinsurgency doctrine in Iraq, except that here I’m focussing more specifically upon the dynamics of *community* relations to space.

opportunities for continued governmental intervention. The next section posits one possible alternative to this type of engagement.

4.2.2 Reflexive Communities, Public City Life

In contrast to Lippmann, Dewey suggests that communities can play a valuable role in political life not because of their stability in space, but because – as set out in more depth in the preceding chapter – through ‘inquiry’ they can help to stabilise problematic situations, constituting them as problems with which it possible engage in a deliberate fashion. For Dewey, the reason that *communities* specifically play a key role in this dynamic is because, in his understanding, once human beings become a part of a community they act ‘in so far as the connection [between actors] is known, in view of the connection’ (Dewey, [1927] 2016, p. 75). In other words, members of a community act reflexively, with an awareness of their membership of the community. Given the fact that, in the pragmatic conceptualisation, publics form around problematic situations when a portion of a public can organise itself into a community, in Dewey’s understanding this community often aims to constitute this problematic situation which has brought it into being in ways which allow for more deliberate collective engagement with it. In other words, communities can help to make problems public, in turn providing a locus, around which a new public might come into being.

The geography of this is important, and becomes apparent, when this idea is compared with Lippmann’s conceptualisation of the relationship between publics and problems; for Lippmann, whose philosophy does not accommodate the reflexivity of communities, publics and problems are related along isolines of relevance, meaning that the closer an actor is to a problem, the more likely they are to be affected by it, and therefore the more likely they are to form part of a public around it (Marres, 2015, p. 53).¹⁷ Dewey, by contrast, argues that – provided the possibility that a portion of an emergent public can organise itself into a community – a much more topological relationship between publics and problems can develop, with the ‘distance’ between publics and problems both a function of, and factor in, their mutual constitution (Marres, 2015).

This understanding pushes against deterministic readings of the relationship between politics and scale, and in many ways prefigures much more contemporary geographical arguments about the relationship between the urban and the democratic. Specifically, these contemporary debates have argued that, rather than treating the urban and/or the local as inherently more democratic, these scales are always constitutive of, and constituted through, particular kinds of political action (Beveridge and Koch, 2023b; Purcell, 2022, 2006). If the urban is a site which is particularly generative of democratic forms, then it is because the ‘thickness’ of encounters between both friends and strangers in urban space encourages the emergence of new forms of problems, publics,

¹⁷ The term ‘isoline’ is not one which Lippmann himself used, but is one used by Marres (2015) uses in her discussion of his work, and which I think helpfully illustrates the geographical ramifications of his thinking.

and forms of political subjectivity; an idea which has been developed by geographers working in a neo-Deweyan vein (Barnett and Bridge, 2013). These ideas have particular relevance for, and have been pioneered by, geographers working on issues of climate governance, given the multiscalar nature of this problem (Bulkeley et al., 2015; Bulkeley and Betsill, 2005; Goh, 2020).

More fundamentally, in Dewey's view, one of classical liberalism's great failings was to miss the fact that individuality is not something which precedes community life, but is instead co-constituted with it (Dewey, [1927] 2016, p. 74; Fesmire, 2014). This is not a case of communities being constituted out of something which is presumed to pre-exist them, nor are communities simply a kind of 'mid-level' between the individual and the public. Communities, in his conceptualisation, are not simply made up of individuals which aggregated together and which can in turn be pulled together like jigsaw pieces to form a public whole. Instead, communities are a kind of medium, both constituted by and constitutive of publics and individuals.

This push against the idea of identity as something essential, upon which communal and public life rests, is something which has obvious appeal in a place like Belfast. It is also something which Noortje Marres has extended, in her materialist re-reading of Dewey's work, which provides a sharper understanding of the role which communities can play in political life. Specifically, Marres points out that there's an inconsistency between the first and second halves of *The Public and its Problems* (Dewey, [1927] 2016): in the second half, Dewey puts forward the idea that, for the public to realise its democratic potential, it must unite in a kind of 'Great Community.' But in doing so, Marres argues, he loses his sense that a 'prime characteristic of the indirect consequences that call a public into being is that there is precisely no pre-existing community available to settle the problems these consequences give rise to' (Marres, 2005b, p. 54). Moreover, this means that 'the issues are lost from view in Dewey's account of democracy as a social ideal' and instead democracy 'now principally requires the organisation of a social community' (Marres, 2005b, p. 54), turning it away from its empirical focus upon issues, towards a moral one, based around the 'fulfilment that can be derived from participation in community life as such' (Marres, 2005b, p. 56).

Keeping the material issues in focus – and in so doing, moving away from Dewey's analysis in the second half of *The Public and its Problems* (Dewey, [1927] 2016) – is important for Marres' feminist-inflected pragmatism, which challenges the idea that one needs to participate in traditional discursive political forums or communities in order to partake in democratic life. Certainly, in Marres reading, communities can help to remake problems in ways which facilitate and/or encourage public engagement with them, but this does not mean that one *needs* to be a part of a community to engage with public problems or, more broadly, partake in democratic life (Marres, 2023, 2015). By beginning with the idea that '*there is simply no other way of passing into politics than via materiality,*

embodiment, and connectedness with and in the world'(Marres, 2023, p. 985 emphasis original), she argues that it becomes obvious that politics is not simply about forming connections to the world as Deweyan readings of politics emphasise, but instead that our (mere) attempts at existence – or, as she puts it, subsistence – within it are political. In her view, in particular, this understanding that the ‘world we live off is the world we live in’ (Marres, 2023, p. 991) is an essential prerequisite to a more ecologically attuned politics, which recognises that in a climate changing world it is not simply our connections to the worlds we live within which are at stake, but the very existence of these worlds themselves.¹⁸

If communities do have a *particular* role to play in political life, in this conceptualisation, it is not because one has to be a member of a community in order to be a political actor, or because one has to partake in particular kinds of actions – dialogue, for example – usually associated with community life. Here instead communities are important because they might help to encourage recognition, that one is already a part of a public, or that one is already acting *in* public. In more explicitly urban terms, communities might help to encourage recognition, regarding the way in which one’s own attempts to sustain life in the city shape the lives of others who are a part of the city; in other words, it might help to encourage connection between the struggle to sustain urban life and the creation of a sustainable city.

The next section explores the way in which, in practice, both the FMCG and the TBTC have actually set about engaging with Belfast’s communities, before bringing this empirical material more concertedly into dialogue with the ideas set out here.

4.3 Navigating Communal Complexity

This section unpacks why (sub-section 4.3.1) and how (sub-section 4.3.2) the FMCG and TBTC have engaged with Belfast’s communities, before delving more deeply into the way in which they have used ‘going sustainable’ as a response to, and means of encouraging, particular kinds of relationships between communities and the city (sub-section 4.3.3). This section provides the empirical material used in the discussion sections later in the chapter.

4.3.1 Ambivalence about Community

Both the FMCG and TBTC’s community engagement processes started, to some degree, with a degree of ambivalence about the nature of community itself. As a senior project manager involved with the FMCG explained:

‘I think the [...] thing is, we have to be cognisant of the legacy of the mistrust, the fear, the conflict, not, I suppose, pushing those boundaries, a wee bit, and sorta trying to create a shared society, and that we all need to take a wee bit of a leap of

¹⁸ Here Marres is riffing off, and extending, phrase used by Latour and Schultz (2022).

faith at times. And if we don't encourage that cross-community engagement, that segregation can get deeper.

But I would have to say from community organisations that have been engaged and that, you know, I've been involved with, they *do lots of this work, that's their bread and butter, it's just what they do.*

And as I said, previously, there's a whole generational difference and young people have said, you know, we should have a connected city, we shouldn't have gates. So, it'll just be interesting. And, I suppose for me, having lived through those dark days, and wanting a brighter better future for Belfast, and my sort of family, is that, you know, I sort of feel when you listen to young people, Belfast's in safe hands, because a lot of our young people have that vision.

But there are still... We have to acknowledge that there are still communities who have great fear and mistrust, and we need to help them along that journey and acknowledge their position and understand their position, rather than just, you know, not having them involved.' (Belfast City Council, Senior Greenway Manager, 25/01/2024)

Here italics are added, to mirror the vocal emphasis of the interviewee, who wanted to emphasise the fact that community organisations are *already* doing the kinds of 'good work' which the FMCG is aiming to achieve. Communities here are, at once, entities which hold the keys to the 'good life' – already knitting the city together, and helping it transition away from a conflicted past – *and* things which need guidance, assistance, and animation, to realise their full potential. Young people, in particular, are emblems of this changing city; the project is doing little more than engaging with and facilitating a process of transition which is already underway. But this is also a process which is at once trying to reckon with and driven by fear, both personal and more widespread; it is about encouraging people to take a 'leap of faith', and moving on from the interviewee's experience of the 'dark days' of the past; it is about ameliorating the sense that 'segregation can get deeper' without prescient intervention, meaning fragmentation, division and ultimately, perhaps, conflict.

By contrast, as one of the TBTC's most experienced activists explained, one thing they don't do is 'that thing of constantly dealing with the fear', because:

'I think we have to move past that. I know it could be legitimate and all that sort of stuff but... I've got very little time for it like. The fear stuff, you know, because it's used as a kind of obstacle to any fuckin' thing, you know? And it's even... intangible, you know?' (TBTC activist, 20/01/2024)

In their view, working with this intangible sense of possibility simply serves to 'reinforce [existing] power positions within the community' because it provides opportunities for

‘the recalcitrant ones to set the agenda’ by sitting back and saying ‘come and convince me, because I’ve got fears’ (TBTC activist, 20/01/2024) Instead, the TBTC aims to try to create spaces where ‘participation can come to the surface’ in a way which isn’t mediated by pre-existing stakeholders (TBTC activist, 20/01/2024). Historically, they have attempted to do this by helping people to engage with governmental agencies through discursive means. But, as explained in the previous chapter, over the past decade they’ve moved towards a more material, prefigurative mode of engagement, moving away from petitioning the state towards building new institutions and/or communities. This community-creation is, as the activist quoted below explains, about both making clear the existence of invisible publics affected by problems not being taken care of by existing government institutions, and using human connections to bridge the gap between immediate problems and longer-term aspirations:

‘It’s about us going, ‘we’re a community of people; look there’s 4 or 5 of us, or 10 out there and...’ So you aspire towards ‘let’s get this big fuckin’ housing estate built, and it’s going to be wonderful. [But in the meantime] yes let’s fight your battle [Person A] and whose gonna help fight with [Person B] and let’s go to these things together as a community because there are thousands like us.’ Know what I mean? We are the majority. And we are the people who are not being heard or seen. And so, creating community, and creating a sense of community is probably one of the biggest lasting wins that you get out of it basically.’ (TBTC activist, 21/08/2024)

But, like the FMCG manager quoted at the beginning of this sub-section, in spite of their keen belief in the ‘power’ of community, the TBTC are reluctant to use the word itself, preferring ‘coalition’ instead because, in the words of a different activist;

‘It’s really community-led housing, although [name redacted] was always like, don’t call it community led, because up here ‘community’ has so many connotations, community can be, you know, loyalist Paramilitaries and all that. [...] and there’s like ‘community workers’ here are very often, like, UDA boys. But that’s what it’s called elsewhere – community-led housing.’ (TBTC activist, 20/04/2024)

These are both projects, then, which begin from an ambivalence about communities; for those involved in the FMCG, because they can produce good and bad outcomes, whilst for the TBTC, because the term itself has become associated with a mode of governance associated with political violence. The next section explains how these projects have set about dealing with this ambivalence.

4.3.2 Spatialising Community Engagement

The reports and documents developed by the EU describing the community engagement delivered as part of the FMCG present a picture of an extensive engagement process, which allowed for the co-creation of a project in conjunction with local communities,

who were engaged with throughout the project design and development (specifically, the project hit its target of 1,080 consultees), and have taken over the project since its completion (RSM, 2024). Interviews both with those engaged by and – perhaps more surprisingly, those who delivered – this process present a rather different picture. In part this is because much of the actual community engagement process went undocumented; as a City Council project manager explained to me, much of the ‘real’ engagement happened in the ‘wee smoky community centres’ across the city’s North and West (Belfast City Council, Greenway Project Manager, 26/10/2023). But it is also because those who were involved in the project engagement used a number of techniques – taking classes of schoolchildren to engagement events (interviews 8, 17 and 38), encouraging people to have their lunch breaks in engagement halls (interviews 17, 24 and 44), utilising consultees from other PEACE process projects in FMCG engagement (interviews 8, 17, 38 and 56), and encouraging local community organisations to send along their members to engagement (interview 8, 11, 26, 31, and 33) – to elevate the numbers of people who ‘passed through the doors’ of the engagement process, (i.e. to increase the number of actors that were engaged). In addition, this engagement started by working with the DUP and Sinn Féin, who identified key consultees within the particular urban worlds under their control, who were then engaged with by the project (Belfast City Council, Senior Civil Servant, 19/02/2024). This helped to ensure that the consultation was ‘equitable’ along CNR/PUL lines. But it also meant that the actors engaged tended to be of a particular ‘type’, as consultants brought in to deliver the engagement explained to me:

Interviewee 1: I think it was quite clear that – and for obvious reasons given the challenging context – but it’s quite an old-school, hierarchical way of doing things, and because everything has to be done [other interviewee interrupts].

Interviewee 2: And white and male. White male, sort of older middle aged. I mean these are people who have held on to power since the Troubles, who have just sort of changed their hat, you know? (Greenway Community Consultant Team, 11/01/2024)

Moreover, because the consultation offered little opportunity for substantive opportunities to engage with project plans, consultees often felt frustrated by, rather than engaged with, the consultation process. Ultimately this meant that, on its completion, local community organisations refused to take ownership of the project as a representative of a key community organisation, closely involved with the consultation explained to me:

‘It wasn’t co-production or even co-designed. It was basically ‘here’s what we’ve come up with, now do you want to play a part in this here? We’ll give you a couple of decisions.’ They actually came to us not long after the consultation and asked us – [Name of Community Organisation] – if we wanted on to the management or

the steering group and we just refused. Because then that becomes our responsibility to get people to buy into it, to get communities to buy into it, and we weren't bought into it. So why would we then, go on to the steering group, and try and get other people? Cause as I say to you people see through a lot of that stuff.' (Senior Community Worker, West Belfast Partnership Board, 08/03/2024)

Rather than being populated by 'locals' then, this steering group today is populated by representatives of NGOs, who had been brought in to deliver the engagement process. Ultimately the process has, thus, served to exacerbate already prevalent feelings of consultation fatigue, and disenfranchisement, as explained by another key community stakeholder:

'It's like, you know, on Harry Potter, what do you call them... The people flying around... Dementors. Yeah. The Dementors suck the life out of you. So it's all sucked out and then you'll read it back in a report and you say. Why? Why? Why was the £50,000 given for that process to take place when the people that you're talking to are more than happy just to give all that information directly to source, and would feel more content sometimes doing that? And sometimes it worries me that I... there's still no faith in working class areas. There's still a thing of like, we're thick or, you know, or self-interested, or... I don't know. I don't know.' (Sinn Féin Politician and Community Worker, 26/06/2024)

These details are important, for understanding the context of the engagement, but they're not particularly novel (lots of other academics have charted similar dynamics in governmental community engagement processes, both in Belfast, and in other cities). More significant for this chapter is the way which this process served to work through, and reshape, the connections between communities and space.

The degree to which actors involved with the delivery of the FMCG identified people *explicitly* on the basis of their ethno-national background was mixed. Some, such as the senior liaison between the EU and the Belfast City Council, described how they'd successfully encouraged equal participation from both 'sides' of the community, generally engaging with people on a cross-community basis; the only 'failure' of this process came about in the immediate aftermath of the 2021 BREXIT riots on Lanark Way, when they'd needed to conduct some 'single-identity' work with those in the PUL community, in order to get them re-engaged with the project (interviews 8, 21 and 23). But others described a desire to move away from this kind of explicit identification of people on the basis of ethno-communal identification, arguing that it served to exacerbate the differences between people on an ethno-national basis, rather than identifying the commonalities between them (interviews 1, 5, and 17). Some pushed against this type of

identification explicitly, writing reports criticising this type of engagement (interview 17).¹⁹ Others bent (or broke), the project's rules, by identifying actors on the basis of where they were from, rather than on the explicit basis of their ethno-national identity (interviews 1 and 5).

The best example of this is the inclusion of an area called 'The Village' in the community consultation and engagement process; a staunchly PUL area of the city in 'South' Belfast, the FMCG doesn't actually run through this area, but runs on the opposite side of a major urban motorway (the M1 motorway), which acts as a de-facto peace line. Consultees from this part of the city thus came to suspect that this was:

'[...] one of those projects where they've thrown a load of money into it and very little thought into it, and then making sure they've got a bit of a balance Orange and Green-wise, which is... a bit rubbish.' (Senior Community Worker, Greater Village Regeneration Trust, 16/11/2023)

Specifically they suspected they were included in the project because of their 'Orange' (i.e. PUL) community status, meaning their inclusion would help the project team to balance the numbers of CNR/PUL/Other consultees. This perception exacerbated this community's sense that their perceived value – and right to participate in the city's politics – comes from their ethno-national identity and relationship to the city's ethno-communal territories. Although they didn't like this form of identification, and quickly recognised that they were being asked to play a role within a particular governmental assemblage, they were content to do so on the basis that it *might* afford them opportunities to build a relationship with the city council and EU, which *might* provide them opportunities in the future (Senior Community Worker, Greater Village Regeneration Trust, 16/11/2023). This specific community's sense tallied with a wider view, voiced by community actors across the city's North and West, that the project's route had been created in order to provide excuses for community engagement events in staunch PUL and CNR areas, more than because the route 'made sense' for travelling through the city (i.e. the route was decided on the basis of the city's territorial geography, more than on the basis of the needs of urban life within the city) (interviews 9, 11, 28, 31, 40 and 56).

This route was challenged substantively twice; one challenge came from the TBTC, the other challenge from a group of local residents in the Whiterock/Ballymurphy area. The TBTC's challenge – launched via the medium of Participation and the Practice of Rights

¹⁹ One of the most interesting examples of this thinking came from the consultants employed to engage with communities on behalf of the FMCG, who framed identifying participants on the basis of their identity as building 'bonding capital' in lieu of 'bridging capital', explicitly referring to Robert Putnam's (1995) theorisations of these terms to explain this. In doing so they were repeating, almost verbatim, a pattern described by Tania Murray Li (2007a, p. 244), whereby consultants engaged to deliver community engagement programmes in Indonesia used Putnam's ideas to turn communities, and their engagement, into calculable fields, and therefore more amenable for governmental intervention.

(PPR) – challenged the equality screening associated with the FMCG. Specifically, the TBTC argued that rezoning the Mackies site from Brownfield to Greenfield, and thereby making it more difficult to build houses on it in the future, did not represent using ‘public land for the public good’, given that this part of the city is suffering from acute housing need, and this is the largest piece of derelict land in the area. This was not a direct challenge to the Greenway, but instead a suggestion to think about how it’s negative impacts could be minimised, and its positive potential realised. Specifically, the TBTC suggested that:

‘A greenway with embedded housing, housing which is designed to the highest possible sustainability standards, well designed and of an appropriate scale, would be an alternative proposal capable of fulfilling [Belfast City Council’s] statutory obligations in terms of deciding how to utilise land.’ (Postal Correspondence, PPR to Belfast City Council, 31/03/2021)

But this suggestion was not taken into consideration, and their challenge was thrown out, in part thanks to the fact that equality screenings in Northern Ireland cannot consider hypothetical alternative cases, and because they are based upon a piece of legislation called ‘section 75’, developed during the Good Friday Agreement, focussed upon ensuring equality between groups with different cultural and/or religious identities, but *not* between groups of differing income inequality.²⁰

Meanwhile Ballymurphy/Whiterock residents were, as one of the project consultants would later put it, ‘up in arms’ about the project and its planned route, because ‘people weren’t consulted. There was no buy-in from the beginning. Essentially a councillor came in with a finished product and said, “you’re gonna love this”’ (Greenway Community Consultant Team, 11/01/2024). But, by voicing their opinion through resident’s associations and Sinn Féin, a local councillor quickly ensured that the FMCG route was adjusted to meet the desires of these local residents (e-mail correspondence, Sinn Féin councillor, 07/06/2024). These adjustments have turned the greenways route from one which would have opened up new ways of moving around the city, into one which largely follows existing roads and paths (and also means it now has to go up and down a large hill). In other words, it makes this piece of infrastructure much less useful, for those who actually want to get around the city. But, rather than being described as a ‘failure’ of community engagement, or as an adjustment which has negatively affected the project, the interaction with the Whiterock/Ballymurphy residences has since been framed by members of the FMCG project team as evidence of *good* community engagement, and a

²⁰ To see this requires reading both Section 75 of the Northern Ireland act 1998, and Belfast City Council’s Equality Impact Assessment guidance alongside one another (the latter refers to, and leans upon, the former), and looking for an absence; namely the absence of focus upon issues of what historically might have been called issues of ‘class’ inequality, based around income, or ability to participate in prevalent systems of political economy. Excluding such questions of political economy was, Nikolas Rose (1996) explains, typical of ‘third way’ governmental initiatives, in the United Kingdom, in the late 1990s.

willingness to listen to, and accommodate, local community concerns (Belfast City Council, Senior Greenway Manager, 18/01/2024).

The TBTC's challenge and the Whiterock/Ballymurphy residents' challenge are different kinds of intervention, and were focussed on different pieces of the FMCG's route; they're thus not directly comparable. But their differences are, nonetheless, illustrative; a challenge voiced by those with existing connections to a particular piece of the city's political apparatus, thanks to their connections to a piece of urban space, had their desires quickly listened to and accommodated, whilst a challenge voiced on behalf of those trying to establish a home in the city struggled, and ultimately failed, to have their concerns recognised.

Ultimately, and more broadly, the criticisms of the community engagement developed by the FMCG – both by those 'inside' and 'outside' the project – most often revolved around the process utilised; critics focused upon the fact that the project had not *really* lived up to the best-practice standards of 'co-creation', nor had communities been engaged 'early enough'. This suggests that the problems with engagement are a result of a failure to effectively apply best-practice community engagement models, which are presumed to be applicable everywhere. But, arguably, the *successes* of the TBTC's engagement have come thanks to the fact that this is an initiative which has designed a community engagement model specifically *for* a particular context – where consultation fatigue is high and faith in state programmes is low – and *around* a specific set of problems; namely, housing. To some extent, these two things are entwined, as a TBTC activist explained to me:

'I think, part of the logic of this peace process, is that you're saying 'two valid sets of values. They will control their bases.' Whereas it's not true. For me, a more fuckin' honest approach with anybody living in our society is not to assign them as a role as a Unionist or a Republican, but to talk to them about what their issues are, and then to go on a journey with them.' (TBTC activist, 21/08/2024)

Because the housing crisis is a broad, intersectional problem which, in the view of the TBTC 'connects everything' and 'almost determines everything in your life; how you communicate with people, how you make relationships' (TBTC activist, 28/08/2024) the TBTC have attracted a broad range of people to their coalition, ranging from homeless people, to (increasingly) refugees and asylum seekers, who are faced with being moved from hostel to hostel, hotel to hotel, in lieu of more stable, permanent homes in the city. But in practice the TBTC has never been a movement which has had, or aimed, to gather a 'representative' cross-section of Belfast's public into it. Instead, they find that: 'primarily the people we end up organising – and I don't want to be too, just, fuckin' like, apply logic to gender or anything – but [they're] primarily women, with kids.' (TBTC activist, 21/08/2024) Today these women are disproportionately – if Belfast's population is taken as the norm – women of colour. Rather than being based around identity, or one's

connection to urban ethno-communal territories, this organising model – which those in the TBTC describe as being self-consciously ‘feminist’ – is based instead around the mundane forms of engagement with urban life, which happen when one is trying to (re-)create life within the city, partly because, as one member of the TBTC put it, facilitating ‘women coming together, and yarning things out, through the lens of “I’m the one who actually cleans that fuckin’ shit,”’ has ‘much more potential than men, abstractly talking about [social problems]’ (TBTC activist, 21/08/2024).

In practice, the TBTC achieves this engagement through regular drop-in sessions, where those with housing problems come together to share their problems and advice about how to solve them. The imperative to actually make a material change to these problems is, for the TBTC, high, even if only in a very incremental way, ‘otherwise you’re just another fuckin.... [people will say] “where’s the actual power in this?”’ (TBTC activist, 21/08/2024). But less obviously material forms of human connection also form a vital part of the way which the TBTC is actually held together:

‘Many people will *not* come the first time and say [...] ‘we want to be part of the campaign.’ They will come to get their problem solved, but then they come again and again, and they meet people, and they get to understand and then they get involved in the campaign. And even the involvement in the campaign is different; it’s not the same for everyone. So some people will come to events and meetings, some people will go to door knocking, some people will speak to the media, some people will follow and share but they are not comfortable coming to stuff. So it’s different levels of participation depending on how comfortable people are.’ (TBTC Activist, 28/08/2024)

Moreover, the TBTC are acutely aware of the fact that the capacity to participate is not distributed equally, but is shaped by the different relationships which people have with the city:

‘In our organising, the organiser wants to try and organise themselves into invisibility if you get me. But that’s not... it’s not as pure as that. In reality there’s no doubt that a skilled and trained organiser on a wage has a lot more capacity to be involved in... work, in changing the world and all that than someone, like a single mum living in a tower block with a thousand different challenges, no income whatsoever, no access to resources, you know? So, our job to take all those barriers that stop people meaningfully participating in how their society is governed, and that’s building platforms and building bridges and building power so that they can participate.’ (TBTC activist, 21/08/2024).

Most of these ‘organisers’ associated with the TBTC are not, however, people who were trained as consultants or community engagement specialists, but are people who were once affected by a problem in the city, who have become deeply involved in the

campaign, and who the PPR have eventually managed to find funding for, in order to support their employment as a ‘professional’ activist. To this core of part-time and full-time activists, the TBTC have gradually added a variety of planning experts, architects, academics, artists, software developers, and professional activists, to try and help advance their work. These people have been added to the coalition because:

‘We’re not experts in any of this house building or planning or procedures or any of it. But enough people, there are a lot of really good people who are strong in their own fields who care about this and see the value of it and that’s what I think draws people’s attention to it because it is....yeah.’ (TBTC Activist, 03/06/2024)

This is not a form of community engagement based around one’s existing relationship to the city’s ethno-communal territories then, but is a form of engagement which is based around the types of relationship which people *might* form with the city, and *want* to form with the city. It is, moreover, a process which involves assembling together a community (or a coalition) of actors with different types of relationships to the city; it involves recognising and mobilising the potential of these differences, rather than attempting to flatten them out on to a single comparable plane – such as that offered by ethno-national identity. The net result of this approach is that the public meetings run by the TBTC often enjoy enthusiastic participation by those present. As the English architect, recruited by the TBTC through a public competition explained to me after a public meeting run by the TBTC:

‘I mean, that was one of the best meetings I’ve ever been to my whole career. 25 or 30 years in architecture, it was probably the most important, most impactful meeting I’ve ever been to and I have been to countless community meetings since that’s what we do. Evening meetings, weekend meetings, pin up boards. It just.... [lost for words].’ (TBTC Architect, 05/11/2023)

There are lots of political implications which stem from the different forms of community engagement offered by the FMCG and the TBTC. But the next section focusses narrowly on the way which these forms of engagement are related to the visions of a sustainable city which each project has developed, and mobilised.

4.3.3 ‘Going Sustainable’

As the preceding chapter indicates, neither the FMCG nor the TBTC were projects with initial interests in sustainability but, as this sub-section explains, both ‘became sustainable’ in order to try and draw actors together in particular ways, by encouraging particular forms of relationships to develop between communities and the city. Those involved in the TBTC were more self-consciously aware of this process, and were, consequently, more explicit about it. As one member explained, making the project ‘sustainable’:

‘[...] has the capacity to build a broader coalition. So if you wanna develop a campaign for the women that need social housing, then you’ll develop a coalition of interest around that issue. If you wanna develop a concept of building a sustainable fuckin’ neighbourhood, high energy, yadah yadah yadah, you’ve got all these other potential coalition partners, who have interests in seeing that development take place: people who want reform in planning, people who want, you know, fuckin’ energy lower, people who want you know... You can also say that this isn’t just about us fighting for that woman to have a home, it’s about that woman’s home generating electricity that goes into yours. You know what I mean?’ (TBTC activist, 21/08/2024)

Read in isolation, this could be taken as a kind of ‘greenwashing’ or ‘climate-washing’ (i.e. little more than a kind of discursive flourish to the initiative), particularly when members of the TBTC do things like introduce the initiative, at public meetings, with statements like ‘who wants to be involved in Belfast’s first ever co-produced carbon-neutral housing scheme?’ (Field Notes, Public Political Meeting, Lower Falls Road, 27/01/2024). But the campaign did not only ‘go sustainable’ in order to create a larger coalition, but also partly *thanks* to the creation of the coalition. Specifically, during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the TBTC held a series of webinars titled ‘the status quo is not an option’, a wide range of actors were drawn to the project, many of whom had an interest in environmental sustainability issues:

‘I mean the initial [...] webinars that opened it during COVID, right, when nobody could leave home, when everything else... One was on sustainability, you know. And it brought [...] in people from [a range of organisations] and other people around, and you know a lot of the community garden people, and the kinda more environmentally oriented people, and they have remained... Like. that’s a really important cohort within the Take Back the City coalition [now], the whole community gardening, sustainable, environmentally sustainable, you know.’ (TBTC Activist, 21/11/2023)

Specifically, it is through this ‘coalition building’ that the TBTC’s plans have gradually turned towards an attempt to realise a ‘garden city’ neighbourhood on the Mackies site. This idea was initially developed when a representative of the Town and Country Planning association (TCPA) joined the coalition and helped the TBTC to develop a public architecture competition. Dialogue between the TCPA, the architect who won this competition, and the large number of community gardeners associated with the TBTC, led to the development of a series of architectural masterplans which draw upon the ideals of the idea of the garden city, explicitly referencing the ideals of Ebenezer Howard, and the garden cities ‘built in the 1920s and 1930s throughout the UK’ (see Figure 4.1).

2.2 Masterplan Anatomy Garden City

Matthew Lloyd Architects

From the outset of this project local people have asked for the Mackies project to be centred around a holistic landscape of gardens and urban greening.

As a result of this ambition, we are proposing that the whole development becomes a Garden City, which recalls and emulates the great garden cities built in the 1920s and 1930s throughout the UK.

This design ambition will therefore create extensive tree lined street and avenues, formal and informal planted public spaces, private and semi-private gardens and vegetable growing allotments for all.

Coupled with this, the majority of the new buildings here will have planted green flat roofs, some with rooftop access to provide rooftop terraces and gardens too.



Wild flowers in the summer 2023, planted by local people at the Mackies site.



The site will become an exemplar of urban greening.

Take Back The City Design Framework

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Figure 4.1: Take Back the City Garden City Plans example (Source: TBTC (2024))

This is, perhaps, the most traditional and archetypal ideal of the sustainable city in existence. But the TBTC are not simply trying to apply this ideal to Belfast; these plans have also served as a spur for bringing people together in order to participate more fully in dialogue and conversation about what the city's potential futures might be. To put this differently, the plans are a means of trying to encourage political engagement in the city in the here and now, rather than simply being a vision for what the city *should* look like in the future.

The 'greenness' of the FMCG, by contrast, occurred in 2018/19 when a consultant 'came forward with about five ideas [for a project name], and about three of them were shortlisted, and recommended, and then went through [City Council] committee structures' (Greenway Project Delivery Manager, 09/05/2024). As this project manager recounted, the project's exact title went through several iterations:

'The B-line was one - with a B for Belfast - which I says, 'that doesn't work', because people when they leave Belfast, people associate themselves with Belfast, but they quickly associate themselves with whereabouts in Belfast they're from. So... So.... I says if you've moved away from Belfast - and I remember sayin' it at the time - if you've moved away from Belfast and people go 'ah you're from Belfast!', the next question's always 'whereabouts in Belfast?' You know... 'Oh, you're from the top of the Ormeau Road, or the bottom of the Ormeau Road?' You

know, that kinda aspect, you know. So I says, the city doesn't... If you're doing something in the West and the North of the city people are going.... It's like, another one was the 'yellow line' because the original sketch, by [Name Redacted] was done in a yellow felt pen [laughter]. And then the Forth Meadow was... yeah. It was very much 'on common ground' strapline as well.' (Belfast City Council, Greenway Project Delivery Manger, 09/05/2024)

For those not familiar with the geography, the top of the Ormeau Road is traditionally considered PUL territory, whilst the bottom of the Ormeau Road is traditionally considered CNR territory. Meanwhile, there is no area of Belfast which is actually known as 'Forth Meadow'; the Forth River runs through the Mackies site (before entering a culvert), and the names of nearby areas bear allusions to old pre-industrial meadows (Springfield, Highfield). The Forth Meadow Greenway then is a name which offers a kind of allusion to, but no specific point of reference to, the city's North and West.²¹

Part of what is interesting about the quote above, though, is the way in which the interviewee frames this process; they describe the city from the perspective of someone who has 'moved away' from it. This is about creating a project which is appealing for someone who is 'looking back' at the city, rather than for someone who is engaged with it, or looking forward towards what it might become in the future. More broadly, as a senior member of the Northern Ireland department for infrastructure sustainable transport team explained, although there is no clear definition of what a greenway is in the city, calling it a greenway helps to provide with a particular emotive appeal:

I don't have a term for what I believe... a traffic free active travel route does not have a ring to it, whereas a Greenway... A Greenway gives you a feeling, of what a thing is like, so it does, even if in reality, in your own head, you know actually what you've created is an off... a traffic free active travel route in attractive surroundings in an urban environment [laughs], even if that's what you've created, calling it the 'such and such Greenway' gives it a feeling, and it... As long as what you've built can live up to that feeling, then maybe Greenway is the best term for it. (Interview, Department for Infrastructure manager, 24/06/2024).

More specifically, the 'greening' of the project appears to have been developed in order to provide the project with a degree of multifunctionality – the project's feasibility studies, for example, describe the project's potential benefits as ranging from biodiversity, to health, to resilience (Greenway Feasibility Report, 2018). This ambiguity was particularly

²¹ Other names discounted included reference to the Wizard of Oz's 'yellow brick road' – as an allusion to the yellow colour of the felt-tip pen used by the civil servant (as described in the previous chapter) and because the paving used in the project was yellow – because of a rumour that this was the favourite song of a Loyalist gunman (City Council Engagement manager, 15/08/2024). This kind of attentiveness to language flowed through the project from beginning to end; another member of the project team explained to me that they tried to avoid using the word 'volunteers' (Irish translation; óglaigh) as this could be taken as a reference to being a member of the IRA (Belfast City Council, Greenway Project Manager, 26/10/2023).

evident when it came to considering the relationship between the project and climate change; for some of those involved, this project had clear climate connections (interviews 6, 10, 21, 27, 29, 39 and 55), for others, it had very little to do with climate change (interviews 8, 17, 23, 41 48, and 51). For those involved with actually delivering this project, this was a point of some frustration; they felt that there hadn't been enough thought given to how the project was actually going to deliver these various objectives (Greenway Community Consultant Team, 11/01/2024). But this poor theorisation – or, more generously, ambiguity – is also, arguably, one of the project's strengths. For example, asked about the relationship between sustainability and the project, the project's senior manager explained:

Interviewee: That was probably one of the things that directed, you know, the project is about addressing inequalities, you know, improving life opportunities for people, about improving neighbourhoods, about the environment and so on. Absolutely. Because you know when we were reporting back and doing our final conference, you know, we had to talk about the Sustainable Development Goals and how we were contributing. So it definitely was a consideration.

Me: So in that sense I guess it being a 'Green' project is somewhat helpful?

Interviewee: I think it was always very much connecting space, addressing segregation, and improving life opportunities, because it's well documented that people in and around peace walls and interfaces and so on, you their life expectancies are lower than others, you know there's great inequalities. So it was really about the improvement that it would bring to people's lives. I just remember – again – so one guy was like, it's added £15,000 to my house value and you're like 'oh really!' you know? [laughter]

(Belfast City Council, Senior Greenway Manager, 18/01/2024)

Here sustainability is something specific – contributing to targets (the SDGs) and being able to talk about them at a conference. But it's also about delivering a much broader sense of 'improvement' for the lives of people already living in the city. Greening overlaps with this broad desired-for improvement but has a few more geographical elements; it's about trying to deal with the city's segregation, whilst benefitting those already engaged with the city's political economy through housing ownership.

The TBTC have also made use of a broad definition of sustainability, which emphasises the intersection of social and environmental issues. But they were keen to emphasise that *greening* and sustainability were not, in their view, the same thing and that although they are 'often used interchangeably [...] in this context it's interesting to tease out the distinction' (TBTC Activist, 21/11/2023). Specifically, as this same activist put it:

‘I think greening is important, but I think sustainability is wider. So like in, in the context of the Mackie’s site, I mean nobody is going to disagree with a Greenway that allows for more green space and, you know, green corridors of ways of getting from one place to another safely, like without having to go on a road and drive a car and all that stuff. But sustainable also means people can live there, and involves community more, and so then questions like, ‘are kids growing up homeless in this neighbourhood?’ are relevant to sustainability when they aren’t necessarily relevant to ‘green’, and I think from our perspective those two things have to kind of go hand in hand.’ (TBTC Activist, 21/11/2023)

More specifically for the TBTC, sustainability isn’t about delivering a particular project in the city, which meets a particular set of goals, but instead about creating a long-term change in the way in which the city develops. This is because, as one activist put it:

‘[...] we are supporting people who are homeless, but we are also supporting people who have houses, but the houses are in very bad standards. So we... I am in a Housing Executive property myself; very old house, needs mending all the time, it’s cold, so we understand that it’s not just about building houses, but it’s about building sustainable, environmental houses, that could last. Because these houses – the houses in our street are getting demolished soon. So it’s building houses that are not sustainable, then getting demolished, then building again...’ (TBTC Activist, 28/08/2024)

This is a desire for sustainability which begins from a response to the material conditions of urban life, rather than from a set of deliverables or outcomes (like the UN SDGs). Specifically, those involved in the campaign are responding to their own experiences of unsustainable forms of urban development, and want to change the way in which the city develops so that others do not have the same experiences in the future. This, in their view, doesn’t mean just reacting to these material conditions, so much as making a fundamental difference to them, breaking out of an unsustainable cycle of social housing construction ‘built on that model of borrow half from the state, half from the bank, use the cheapest products you’ve got and 20 years later the houses are falling down.’ (TBTC activist, 21/08/2024). But it also requires, as one TBTC activist explained, breaking away from a set of unspoken presumptions, regarding the priorities of those who are most negatively affected by contemporary forms of urban development:

Me: If you're talking about housing needs, people sometimes would say, ‘Oh well, let's just build houses, you know, we don't need to worry about building them in, like, in a way that’s climate sustainable.’ So like, why [interviewee interrupts]

Interviewee: And so why are poor people not entitled to ecologically sustainable housing? Why is that? Why is that only in the mix for people who have the money for solar panels or fuckin’ whatever.

Me: So is that a narrative that you come up against?

Interviewee: No, not really. But like it's kind of unspoken as well, isn't it? It's like [laughter] 'you wanna do what?' You know?

(TBTC Activist, 20/04/2024)

But ultimately for the TBTC, it is in drawing connections between the material conditions of everyday urban life and the broader conditions associated with contemporary urbanisation, that they feel their work has the closest alignment with 'climate battles':

Interviewee: See one thing I'll say about the housing campaign and the Mackies campaign – and it's a constant challenge for organising – fundamentally what you're telling people is to fight for something they'll never have. Know what I mean? Let's fight. We'll build a thing, that you won't own, and that maybe your children will benefit from. Know what I mean? And really, isn't that the climate battle? Know what I mean? You're saying: 'know what it is, generation of today? Lets get organised and fight, but we're gonna fight for the future. And you won't own any of it. You won't see any benefits of it.' Which is a real fuckin' hard sell.

Me: Well how do you sell it then?

Interviewee: Cause you have to have the small wins on the side. You have to be running housing clinics to get people homes. You have to be fighting the wee battles in the big battle. The symptomatic battles and then the fuckin', the systemic. Know what I mean? So the symptomatic are, 'I don't have a home right now, my damp problem's crap, my kinds can't find a place at school.' And the societal, or the systemic, is 'well if you want to build a neighbourhood like this, you have to solve those problems.'

(TBTC Activist, 21/08/2024)

The next section of this chapter unpacks the understandings of sustainability developed by the FMCG and the TBTC in more depth and explores their significance for Belfast's politics.

4.4 Defining the Sustainable City

A summary of the empirical material from the section above is presented in Table 4.1, which the analysis in the following three sub-sections builds upon. The first – sub-section 4.4.1 – focusses upon the FMCG, and the second – sub-section 4.4.2 – focusses on the TBTC, exploring the way which each of these projects has encouraged contestation and conflict, within and between communities. The final sub-section 4.4.3, reflects on the implications for what it means to engage in climate politics in Belfast today.

Table 4.1: Summary of differing visions of Community, Sustainability, and the relationships between them.

	Forth Meadow Community Greenway	Take Back the City Coalition
Primarily engages with 'communities' because:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - They are already providing useful services for the city which can be used and enhanced. - They contain negative (divisive) potential. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Their potential is being limited by contemporary governance structures. - Developing new forms of power requires the assemblage of people and the experiences they have into a new community/coalition.
A Sustainable Belfast means:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Improving the lives of those who already have a stake in the city. - Delivering projects which meet governmental targets (specifically the SDGs). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Creating a city where future potential residents can have and sustain a home. - Responding to, and being responsible for, contemporary forms of urban development.
The urban ecologies associated with these sustainable visions should engage publics:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - In spite of actors' existing or past associations with the city and its ethno-communal territories. - Because green projects offer benefits to those who already have a connection to the city and its politics. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - On the basis of actors' desires to become involved in tackling the city's socio-ecological problems. - Because visions for a sustainable city appeal to a wide range of actors, engaging them more fully in the city's politics.

4.4.1 Transcending the City through Greening

As indicated in the preceding chapter, the route of the FMCG was designed in order to draw together a range of different governmental projects in the city's North and West, in order to try to turn them into a kind of cohesive whole. But those in community groups in the city read the route in a different way; they see it as part of an attempt to try to balance between PUL and CNR geographies. More broadly, it is a route which cuts through lots of different ethno-communal territories. This has, of course, provided lots of opportunities for those who are associated with the city council to consult with actors in the 'wee smoky community centres' (interview with City Council Greenway Team, 26/10/2023), and to run public engagement sessions. It provides an excuse, in other words, to engage with actors across this part of the city, who might otherwise be disengaged with the city's governance and politics.

This kind of extensive engagement is something which those in the city council policymaking and planning teams described as necessary, but an inconvenience. More broadly, these kinds of greenway projects, they explained, require significantly more public consultation than other types of projects, because they tend to cut across lots of different patches of land (they require much more public engagement than, say, a project which involves electrifying a bus fleet) (interviews 17, 39, and 54). But there is also a different way of framing this; these types of projects *create* opportunities for those involved in Northern Irish government to engage with communities in North and West Belfast, and *produce* the kinds of publics which the Peace Process is designed to govern.

Creating opportunities for engaging with communities in North and West Belfast has long been an aspiration at the core of the Peace Process. Prior to 1998, some areas of this part of the city were 'no-go zones' for actors associated with the Northern Irish state (the PSNI didn't freely patrol West Belfast, for example, until after 2015). The Peace Process has attempted to forge connections with these communities, ensuring that their political energies are channelled towards the stabilisation and perpetuation of Northern Irish government, rather than towards alternative political projects like armed insurrection. By stretching across this geography, projects like the FMCG provide a good excuse for engaging with a wide range of communities associated with the city's North and West.

But the Peace Process has, of course, already done a good job of corralling the political energies of this part of the city towards the perpetuation of the GFA; there is no longer a realistic threat of organised armed insurrection from this part of the city. This part of the city is, in other words, relatively peaceful. But projects like the FMCG serve to agitate communities within it, creating the kinds of conflicts and moments of contestation which the Peace Process has been set up to tackle; it produces a public which is agitated and frustrated, and resists projects which are designed to encourage connection and

reconciliation. Here, the protests both the TBTC and the Whiterock/Ballymurphy residents launched *against* the FMCG actually serve to *reinforce* the rationale for the project, rather than fundamentally challenge it. Those involved in the FMCG's team, after all, viewed the way which they handled the Whiterock/Ballymurphy protest, in particular, as an example of *successful* public engagement.

There are two broader implications to this. The first is that the kinds of 'agonistic' protest, or forms of public engagement, long favoured by critical scholars as alternatives to governmental forms of public participation, are ineffective in this kind of geography. They merely feed governmental assemblages set up precisely in order to try to reckon with these kinds of challenges. The second is that actors in this part of the city find this dynamic exhausting; they find themselves caught up in rounds of public consultation, which engage with them on the basis of identities associated with the past, which channel their energies towards projects associated with the perpetuation of the GFA, rather than towards political projects focussed on the city and its problems.

But protest and/or exhaustion are not the only possibilities for community actors in these kinds of engagement processes. Presuming they are being engaged with *because* of their ethno-communal identities and connections to territory, some community groups in this part of the city are willing to enact this role, not because they feel it accurately represents them (nor because they feel like it), but because they think it might keep opportunities open in the future by maintaining connections with government. Here again is a project which has produced the type of public which it has been designed to govern; a public made of ethno-sectarian communities closely tied to territory, like flocks of sheep hefted to patches of turf. Here communities' connections to 'local' geographies are not just a something which this project has aimed draw upon, as set out in sub-section 4.2.1, but are something this form of engagement has actually produced, thanks to the way which actors associated with it have negotiated this particular governmental programme.

The project's 'greenness' is also, protagonists assert, something which is supposed to help the project to benefit actors who already have some form of connection to the city's territories; for example, as one of the City Council Greenway team quoted in sub-section 4.3.3 explains, they hope that this will help to bump up house prices for those who already own property within it. But it is not just the project's outcomes which have benefitted those who already have connections to urban territory; the process of consultation has reinforced the importance of the 'white men' who have held power in this part of the city 'since the Troubles' (Interview with Greenway Consultation Team,

11/01/2024), by consulting with them first, and placing them at the centre of the consultation process.²²

And yet, the project's greenness was something which, ostensibly, was supposed to help the project transcend these territorial divides, by loosening its connection to any particular place (or territory) in the city. And in a sense here the project has largely succeeded – no community has 'claimed' the project. But this also means that the project has not really connected to – nor created – any long-term community *in* the city. None of the city's communities, for example, have accepted responsibility for this project's uptake and care; the Greenway 'board' now managing it is instead made up of actors associated with NGOs who have an interest in intervening *in* these communities rather than being actors who are part *of* these communities.

But again, for the those who have delivered the project this is not necessarily a 'failure', if their goal is to try to create a platform for future repeated engagement with communities in this part of the city. For example, most of those involved with the FMCG explained to me that, as far as they were concerned, the project would only reach its full potential if it were supported by another round of PEACE funding, and another round of community engagement was developed (interviews 1, 8, 17, 23, and 58). Rather than create a new community in the city then, the project has instead set up an opportunity for actors coming from 'outside' North and West Belfast to re-engage with the communities in it, entangling them in another round of public consultation, channelling their energies towards the (re-)creation of particular governmental programmes.

The TBTC has, by contrast, placed much more emphasis on the creation of new communities in order to afford new types of opportunity to engage with the city and its politics. More specifically, perhaps the biggest contrast between the TBTC's community engagement and that offered by the FMCG is that the former has built its community engagement around those who are affected by the material conditions of urban life, but are not as yet part of the city, nor have stable connections to any particular territory (or place) within it. In practice, this means that the TBTC is a project which is based around the kinds of everyday material problems of (re-)producing life in the city often associated with feminist politics (interview with TBTC activist, 28/08/2024). More specifically, where the FMCG's consultation went through the white male stakeholders who have held power in the city since the Troubles (interview with Greenway Consultation team, 11/01/2024), the TBTC's coalition is increasingly composed of, and led by, women of colour, who have migrated to the city and are trying to establish a home within it. The next section

²² By way of illustration, during the delivery of the FMCG one of the key consultees and conflict mediation 'experts' associated with the project was arrested with several assault rifles and large quantities of ammunition in the boot of his car. He was later charged with being a senior member of a paramilitary organisation. Local media outlets, and PPR, drew attention to this connection (see Young (2022)).

examines, in more depth, the implications that this has for the vision of a sustainable Belfast which the TBTC have developed.

4.4.2 Reclaiming the Sustainable City

There is much about the TBTC's development of a vision for a sustainable Belfast which aligns with Daniel Aldana Cohen's (2018) understanding, regarding the potential points of synergy between right to the city movements and climate politics. Perhaps most plainly, the TBTC is a movement which is fighting for a form of urban ecology which is more overtly low carbon than the more 'aesthetic' adjustments to the city offered by the FMCG. The TBTC is also, however, a project which is blurring the boundaries between the 'green' and the 'grey', by marrying social sustainability and environmental concerns.

In many ways, here, the TBTC's aspirations align closely with classical ideals regarding what sustainable cities should be; it is a project which is interested in trying to ensure that the needs of both the present and the future are looked after, by bringing together social, ecological, and economic concerns. More specifically, the TBTC is aspiring towards what is, perhaps, the most traditional ideal of the sustainable city in existence; that of the 'garden city' – an ideal which has been brought to this campaign by actors from the far side of the Irish sea. But the TBTC aren't simply trying to apply this vision of sustainability to the city. They're also trying to use it as a means of drawing together new actors *in* the city today. And here Cohen's (2018) understanding as to *why* right to the city movements have potential climate credentials begins to break down. In his conceptualisation, part of the reason that these types of movements are potential climate protagonists is because their claims offer more widespread, or even 'universal' benefits, than their 'elite'-led counterparts. But as touched upon in the introduction, and the preceding chapter, in Belfast this is by no means true; claims for a right to the city are inflected through the city's ethno-communal politics. Specifically, housing need is much more acute in the city's CNR districts than in their PUL counterparts.

For PUL housing activists this discrepancy is rooted in long-term political dynamics; where once Loyalist communities were provided with political representation and support, thanks to the fact that they provided the 'muscle' needed for an 'Orange' system of political economy, in a post-modern political world these communities have been left by the wayside (Interview with BUILD activist 22/04/2024; Interview with Highfield Orange Order 10/01/2024). Today these communities no longer enjoy political representation like they once did and also do not have a strong history of community organising like their CNR counterparts – who had to develop community infrastructures in order to fill the needs of the population, left unmet by the 'Protestant' state (Interview with BUILD activist 22/04/2024). In CNR areas, consequently, a young person who stays in Belfast might, conceivably, make their way up the political ladder and one day be an MLA, or even the Taoiseach. Their PUL counterparts, by contrast, have limited opportunities for this kind of growth, thanks to the disjuncture between grassroots Loyalist organisations and political

Unionism; one women’s group in North Belfast, for example, explained to me that the best opportunities for ‘growth’ open to their children would be attained by leaving the area (Focus Group, Women’s Group, Ballysillan, 30/05/2024). The broader implication is that, where in CNR areas there are many who still aspire to be a part of the city’s future, for their PUL counterparts there is no future they aspire towards, within the city.

Consequently, one might expect that the TBTC’s visions for a sustainable Belfast, based around housing development, are far more appealing to those associated with CNR communities than their PUL counterparts. But in actuality the TBTC’s relationship with the city’s community politics is more complex than this. For example, on 10/10/2025 the TBTC held two public engagement sessions – one in the afternoon, one in the evening – focussed on their ‘garden city’ plans. The sessions were held in the Forthspring community centre, whose back wall is the Lanark Way Peace Wall, making it something of a ‘neutral’ zone in the city. Three days before the meeting, a Protestant Facebook page posted about it (see Figure 4.2). Some in the TBTC were worried that this might be a kind of covert call for a Loyalist protest (Field notes, 10/10/2025). But in actuality, when members of the PUL community did turn up – largely in the afternoon session – they were enthusiastic about the plans, describing them as exactly the kind of uplifting vision the area needed, and voicing frustration that community leaders in their own areas had not advertised the session more widely (Field notes, 10/10/2025).

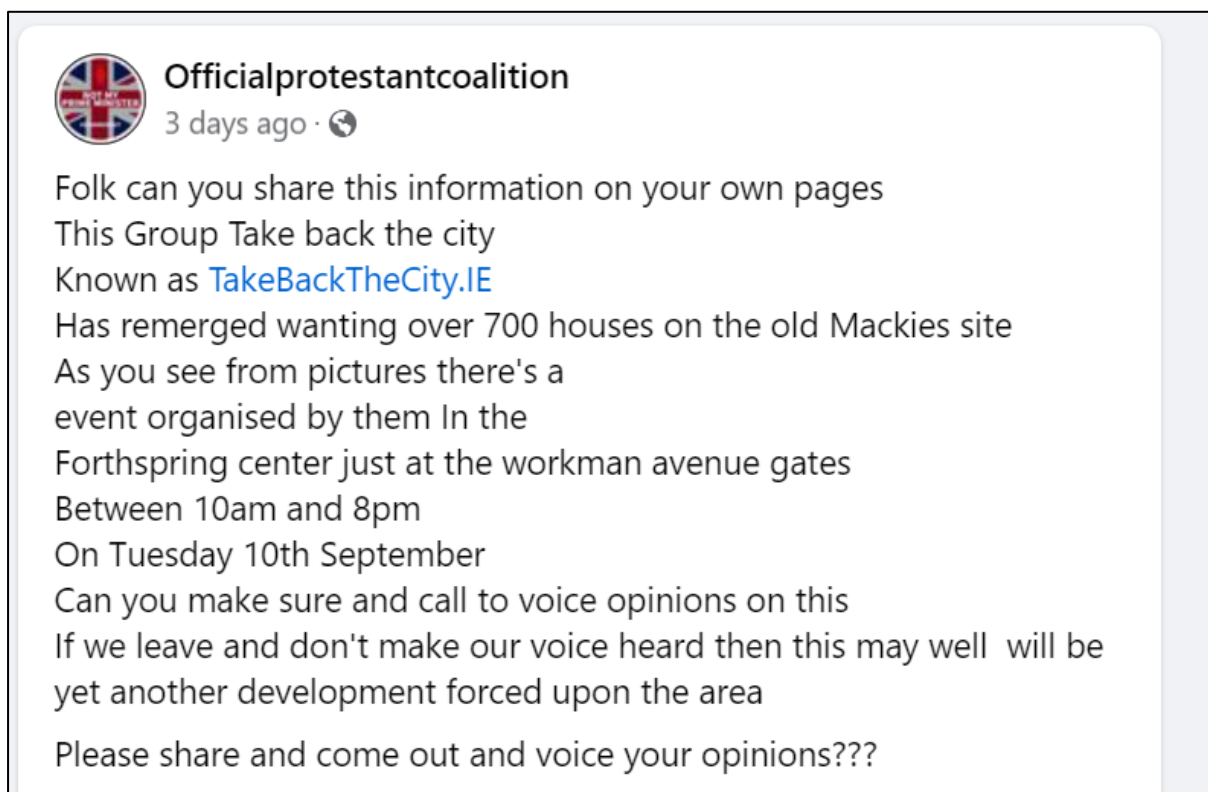


Figure 4.2: Facebook Post about TBTC meeting (Source: Official Protestant Coalition (2025))

But in the evening session, the TBTC faced a different kind of challenge. After standing up at the front of the room, welcoming everyone to the event, and explaining the plans, the TBTC's London-based architect invited questions from the room. Two quickly emerged.

The first came from a local who had been a long-serving Sinn Féin front-line politician at Belfast City Council. He questioned the feasibility of the scheme, on the basis of his experience working in the city council, noting that in his experience getting even minor schemes completed was a real challenge; his implication was that the plans were utopian. The second came from another local, who introduced himself as the leader of a local resident's association. He started by noting that he thought the current British state would do little to solve the housing crisis and also questioned the feasibility of the plans. He then stated that the project would have a damaging impact on the local community and said there hadn't been enough consultation. Rather than ending with a question, he instead stated: 'At some point you're going to have to face reality. At some point you're going to have to face the community. But thank you for your presentation.'

The architect carefully answered the questions explaining that – as far as he was concerned – this was a concept plan, designed to foster engagement and imagination, rather than set out completed ideas. In other words, this was an opportunity to engage with the local community. What the architect didn't know though – and what most of the people in the room likely knew – was that the second questioner was not simply a leader of a resident's association but was once, allegedly, a very senior member of the Provisional IRA's Belfast Brigade.

After the architect responded, a member of the TBTC stood up. Sinn Féin, he pointed out, claimed they were going to be able to deliver a United Ireland within a generation. 'Surely,' he said to the politician, 'this [TBTC scheme] is postage stamp stuff compared to that?' He also pointed out that Sinn Féin seemed to have skipped over something important in their focus upon national politics: 'what about a United Belfast?' he asked. Then he moved on to the issues of feasibility, visions for the future, and dreams. Belfast had been rocked by racist riots in the summer, he pointed out. People were feeling disheartened. People needed something to dream about; something to work towards. 'Those riots are the fault of those in power who, for years, have had no vision,' he stated. For those in the room aware of the identities of the two initial questioners this was a thinly veiled condemnation of their past political work. He finished on what was ostensibly a less critical note, pointing out that the plans should be treated as a spur for conversation more than anything else. 'This is what we need' he said. 'This kind of dialogue. To me it's stimulating. It's invigorating.' This too, though, was a kind of challenge to the two questioners; his implication was that they had tried to shut down the dialogue in the room, rather than engage in it, confusing their right to question as citizens of Belfast with a right to dictate as nationally significant political actors. His speech was first met by

silence, then by a smattering of applause, which grew to fill the room (Field notes, 10/10/2024).

This is not a conflict between different visions of what the city should be, so much as a challenge between those who are trying to claim a ‘right to imagine’ (as one of the TBTC put it (Interview, TBTC activist, 03/06/2024), and those who are trying to police the city’s political imaginaries. This kind of policing is, of course, a project both Sinn Féin and the Provisional IRA have long been engaged in and have become adept at. These are both organisations built around the sense that a United Ireland is an inevitability. They’re also organisations which have worked hard to establish this vision of the future – Sinn Féin through political channels, the Provisional IRA by violence in and through communities.

The broader implication is that the TBTC are trying to achieve much more than simply claim a patch of space – the Mackies site – in order to realise a particular vision of the future – a garden city. They are also trying to reclaim a more metaphorical kind of space; they are trying to open up the boundaries of the imaginable. The garden city plans are a means of doing this, by spurring debate, discussion, and possibly conflict. They are a means, in other words, of bringing multiple possible futures into the present. In part this is what both the Sinn Féin councillor and the ex-IRA leader missed in their critiques of the plans; the TBTC are not only interested in actually realising this particular vision of the city, but in reinvigorating the city in the here and now.

The TBTC’s attempt to create a sustainable city does not merely involve trying to blur the boundaries between the ‘green’ and the ‘grey’ then but also involves trying to disrupt the boundaries between the urban present and possible futures. This has brought them into conflict with those who have long policed the city’s potential futures, often through the development and deployment of fear, exercised on and through the city’s communities. In addition though, the TBTC are also trying to open up opportunities to bring learning’s from the city’s pasts into the present, so they can be deployed in remaking urban life for the better; specifically, their community engagement process is designed to try to provide those who have the most direct experience of the urban environment, rather than with ‘men, abstractly talking about [social problems]’ (TBTC activist, 21/08/2024). This is about building a vision for a sustainable future from the past experiences of those living in the urban environment, to develop the city’s political vitality in the here and now. The next section explores the implications this has for the Belfast’s climate politics.

4.4.3 Locating Climate Politics

The FMCG is an infrastructure project, designed to try to change the way in which people travel through the city, aiming to green urban space and encourage new forms of connection in and to urban nature; perhaps what’s most striking about the relationship between the FMCG and climate politics is that some *don’t* consider this a project which

has climate significance. The strangeness of this absence became particularly apparent to me before and during an interview with a local Sinn Féin councillor who had supported the scheme. Before our interview ‘proper’ we had a cup of tea with the manager of the Bog Meadows wildlife reserve in West Belfast, which is now on the FMCG. We talked about climate change and the types of changes needed to actually engage with it through the city. Then the wildlife manager left and I started to interview the Sinn Féin councillor ‘formally’; I asked him about the FMCG’s climate credentials, and he explained to me that, in his view, the project had nothing to do with climate change (Interview, Sinn Féin Councillor, 06/06/2024).

It was only later that I recognised the oddity of this; the councillor had described a sense that climate change is something that increasingly permeates many facets of urban life, yet explained to me that this project, deliberately designed to try to reshape the urban environment, had little to do with climate change. It is an example, which is representative of a broader pattern, regarding the way in which climate politics is defined by those involved in the city’s governance; whether or not something is climate related is defined in large part, by two main factors. First, the relationship which projects have with particular governmental policies and flows of funding; the FMCG has gradually ‘become’ more about climate change, for example, as documents like the city council’s *Environment and Segregation* plan (Belfast City Council, 2024) have been released and this project has been reconceptualised as a good example of an attempt to bring together Peace and ‘the environment.’ Second, the literal scale of these projects, and their capacity to deliver against metrics associated with climate change. An interview with a senior planner with the Department for Infrastructure’s sustainable travel team illustrates both of these points. As he explained, the ‘main impetus for investment in active travel [in Belfast] is coming from our Climate Change act, which came in in 2022, and that sets a minimum annual spend for the department, for active travel’ (Interview with Department for Infrastructure sustainable travel team, 24/06/2024). For this reason, he was willing to call active travel projects – like the FMCG – ‘climate projects’, even though he felt that this doesn’t actually represent their climate impact. As he explained, they’re ‘not going to shift the dial on the point of the climate change act [as] the point of the climate change act is to reduce carbon’ (Interview with Department for Infrastructure sustainable travel team, 24/06/2024). But he was willing to accept this dissonance, because ‘I know it’s where my money’s coming from’ (Interview with Department for Infrastructure sustainable travel team, 24/06/2024).

There is overlap here with the vision of sustainability associated with the FMCG (and described in Table 4.1); this is a vision of sustainability which is based on delivery against governmental targets, like the UN SDGs. By contrast, the TBTC’s vision of sustainability is one which begins from a sense of responsibility towards future generations who might become a part of the city; rather than delivery, here the priority is responsibility towards future generations, which in turn requires developing a sense of imagination regarding

what the future might hold, and bringing together different perspectives regarding how best to approach it. The COVID-19 pandemic neatly illustrated these differences. For those trying to realise the FMCG, the pandemic was a real challenge, as it made it harder for them to realise their particular vision for the city. For those involved in the TBTC, it was a moment of opportunity; relieved from the pressures of day-to-day political organising, they set up a series of Zoom meetings, which ultimately led to the creation of the coalition, the 'garden city' plans, and everything which has followed.

Much about the vision of sustainability which the TBTC have developed actually aligns quite closely with that of the UN SDGs. But as set out in the preceding section, for the TBTC, sustainability is not just about trying to balance the needs of the future city with those of today, but about enhancing political life in the city today by bringing possible futures into the present. There is no trade-off here. In a more geographical vein, their work is also associated with trying to remake the scales of political action, bringing the 'symptomatic' and the 'systemic' together (Interview with TBTC activist, 28/08/2024), making it clear that widespread issues at once create, and are composed of, that which happens at the local. For those in the TBTC creating new communities is a key means of achieving both of these things; it is a means by which actors who are affected by a particular problematic situation become involved in longer-term political work, and it is also a means by which (as the preceding chapter sets out), they come to understand their particular problematic situations as being related to broader public issues. It's here that the TBTC see their work as being climate work; as one of the activists quoted above puts it, in their view the 'climate battle' *is* the battle of trying to get people to encourage people to fight for something they 'wont own' and from which they will never 'see any benefits' (Interview with TBTC activist, 28/08/2024). In other words, it is about trying to encourage people to imagine, and act with reference to, urban worlds which they themselves will never see.

Climate action, here, is not defined by particular policies, or funding flows, or of the capacity to shape a city's carbon footprint. Instead, it is a project which involves encouraging recognition that the city is made up of, and creates, relationships whose spatiality and temporality far exceed anything that could ever be plotted on a map, or captured in a carbon footprint. Here climate action is not about delivering particular kinds of changes to the city as it currently exists, nor about realising particular kinds of visions for the future. Instead, climate action is about reflecting more carefully on the way which one is situated within the world and how this both affects, and is affected by, one's relationship with others. It is about acting, in other words 'in so far as the connection [between actors] is known, in view of the connection' (Dewey, [1927] 2016, p. 75).

4.5 Conclusions

On 21/07/2024, in a public meeting in the Culturlann on the Lower Falls Road, I watched American academic Elizabeth DeYoung questioned by the son of a key Sinn Féin

politician, about her critical analysis of the Girdwood Community Forum building in her book *Power, Politics and Territory in the 'New Northern Ireland'* (De Young, 2023). As touched upon briefly in the preceding chapter, the Girdwood forum is, in many ways, the predecessor to the FMCG (De Young's book actually finishes by mentioning the FMCG in the concluding chapter). The questioner pointed out that the community forum is well used in the summer months, and is a building used by both 'sides' of Belfast's public: how could DeYoung be so critical of what was, in many local people's views, a relatively successful project? Her reply was simple; the project may be good, but it could have been better, if the views of local people had been taken more fully into consideration during its development.

Her response is typical of many critiques of processes of public participation and community engagement, which focus upon the eventual outcomes of the initiative in question. But it is an unsatisfying response because it involves trading in hypotheticals and, moreover, it misses out a point which she makes very well in her book; that the means by which these types of projects are delivered *also* matter, because they can serve to inscribe and reinforce community divisions and hierarchies, or erode and remake them (De Young, 2023). The *point* of these projects is not *only* the physical infrastructure which they deliver 'in the end', but also the opportunities they afford, for engaging with, and remaking, communities, publics, and the city, as part of project delivery.

This chapter has zeroed in on the processes of public participation associated with the FMCG and the TBTC, and, more specifically, explored how each of these projects has negotiated Belfast's complex communities. After drawing upon Pragmatist understandings, of how communities and publics are related, and why they should be engaged with (section 4.2), the chapter then unpacks the empirical details of these two projects (section 4.3). It shows that both projects were ambivalent about Belfast's communities, and that both projects have developed their particular visions for a more sustainable city in order to negotiate this complexity. But where the FMCG has engaged with communities largely on the basis of the relationships which they have to the city's territories, the TBTC has, by contrast, attempted to create a community made up of people who are not yet a part of, but want to become involved in, the city as a broader public community.

The chapter then discusses the implications which these differences have, for Belfast's politics (section 4.4). This discussion shows that both projects have caused conflicts between those attempting to impose particular visions of the future upon the city; in the FMCG's case, between governmental actors trying to realise this infrastructure project; in the TBTC's case, between this project and those who are trying to hold in place a singular vision of the city's political future. But where the FMCG has channelled the public energies created by this conflict towards the perpetuation of a governmental assemblage associated with the Peace Process and the GFA, the TBTC are instead

attempting to try to channel these energies towards the development of new ideas, about what the city is might become.

The implication is that, to understand the relationship between public engagement and differing visions for what a sustainable city should be, there is a need to not only understand how these types of visions set up relationships between urban presents and the potential city of the future. There is also a need to consider how these different aspirations work with, and reshape, existing community connections to and through urban territories. In many ways, the FMCG's use of greenness has been developed to benefit those who have some form of connection to the city's past, through its existing urban territories; it has helped to cement the power of existing community stakeholders, for example, and those who developed the project hope that its delivery will help to benefit those who are already property owners in the city. Moreover, to some extent, this is a project which has produced an urban public which fits with existing beliefs about what the city is; it has highlighted the importance of paramilitary actors for the city's politics and has encouraged community groups to emphasise the importance of their connections to ethno-communally defined territories. In doing so, however, this project has actually *dis*-engaged these actors from partaking in the city's politics in the here and now, by entangling them in a governmental programme which channels time and energy away from creating alternative political communities and projects. Here greening is not being used as a means of engaging actors in the city and its politics – as suggested by Wachsmuth and Angelo (2018), but *dis*-engaging them, by entangling them in a governmental programme, constructed around existing forms of urban territory.

Meanwhile, the TBTC's vision of a sustainable city has been created as a result of, and in order to try to broaden, their coalition; it is a vision of sustainability, in other words, which has been created in the kind of reflexive fashion which Dewey (Dewey, 2016) associates with community life. To do so the TBTC have blurred the distinctions between green and grey forms of sustainability, but they are also pushing against the boundaries between urban pasts, presents, and futures; they are aspiring towards a form of sustainability which is built around responding to the existing urban environment, and acting responsibly towards urban political communities who might become part of the city in the future. This means that the TBTC are not simply trying to claim a patch of space – the Mackies site – in order to realise a particular vision of a sustainable future. Instead, they are using their vision for a sustainable community on the Mackies site a means of opening up political space, to imagine the city anew. This has brought the TBTC into conflict with actors who have historically tried to develop and exert political control by shutting down opportunities to develop alternative political imaginaries, such as Sinn Féin, and ex-leaders of the Provisional IRA. Here the TBTC's efforts to take back the city are of climate significance not just because of the types of infrastructures which they are advocating for, nor solely because they are blurring the distinctions between the green

and the grey – as Cohen (2018) suggests – but because of the way which they are reclaiming the city’s capacity to create political imaginaries and possibilities.

The final sub-section (sub-section 4.4.3) in this chapter explores some of the implications which these differences have, when it comes to thinking about what it means to partake in climate action. For those associated with Belfast’s governance, climate action is something which is largely defined on the basis of policy documents, funding flows, and the question of what types of action will have a material impact upon the city’s carbon emissions; for those in the TBTC, it is instead a project of trying to encourage actors in the city today to recognise that they are part of publics which stretch through space and time beyond the immediate here and now, but which should be considered as part of action undertaken in this here and now. This has implications when it comes to defining who or what is a climate actor; against the former definition, it is those who have the capacity to influence governmental policies, funding flows, or large-scale changes to the city; against the latter, all those who have a potential relationship with the city are part of a potential ‘climate public’, although not evenly so, as present actions are both affected by and have the capacity to affect others differently, thanks to the inequities of existing socio-spatial relationships.

Of course, though, it is not only public participation processes which affect the climate impacts of projects like the FMCG and the TBTC; the changes they make to the streetscape are critically important too. The next chapter turns towards these changes, exploring how the visions for sustainable urban futures set out in this chapter have been realised in practice, and examining how this is related to the city’s publics.

5 Towards Green Urban Futures

‘In civilizations without boats, dreams dry up, espionage takes the place of adventure, and the police take the place of pirates.’

Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias, Michel Foucault (1984 [1986], p 26)

5.1 Introduction

This chapter focusses on the changes which the FMCG (Forth Meadow Community Greenway) and the Take Back the City (TBTC) have actually made to Belfast’s streetscape. To do so, this chapter makes use of Michel Foucault’s ([1984] 1986) concept of heterotopia; an idea which he developed to describe places where utopian aspirations meet reality, and which is particularly useful for exploring how new publics are brought into being. Specifically, this chapter focusses on two places – the Springfield Dam, and the GaP (Gardín an Phobaíl: translation from Irish, ‘Garden of the People’) which have become central to the FMCG and TBTC’s efforts to make new, more democratic, publics in the city.

Comparing these sites is interesting in part because of their different relationships with communities. The Springfield Dam is a space which is supposed to lie ‘outside’ the city’s ethno-communal territories, and which has been created by actors associated with the Peace Process specifically in order to try to bring a new community into being. The GaP, by contrast, is a place which has been created with communities which already exist in the city and which has a close connection with the city’s ‘Irish’ community (hence the Irish-language name). Given the close connection between ethno-communal politics and division in Belfast, this makes these projects interesting comparators; this chapter explores the implications of these different forms of engagement between communities and space, when it comes to connecting and dividing the city.

Part of the reason that the concept of heterotopia is useful for achieving this task is that it is not sufficient to think about these connections and divisions in purely ‘spatial’ terms; one also needs to think about how these sites set up opportunities for engaging with the city’s pasts and futures, to grasp their political significance and thereby understand their relationship with public formation. The concept of heterotopia provides a useful framework for achieving this. This concept is defined in the first part of the chapter, which analyses the FMCG/Springfield Dam and the GaP through this particular conceptual lens (section 5.2).

The concept of heterotopia also draws attention to the importance of attending to the way in which particular utopian aspirations are made through, and become embedded within, particular contexts. This, of course, means thinking beyond the boundaries of

these specific sites; in Belfast this means attending to the fact that this is a city, to riff off the quote above, ‘without boats’ – whilst I was conducting the fieldwork for this thesis, the city’s dockyards (once the largest in the world), were sold off to a Spanish financial consortium, joining much of the United Kingdom’s infrastructure in the hands of financial institutions headquartered elsewhere (Campbell, 2025). Here infrastructures are not solely valuable because of the way which they move people and goods around the city, but also thanks to the way which they themselves can be moved around international financial markets, sustaining and making use of connections between investors and the city.

Projects like community greenways and community gardens are becoming increasingly common in these kinds of post-industrial, post-austerity urban settings. as touched upon in the introduction to this thesis (Apostolopoulou and Kotsila, 2022; Crossan et al., 2016; Safransky, 2023, 2017, 2014; Thompson, 2015). In these contexts, these forms of urban greening are often used to fill social and spatial voids in the post-industrial, post-austerity city. The second part of this chapter (section 5.3) suggests that these infrastructures can also help to bridge the gap, between the infrastructural promises made by activists and governmental actors, and the changes which they actually make to the city. This is particularly important, in post-industrial, post-austerity contexts like Belfast, where it is becoming increasingly difficult for both activists and governmental actors to actually deliver the public infrastructures needed to sustain urban life. In other words, this chapter suggests that these types of green infrastructural projects have particular political utility, in cities where dreams of a better future are drying up.

This chapter explores the implications this has for public formation in the city, thereby contributing to the growing literature exploring the way which green infrastructures are serving to make and remake democratic publics in post-modern urban contexts (Armstrong et al., 2022; Blok and Meilvang, 2015; Lang and Rothenberg, 2017; Manning, 2025; Murphy et al., 2023; Rosol, 2010). Doing so is particularly important in contemporary Belfast because, by some estimations, there are now more community gardens than pubs across the city – if the latter was the archetypal space for the city’s 20th century ‘public sphere’ then perhaps the community garden is the 21st century alternative.²³ The chapter’s conclusions suggest that where the FMCG/Springfield Dam has encouraged those concerned with the city to see its infrastructures as territory, in order to sustain financial flows which sustain Northern Irish government, those in the GaP are helping to turn the city’s territories into public infrastructures, helping to sustain the city’s diverse political communities. The conclusions reflect more fully on the causes of these differences, and their implications for democracy in the city.

²³ Based on numbers associated with BBC documentary created about the Gardín an Phobail, aired on BBC Northern Ireland, 3/03/2025.

5.2 Green Heterotopias

Michel Foucault developed the term heterotopia to describe places which are an ‘effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within [a] culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted’ (Foucault, [1984] 1986, p. 26). He developed this idea in two texts. First, in an extended introduction to *The Order of Things* (1966) where he used the term primarily with reference to textual analysis, to describe situations where the relationship between symbolic signifiers and their referents break down. Second, in a short article titled ‘*Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias*’ ([1984], 1986) – a text developed in 1967 but not published in English until the early 1980s. Here he developed this idea in more explicitly spatial terms, setting out the key characteristics of what he deemed to be heterotopic sites – which in his view range from cemeteries, to prisons, to gardens, to ships (as indicated in this chapter’s introduction). In both his earlier and later writings on heterotopias, Foucault uses the idea of a mirror to illustrate what he is describing. Mirrors, he points out, help to create virtual, utopic, ‘placeless’ (Foucault, [1984] 1986, p. 24) places, because they create ‘unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface’ (Foucault, [1984] 1986, p. 24). And yet, a mirror is not a utopia, as a ‘mirror does exist in reality, where it exerts a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy’ (Foucault, 1986, p. 24). Heterotopias thus create a kind of ‘mixed, joint experience’ of reality and unreality, materiality and virtuality, actuality and utopia, which may allow for new forms of self-constitution and/or subjectification, as through a mirror it is ‘possible to ‘reconstitute myself where I am’ (Foucault, [1984] 1986, p. 24).

Foucault’s writings have spawned an extensive secondary ‘heterotopic’ literature across geography (Boedeltje, 2012; Edwards and Bulkeley, 2018; Gandy, 2012; Johnson, 2013; Poteete et al., 2025; Sacco et al., 2019; Topinka, 2010), and have been developed conceptually, famously by Ed Soja (1989), who developed his conceptualisation with Henri Lefebvre’s (2003) own development of the term (which to some extent runs parallel to that of Foucault’s). In this secondary literature – particularly when it draws on the Lefebvrian conceptualisation of heterotopia – the term is often taken to describe sites of alterity, liminality, and difference, which do not fit neatly with existing political and spatial schemas. For example, in a recent use of the idea of heterotopia to describe the politics of community gardening, Poteete and others (2025, p. 6) ‘identify heterotopia with looseness and denormalization.’ But, as Hetherington (1997, p. 7) points out – in a reading of the term which remains faithful to Foucault’s original writings – this form of analysis often offers an oversimplified understanding of otherness, which misses the fact that whilst difference ‘is indeed a source of marginality and of resistance to marginalization’, it is also always ‘implicated in a social ordering, even if at the most fundamental level, it is opposed to everything that society, as a social order, stands for.’ By contrast, Hetherington argues, heterotopic spaces consequently should be understood as ‘*spaces of an alternative ordering*’ (Hetherington, 1997, p. 9 emphasis original) whose presence

‘either provides an unsettling of spatial and social relations or an alternative representation of spatial and social relations’ (Hetherington, 1997, p. 8). Specifically, he argues, heterotopic sites can act as ‘obligatory passage points’ (Hetherington, 1997, p. 12) for the development of new forms of socio-spatial relationships. These are spaces which are almost ‘like laboratories’ where ‘new ways of experimental society are tried out’ (Hetherington, 1997, p. 13). In other words, these places where new forms of publicity can be experimented with, in the sense that they can be tried out and played with, both by those who are aiming to destabilise existing forms of political formation and by those who are aiming to create publics which fit more readily with existing forms of government.

This sense that heterotopias are sites of public experimentation – but that these experiments are not inherently democratising – is helpful for framing the cases at this chapter’s core. It has also been helpfully further developed by Edwards and Bulkeley (2018, p. 365) to explore urban politics in a climate changing world, where experimentation is an increasingly ubiquitous feature of urban life. In this context, they argue that heterotopias show that urban climate ‘experiments are *necessarily* ambivalent spaces’ (Edwards and Bulkeley, 2018, p. 365 emphasis original). This is because the ‘dialogue between future and present, between aspiration and reality’ which they create ‘means experiments are always constituted through political contestations – both external (over their legitimacy and place in the present city) and internal (over what futures they seek to actualize and what methods they adopt to do so)’ (Edwards and Bulkeley, 2018, p. 365). This chapter attends closely to the way in which the particular heterotopic spaces of the Springfield Dam and GaP have been established and have become (or not become) embedded into the city’s socio-spatial fabric. To do so, over the next three sub-sections the concept of heterotopia is unfolded in more detail, through analysis of these particular sites.

5.2.1 Remaking Public Norms

Foucault begins his heterotopic typology by arguing that ‘there is probably not a single culture in the world that fails to constitute heterotopias’ but quickly points out that they ‘obviously take quite varied forms, and perhaps no one absolutely universal form of heterotopia [can] be found’ (Foucault, [1984] 1986, p. 24). Heterotopias can, however, be classed ‘in two main categories’; what he calls ‘crisis’ heterotopias, and heterotopias of ‘deviation.’ The former are, he suggests, ‘privileged or sacred or forbidden places’ which are ‘reserved for individuals who are, in relation to society and to the human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis’ (Foucault, [1984] 1986, p. 24). Specifically, these heterotopias are reserved for individuals who are going through a moment of ‘crisis’ in their lives – in the broad sense of a moment of personal, potentially challenging, transformation.

To some extent the TBTC’s gardens can be described as ‘crisis’ heterotopias. At its core the TBTC is, after all, a project which is built around people who are in ‘crisis’ relative to

the norms of neoliberal urban society; to be on the margins of urban property markets is to be a kind of 'deviant' in the neoliberal city. Moreover, the TBTC's goal is to create social housing, in order to care for this particular group of people. But, as of yet, they have failed to build a single house. And this is where their gardens have become important.

As touched upon in the preceding chapter, as the TBTC have expanded their 'coalition' they've gradually come into contact with Belfast's rapidly growing community gardening network. This is part of what has spurred the TBTC's turn towards 'sustainability.' But it has also encouraged some of those in the TBTC to develop their own community gardens. The GaP is the best example. Located in an area of West Belfast known as 'Whiterock', the garden sits at the intersection of some of Belfast's most socio-economically deprived areas, and in a CNR area which was heavily impacted by the Troubles. More specifically, the garden is on the site of an old set of allotments, set up by the City Council, but which had fallen into disrepair. (When the funding stream which supported the creation of the allotments ran out, the allocation system broke down, and funding for maintenance dried up). The TBTC 'reappropriated' this space in 2022 towards the end of the COVID-19 pandemic. Ostensibly, the aim of the garden is to produce fresh produce for people who would otherwise struggle to afford it. But, as one of the TBTC's members explains, the garden actually has a much broader political role than this:

'The Gardín an Phobaíl isn't great because it has nice vegetables. It's great because it has this – and you can imagine the circles as they go out. It's got your core group; your hardcores. It's got your wider group, who go 'hey can we come every week?' It's got your pensioners walking in saying 'give us a fuckin' tomato and we'll raise money in the leisure centre.' It's got your schools going. It's got [this] thing, it's got [that] thing. So, what have you got? The whole community centred around a hub. And the hub is lovely space, nice things, a wee fire from time to time, and it can lend itself to other causes, like do a Palestine day, do a this, do a that. It's challenging food, it's challenging, you know...

But if you went into this area to give a lecture on food poverty, a couple of people who wanna hear lectures will come to it. If you come to the area to give a lecture on electricity; couple of people. Or climate, or whatever. But if you do an initiative, where everybody feels a part of it and loads of contributors are in it all the kids are telling their grannies and blah blah blah, then everybody's a fuckin' climate activist! Know what I mean?' (TBTC activist and gardener, 21/08/2024)

The point, then, is that this is a place which might encourage people to become more 'activist.' But not through the dictation of particular ideas or norms (as might happen in a lecture theatre). Instead, this is about breaking down understandings of who might be an activist, and what activism is (see Figure 5.1 for illustration of poster advertising the connection between the gardens and the TBTC).



Figure 5.1: Marketing of TBTC 'Growing Group' from PPR Twitter

Along with its connections to the TBTC's campaign, the garden has also developed through close relationships with the local community of which it is more literally, geographically a part. Given that one of Belfast's most important Irish language schools is across the road from the garden, in practice this means engaging with the Irish language. For some gardeners, this is a means of forming closer connections to the non-human world; as one of the GaP's gardeners writes in an English/Irish amalgam, in a Belfast-based journal, 'plants have their own teanga' ('teanga' is Irish for 'language'), but the 'ability to communicate with plants, or in many cases even the idea that this is possible, has been deeply impacted by centuries of colonial violence that disrupt how we connect with the world around us' (Hogan, 2025, p. 15). For some engaged in the garden, Irish might facilitate this kind of connection because it is a more relational language than English; one does not 'have a job' in Irish, for example, but a 'portion of the work' (*cuid oibre*). In Irish, one can also 'be' in or with a place in a range of ways, not

readily translatable to English; for example, as one gardener explained to me, the Irish term ‘bhí me sa ghardín’ – which conveys a sense that one develops one’s sense of being in the garden – conveyed his feeling of connection to this place much more effectively than the English alternative ‘I am in the garden’, which in his view provides a more strictly locational sense of being (Field notes, 21/02/2025).²⁴

Since the early 2000s, Irish has been enjoying something of a revival in Belfast, as made infamous globally by the Irish-language rap group Kneecap. The GaP has, to some extent, become associated with this revival; the BBC made a documentary about the garden (and two other TBTC-associated gardens) as part of their efforts to document Belfast’s cultural change (BBC NI, 2025). But one of the things these documentaries illustrate is the messiness of the language actually used in the garden: those interviewed in the film pepper their sentences with English terms like ‘deindustrialisation’ and ‘raised beds’ more suited to describing Belfast’s contemporary urban environment than Irish. This, in turn, reflects the actuality of the language spoken in the garden day-to-day; a messy medley of Belfast vernacular English and Ulster-Irish. Arabic is also spoken frequently in the gardens, as they have become sites of refuge and connection for asylum-seekers (particularly from Sudan) in the city; in particular, the gardens have served as sites of ‘escape’ for migrant communities during racist riots, such as those which occurred in Belfast in 2024. Rather than thinking about this as a place which aims to ‘revive’ Irish then, this place is perhaps better thought of as somewhere where new forms of language are developing, as part of attempts to try to develop new forms of connection to other people and the non-human world too. Put differently, this is a place where people undergoing various sorts of ‘crises’ are able to develop new forms of ‘being’, through establishing new forms of relationships with the city.

But the TBTC’s use of Irish also has a more specific genealogy. Belfast’s Irish-language revival is partly rooted in the foundation of an ‘urban Gaeltacht’ in Belfast in the 1970s, which involved grassroots activists literally constructing a new neighbourhood and school, as part of their efforts to revivify the language and culture associated with it.²⁵ This was a radical move, in part because outside Belfast, all of the islands other significant ‘Gaeltacht’ areas are in the rural West, where British colonisation was less acute than in the island’s East (see Figure 5.2, which presents a map of the ‘traditional’ Gaeltacht areas on the island). Those working in the GaP – and the TBTC more broadly – have taken inspiration from this urban Gaeltacht movement. Specifically, the TBTC have directly appropriated the urban Gaeltacht’s slogan, ‘na habair e, dean e’ (which translates as ‘don’t speak it, do it’). In basic terms, this slogan promotes a kind of prefigurative practice. But the slogan’s connection with the language movement is also important; the term implies that language and culture are not representations of the world but are

²⁴ This would translated as ‘ta me sa ghardín’

²⁵ A ‘Gaeltacht’ is an Irish-speaking area on the island of Ireland.

enacted as part of the practice of world-making. In other words, as one of the TBTC's activists explains in a blog post about the phrase, this is not just about language rights, or a fight 'for a bilingual society rife with food banks and homelessness' (Mac Brádaigh, 2022, p. no pagination). Instead, it is a slogan which is about encouraging recognition that our lives 'are inextricably linked to the fortunes of our communities and the struggles of our neighbours'; it's about encouraging the development of a 'deep sense of community - solidarity - intersectionality - whatever you want to call it [...]' (Mac Brádaigh, 2022, p. no pagination). It is about both physically remaking the world and imagining it anew, as the blog post concludes:

'Imagine a diverse, inclusive, sustainable self-organised community. A place without peace walls, where paramilitaries and political parties have no territorial claims or vetoes on human rights. Imagine a place where the only agenda is that every child has a safe and sustainable home. Ná habair é, déan é!' (Mac Brádaigh, 2022, p. no pagination).

This kind of relational form of engagement with the land is something which the TBTC also realise through their gardening practices. Perhaps most prosaically, they make use of a 'no dig' method in these gardens, which aims to work with the soil structure and microorganisms which exist within it, rather than attempting to control or dominate them. More broadly, the act of creating a community garden is, for some, a means of contesting the sense that land has to be owned in order to be productive; this is about pushing against the sense that control *of* space, rather than collectively working *with* places, is the best way to ensure that the city flourishes. Here there is a more conceptual connection with the TBTC's housing work; the aspiration is to push against the sense that the creation of a community is something which inevitably results in a negative form of territorialisation.

This push against a focus on property ownership is common to many community gardening projects across the Global North (Barron, 2017; Crossan et al., 2016; Cumbers et al., 2018; Ghose and Pettygrove, 2014; Thompson, 2015). The push towards a more relational form of engagement with the world, which treats language and culture not as representations of the world but as things which are enacted as part of practices of world-making are, Escobar and others (2024) suggest, typical of many indigenous cultures around the world. What makes the TBTC's community gardens particularly interesting is the way that these different forms of 'indigenous' engagement with space and culture are being brought together with more obviously 'modern' forms of urban knowledge and practices. For example, the gardens are part of an attempt to move towards the garden city to which the TBTC aspire (in this sense, they're trying to 'prefigure' the garden city they want to be a part of), but they are also a place where these garden city plans are being remade. Specifically, having adopted the 'na habair é, dean é' slogan through their gardening practices, the TBTC have now spread this idea to the London-based

architecture practice drawing up their plans, who have placed it at the centre of the project’s design ethos.

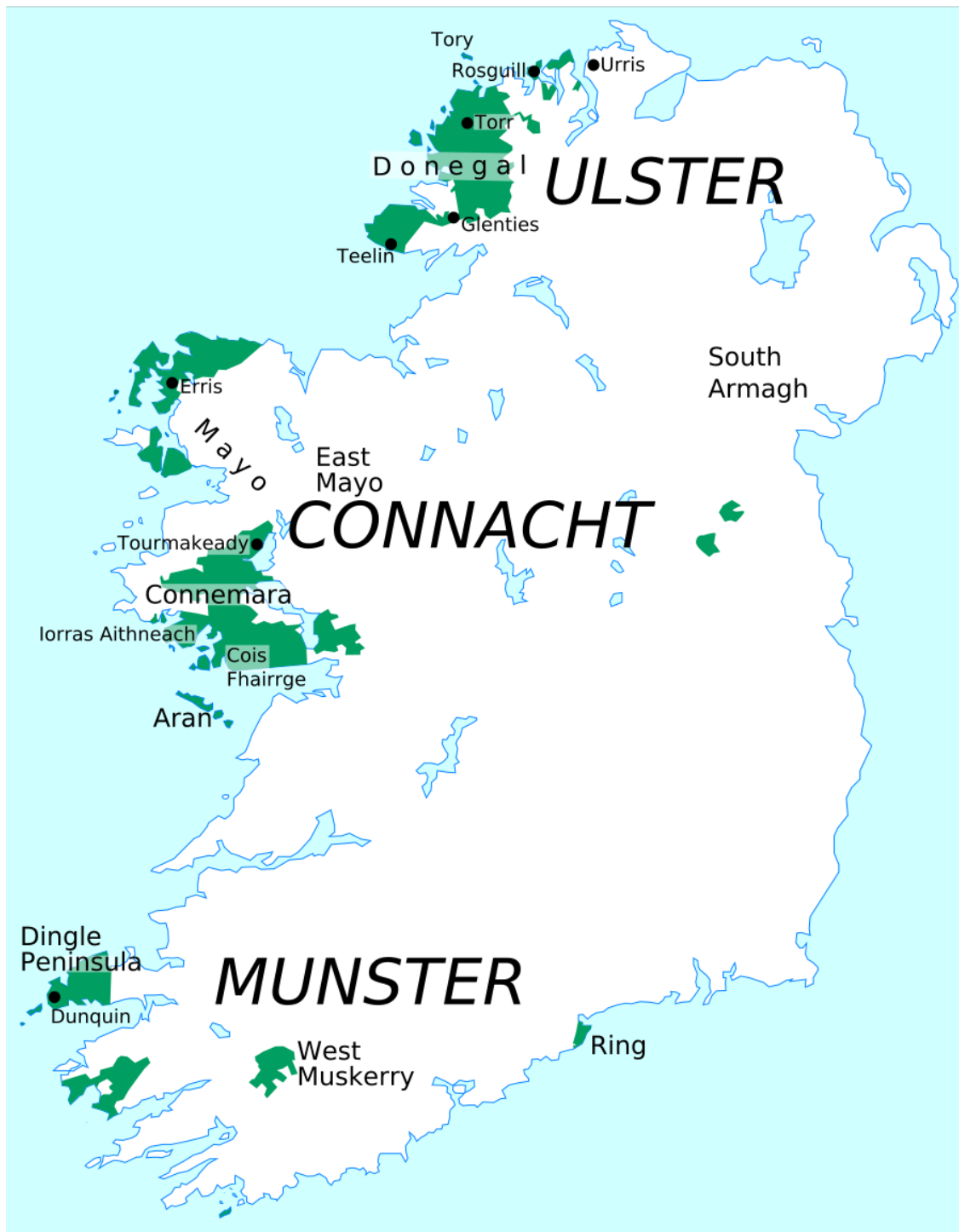


Figure 5.2: Map of main Irish Gaeltacht Regions (Source: Wikimedia Commons (2026))

Foucault’s writings hint at, but do not extensively explore the possibility of, heterotopias associated with non-modern forms of knowledge – he describes them in pejorative terms as ‘primitive’ heterotopias (Foucault, [1984] 1986, p. 5). But he also argues that these types of heterotopia are ‘disappearing today and being replaced [...] by

what we might call heterotopias of deviation: those in which individuals whose behaviour is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed' (Foucault, [1984] 1986, p. 23). Here the history of the relationship between the GaP and the FMCG is illustrative: the GaP was nearly shut down by the FMCG, when the city council attempted to reclaim the gardens, to make an active travel hub as part of the FMCG's own 'animation' programme. This hub would have been used as a base for the storage of materials like bicycles, and as a kind of classroom, training the public about the 'correct' way to move through the city. A concerted community campaign coordinated by the TBTC – involving everything from letter writing to seed-bombing, to graffiti campaigns with local schoolchildren – has kept the GaP open and in community hands.²⁶

To describe an active travel hub as a potential heterotopia of deviation is perhaps a stretch; for Foucault, heterotopias of deviation include institutions like 'rest homes and psychiatric hospitals, and of course prisons' (Foucault, [1984] 1986, p. 23). More broadly though he describes these heterotopias of deviation as places for 'individuals whose behaviour is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm' (Foucault, [1984] 1986, p. 23); although certainly not a psychiatric hospital, the active travel hub which the FMCG attempted to establish on the site of the GaP was part of a much larger public 'animation' programme, which was designed to inculcate a particular normative understanding of what particular spaces in the city are, and how publics should behave within them.

Most obviously, the FMCG's animation programme was designed to try to create a particular kind of space – 'shared space' – the 'WAGS' principles set out in chapter 2. The question of *who* gets to determine what welcoming, accessible, good quality and safe mean is left undefined; in practice it is something which is answered through the practices of how this particular type of space is made. One particularly important aspect of making this type of space is establishing relationships between 'shared space' and the rest of the city. The next section explains how and why the FMCG achieved this in more detail.

5.2.2 Establishing Spatial Relations

Heterotopias may be 'placeless' places, Foucault explains, yet at the same time they always exist in relationship with the societies which they are embedded within. In some cases, he suggests, heterotopias can be spaces of 'illusion' which expose 'all the real space, all of the sites inside of which human life is partitioned, as still more illusory' – the mirror is the archetypal example (Foucault, [1984] 1986, p. 25).

In many ways the Springfield Dam might best be thought of as a place designed to be somewhat 'placeless', and as a place which exists as a kind of mirror-image of the divided

²⁶ Periodically threats to the GaP reappear. In late 2025, for example, the city council threatened to reclaim the GaP once again. Again, a concerted campaign by the TBTC and the local community succeeded in dispelling the council's ambitions.

city, where the divisions which cut across Belfast politics are turned into a kind of illusion. Located at the top of Belfast's Springfield Road, adjacent to the Mackies site, the dam lies at a point where several of Belfast's ethno-territorial boundaries tightly intersect. As the name suggests, the space has a reservoir at its centre, which was once used for linen retting and drying, but by the 2010s had become largely derelict. The FMCG redeveloped the site, and it has now become what project protagonists term the 'jewel' on the green 'necklace' which the greenway is supposed to string around Belfast. (see Figure 5.3 for aerial illustration of the space). It is, consequently, the site which has been most often used in social media outputs related with the project, was the site most frequently selected for walking interviews in my fieldwork and was central to the extensive animation programme associated with the project.



Figure 5.3: Aerial Image of Springfield Dam, from Forth Meadow Community Greenway Twitter header (Source: Belfast City Council (2026)).

This 'animation' programme followed sequentially after the engagement programme described in the preceding chapter and after the physical completion of the FMCG. The problem aimed to engage '600 children and young people' through 'programmes on civic education in shared open spaces'; engage '300 younger and older people' in programmes focussing on inter-generational 'heritage and identity'; 'recruit and train 60 shared space volunteers from neighbourhoods adjacent to the necklace' of green spaces tied together by the FMCG with '50% achieving accredited certification in [conflict] mediation'; 'engage with 60 unique participants to deliver community-led shared space activities'; and to 'engage with 1,080 people in attending community led activities (30 people per site per activity x 3 x 12 sites) over a 6 – 12-month period post construction stage' (RSM, 2024, pp. 78–79).

Unlike the animation associated with the GaP, this public animation was delivered by professional consultants, conflict mediation specialists, and volunteer organisers from organisations like INTERCOMM Northern Ireland, SUSTRANS, and 'Volunteer Now.' Moreover, where the GaP's animation programme involves the concurrent, and open-ended, making of the garden and the community, the animation programme associated

with the FMCG instead occurred sequentially; the greenway was created, and then the public was created for the space.

Those involved in the FMCG's animation programme usually described the reason for this sequential form of animation in practical terms. Most of the community centres in this part of the city are associated with one community or another, but the FMCG wanted to be a project which benefitted all communities in the city. Once the Springfield Dam had been created, then the City Council had its own space in this part of the city, where they could run public engagement events. But there was also a more specific, aesthetic reason; once completed, the Springfield Dam served as a space where it was possible to 'demonstrate how this "oasis" effectively – that's what I would like to think of the Springfield Dam – can sit within a very, you know, urban environment. And the two can sit side-by-side.' (Interview, City Council Greenway team, 14/11/2023). In other words, this space became a demonstration site for the kinds of greening and spatial changes which the city council were aiming to achieve through the creation of the FMCG.

This was achieved, in part, by trying to use various aesthetic means to distinguish between the urban and the natural, or the green and the grey; as the project's marketing guidelines put it, the project uses 'slate grey to represent the gritty urban landscapes along the length of the Greenway as well as a vibrant green for the beauty of trees and grass areas [...]' (Belfast City Council, 2022, p. 21). The ultimate aspiration for achieving this kind of separation from the urban environment was, as the project's slogan put it, to create a place where people in the city are 'proud of our past, confident for the future' as 'we all walk on Common Ground' (Belfast City Council, 2023)., where it might be possible to escape from the city's politics. As a local politician involved with promoting the project explained – using shirts, a common signifier of ethno-political background as an example – in the Springfield Dam:

'You'll have someone with a Celtic top or a GAA top, or you'll have someone with a Rangers top, or a North of Ireland top, and you don't see any conflict. You don't see any sectarian flashpoints. And that's great to see, that's what you want. There's a perfect example of connecting this Greenway, making it happen, where people from both sides of the community are coming together and sharing that space, they're walking past each other, there's no animosity, there's no fighting. [...] And even if people aren't wearing jerseys, and they're wearing clothes that don't, sorta, identify that you're a Catholic or a Protestant, you're gonna say hello. You're gonna talk to each other. And through time you develop that you're Micheal from Turf Lodge, and you're William from Highfield, and you've been talking to each other the last four weeks, and politics hasn't come up once. So, you know, it indirectly and directly removes those barriers of the past, which the conflict created.' (Interview, Sinn Féin councillor, 06/06/2024).

This is a space, then, where the city's divisions are meant to disappear and become somewhat illusory, or at least insignificant. It is a space which is meant to be shared, in contrast to the divisions of the city which surrounds it. It is a space where one is supposed to be able to escape from politics, which saturate so much of life in the city, through details like the clothes one wears, or the name one is called. Perhaps it is not this space itself so much as the green/grey boundary between this space and the rest of the city which is supposed to be mirror like; this boundary marks the distinction between divided and shared space, and between political confinement and political escape. Put differently, this is a space which exists right in the middle of the city's ethno-communally divided territories and yet is supposed to exist somewhat outside of it. In doing so, one of the project's key promoters asserted on the BBC news, it offered a kind of universal benefit for everyone who is a part of the city:

Providing a greenway benefits everybody. It benefits all communities. It brings people together. It enriches an area. It regenerates the area. So, to create a greenway... everybody benefits from it. (Councillor John Kyle, interviewed BBC News, 26/04/2024)

Sometimes, those involved in it also claim that the GaP is a place which offers a kind of universal attraction, or set of benefits, to those who live in the city. Specifically, they point out that maintaining the garden requires lots of different people to do lots of different jobs, from bird feeding, to turning compost, to filing accounts, which require different sorts of skills and personalities. But, of course, there simply isn't a job for everyone in the garden (and not everyone likes gardening). And more specifically, this is also a place which is associated with a very particular political community – it is *Gardín an Phobail*, or the Garden of *the People*, after all, and through the 20th century the Irish language has become closely and inextricably entangled with *some* people in Belfast. Specifically, the language has ties to Irish Republicanism. Some assert that Belfast's contemporary Irish-language revival is rooted in the Long Kesh prison camps where, during the 1970s, interned men set up what has become known as the 'jailteacht' in order to learn Irish whilst behind bars. By encouraging the use of the Irish language then, the GaP is also, inevitably, bringing itself into relationship with this particular strand of political history. It may still attract a diverse array of actors, but it is impossible to know how the composition of actors involved in the garden would differ without this connection to the Irish language. This is part of what makes this place what it is. More convincing than claims that this is a place which offers benefits for everyone, then, is the sense that through the garden:

'We want to create a movement; we want to be part of a movement; we don't need to own it, or control it, or... We just want to have these ripples of action happening where people feel like they've some power, some ability to influence change in

their communities, because at the moment... It's so easy isn't it? To be hopeless, like.' (Interview, TBTC activist and gardener, 05/12/2023).

Rather than providing people with an attempt to escape from the city and its politics then, this is instead a place where – the activist hopes – people might be able to develop some sense of political agency, as part of an attempt to develop what might best be called a kind of hope against darkening political horizons. In many senses, this is an understanding of activism which aligns with essayist Rebecca Solnit's famous argument, that '[p]olitical awareness without activism means looking at the devastation, your face turned toward the centre of things. Activism itself can generate hope because it already constitutes an alternative and turns away from the corruption at centre to face the wild possibilities and the heroes at the edges or at your side' (Solnit, 2016, p. 14). This is a type of politics which, Solnit argues, is best developed through the 'global local', or a globally networked variety of struggles seeking 'to democratize the world, to share power, to protect difference and complexity, human and otherwise' (Solnit, 2016, p. 15). Or, as activist, writer, and occasional GaP gardener Lynda Sullivan (2024) puts it – in an article using GaP as an example – this is a form of politics which begins from the sense that communities protect 'ecosystems and communities' not only 'for themselves, as they have a right to do, but also [...] for the rest of us, and for those to come' helping to improve 'the future prospects of a life-sustaining society' (Sullivan, 2024, p. no pagination). This is about trying to become part of a kind of 'rhizomatic network' like 'mycelia' (Interview, TBTC activist and gardener, 05/12/2023) – as one of the TBTC's activists put it, using the terms in a purely metaphorical sense (the activist trained as an ecologist, before becoming an activist).

In practice, the main way which those in the GaP have attempted to achieve this is by drawing upon, and becoming a part of, Belfast's burgeoning community garden network; as touched upon in the introduction of this chapter, the network of gardens across the city has grown significantly in recent years, with some estimates now suggesting there are more community gardens across the city than pubs. This is a network which is held together through trades of compost and goods, but also ideas and knowledge, shared by people who are embedded in, yet connected across, particular place-based projects. It is differences between the different gardens, in other words, which makes the connections between them important and valuable; where some produce too many tomatoes, others have excess compost, and so can share in a way which ensures that all benefit. The GaP has taken on a particular role within this network; it has gained a reputation as a place where people come to share ideas about how best to develop activist struggles. This allows those in the TBTC to make use of their activist knowledge whilst also learning from those in the city's community gardening network. For example, on 06/06/2024 the TBTC ran a 'power mapping' workshop in the garden, bringing together community gardeners from across the city, who had become concerned about the way which compost is used and distributed in it. In doing so, the TBTC shared the lessons from

their activist experience, whilst also learning from the network of community gardeners about the city's various ecologies and communities (field notes, 06/06/2024). More broadly, the GaP has become a place where activists from the world now visit, when they come to Belfast; activists from the Amazon and Papua New Guinea for example, sharing lessons from their own place-based struggles, and learning from those occurring in Belfast today,

This, then, is not an attempt to create a place which is 'outside' the city and its politics, or a place which is a kind of mirror-like inversion of the divided city. Instead, this is perhaps closer to what Foucault terms a heterotopia of juxtaposition, where 'in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible' are brought together (Foucault, [1984] 1986, p. 25). As he explains, the garden is the best example of this kind of heterotopia, as it is a place which is supposed to bring the global into the particular; it is the 'smallest parcel of the world and then it is the totality of the world' meaning it has been 'a sort of happy, universalizing heterotopia since the beginnings of antiquity' (Foucault, [1984] 1986, p. 26). More plainly, perhaps, when the TBTC and those engaged in the GaP are asked how they intend to begin changing the world, they sometimes reply that they intend to 'dig where they stand', the implication being that global change always happens through local acts.²⁷ The garden is a place which makes this kind of digging possible in a literal, and more metaphorical sense, in that it makes it possible to remake a small patch of earth and in so doing play a part in remaking the earth.

5.2.3 Creating Temporal Orders

The different types of relationships established within and to the city described in the preceding section might roughly be termed different forms of 'spatial' politics, in that they are about establishing relationships to and through space in order to try to develop particular forms of political relationship. But for Foucault, it is not the spatiality but *temporality* of heterotopias which makes them particularly special kinds of space. Specifically, he argues, heterotopias begin 'to function at full capacity when men arrive at a sort of absolute break with their traditional time' (Foucault, [1984] 1986, p. 26); heterotopias realise their potential when they become, as he terms it, 'heterochronies' where different 'slices in time' play over one another.

Some heterotopias, Foucault argues, are spaces of 'infinitely accumulating time, for example museums and libraries'; spaces where 'time never stops building up and topping its own summit.' These spaces aim to provide access to the 'entire history of humanity reaching back to its origin [as if] it were accessible in a sort of immediate knowledge' (Foucault, [1984] 1986, p. 26). Just as it is a space where attempts are being made to draw the global into the local, so too the GaP is a place where the gardeners are

²⁷ See Mac Bradaigh (2021) for a deeper explanation of this particular approach, as developed through the TBTC's gardening practice.

attempting to draw the city's pasts into the present. It is a space, for example, where people are trying to reach into the past and make use of traditional Irish knowledges, to learn how to better connect people with the landscape. But more broadly, it is a space where some hope to get 'underneath' the norms associated with modern culture, in order to create more sustainable futures; for example, as one gardener explained:

'Well, in the garden... I think you know ultimately we all want to help people. I think we've forgotten how to, and I think we've forgotten, like the ways that we should be helping people. But that's not necessarily our fault. That's like the world that we live in. We're bombarded with like, you know, this is how you need to help, or this is what you need to buy, or this is what you need to do. And a lot of that stuff is really not important, but it's important to companies, who obviously have an interest in making a lot of money out of you believing them things. And it goes back to what I was saying the other week, about, you know, right down to politicians and stuff like that. You know, it's not necessarily that people don't want to deal with climate change, or don't know what we need to do to deal with climate change, but how do you change the public's perception, that you've trained them on for 50, 60 years, that this is the way you live, this is the way you should be living, and then, how do you just, at the flick of a switch, go 'well we were wrong about [these ideas.]' I mean, this is the challenge, of you know, climate action.' (Interview with TBTC activist and gardener, 22/11/2024).

But is also a place where the TBTC are trying to bring futures into the present too. This is, of course, the meaning of the term 'na habair é, dean é.' In practice, perhaps the best example of this is the 'rewilding' programme which has become centred around the garden. This programme involves local schoolchildren, who nurture oak trees in the garden, before planting them out on the Black Mountain (which rises behind the city). The attraction of oak trees is, in part, their longevity – they live for up to a millennium – and the rewilding programme is part of a deliberate attempt, to encourage schoolchildren to consider how they are related to futures which stretch far beyond their immediate perception.

For Foucault, the aspiration of trying to create a heterotopia of 'infinitely accumulating time' is associated with a decidedly modern aspiration, to 'enclose in one place all times, all epochs, all forms, all tastes' in order to constitute 'a place that is itself outside of time and inaccessible to its ravages.' (Foucault, [1984] 1986, p. 26). But to some extent it doesn't quite make sense to consider the GaP in these terms. Certainly, the garden may be a place which allows for a kind of escape, from the 'ravages' of the contemporary, darkening, crisis-laden world. But, as the preceding section indicates, it is precisely by acting as a place *through* which it might be possible to engage with the city and its politics that the garden aspires to offer a kind of escape from this darkness.

Rather than thinking about the GaP as an attempt to enclose all times within a place then, perhaps it makes more sense to think about the garden as an attempt to try to draw different temporalities together as part of this place. Here considering the term place more closely is helpful; in classic, relational, geographical terms places can be considered not ‘points or areas on maps, but as integrations of space and time; as *spatio-temporal events*.’” (Massey, 2005, p. 130). In this conceptualisation, places are not merely sites where stories collect or are captured but are themselves collections of spatial ‘stories so-far’ (Massey, 2005, p. 130). This provides a closer framing for the kind of temporal relationships established in and through the GaP. In quite literal terms, those involved with the garden initially refused to put it on Google Maps, preferring instead to have the project advertised through word of mouth. More broadly, the GaP is something which is re-composed on a weekly basis, when the regular gardeners turn up on a Friday morning. That the garden is something which is forever falling apart – that every week there are new jobs to do, as weeds need to be weeded, seeds planted, rotted raised beds replaced, and birdfeeders refilled – is helpful, as it keeps drawing people back to this place. This is not a place where different spatial stories so far are collected once and for all. Rather it is a place where people turn up on a weekly basis to try to knot a different range of spatial stories together, in spite of their inevitable subsequent unravelling.

In some senses, there is an echo of this kind of eventfulness in the FMCG and the Springfield Dam too. But perhaps this eventfulness is a little more literal than that of the GaP; as the SEUPB’s evaluation report for the FMCG explains, as part of the animation programme associated with the project, a series of events were run on the greenway, including a ‘spectacular’ event on the 5th of March 2022 which was attended by ‘approximately 1500’ people (RSM, 2024). This is a different kind of heterotopic temporality; it is that of ‘time in its most flowing, transitory, precarious aspect, to time in the mode of the festival’ (Foucault, [1984] 1986, p. 26). Heterotopias which aim for this kind of temporal relationship, Foucault suggests, are not ‘orientated toward the eternal, they are rather absolutely temporal (chroniques)’ (Foucault, [1984] 1986, p. 26).

The key difference between the FMCG and the GaP, though, is the way which it has (and has not) been recomposed. The GaP is a place which is continually being (re-) assembled; as the old adage goes, a gardener’s work is never done, and those who are engaged with the GaP return on a regular basis, in order to keep on re-composing this space. But the FMCG, by contrast, is an ‘event’ which is now largely over, and which is not being repeated within the city. Specifically, since the completion of the animation project, the project has almost entirely disappeared out of the city’s streetscape. See Figure 5.4 for illustration.



Figure 5.4: 'Greenway' as it passes along the Upper Whiterock Road. Screenshot on the left is of the map on the city council website, showing my location on the route, as I took the photograph to the right. (Source: the author)

In part, the reason for the FMCG's disappearance is because of a problem with the project's signage. Through the development of the FMCG, the project team developed a range of signs to run along the length of the project, indicating its route as it passes through the city. The team wanted to have a common linguistic standard on the signs, as part of an attempt to ensure the cohesiveness of the route. Specifically, they wanted signs which had English, Irish, and Ulster-Scots on them, to reflect the languages associated with the city's main ethno-communal blocs. But city councillors associated with the city's PUL districts did not want Irish on the signs; those in the city's CNR districts said that it was essential. Consequently, the FMCG's signs now lie gathering dust in a city council shed. As such, the changes which the project has made to the city's streetscape are now unmarked and have become insignificant features of the city's streetscape. This disappearance means that the project has attracted criticism from a variety of different actors. As one DUP councillor put it to me 'as far as I'm concerned, that project never even happened' (DUP councillor, field notes, 07/06/2024). More specifically, one Sinn Féin councillor explained:

'At the minute it's not viewed as [the greenway]. And it's not viewed that anything has happened yet because, well, nothing has. You know? There hasn't been any changes to Section 5. At all. You know? Not one. I find that a bit frustrating now you know, 'cause I knew they said it was going to be very light touch low investment but... I haven't seen anything.' (Interview, Sinn Féin Councillor, 27/08/2024)

The net result is a curious inversion of the type of visibility associated with the GaP; where the GaP is almost invisible at a distance, yet is transforming the way which people relate to each other and the land, the FMCG is a project which, when viewed from a distance (such as through a laptop screen) appears to have transformed the city, but get up close to it and it becomes invisible. The following section explores these differences

with reference to a wider body of geographical theory, in order to better grasp the political implications of these two projects for Belfast and its politics today.

5.3 Greening Infrastructural Gaps

One way of thinking about the Springfield Dam and the GaP is as places which have been established in order to reckon with infrastructural absences, or a gap, between the promises being made by the FMCG and the TBTC, and the actuality of what they've actually delivered for the city. But they have done so in different ways. The Springfield Dam, as sub-section 5.3.1 explains, is a place where publics have been taught to 'see' the FMCG, in spite of the fact that (as set out above) it has made only very limited changes to Belfast's cityscape. Meanwhile, as sub-section 5.3.2 explains, because the garden keeps on falling apart – and needs repeated care – it keeps the TBTC's coalition alive, in spite of the fact that they've yet to deliver the kind of systematic infrastructural changes which they claim are necessary, to actually create a sustainable city. The two sections below unpack the political significance of these two different methods, of using greening to try to bridge the gap between these infrastructural promises and the actuality of the urban environment.

5.3.1 Imagined Space for an Imagined Community

Perhaps the most striking feature of the FMCG is the dissonance between the limited material change which the project has made to the city and the significant public impact which it has claimed in Peace Process reports, City Council policy documents, publicity material (to some extent the FMCG, and especially the Springfield Dam, have become the poster children for the EU's SEUPB PEACE IV Shared Space projects) and in interviews. One of the project's protagonists explained to me, for example, that the FMCG was, in his understanding, 'the longest urban greenway in Europe' (whilst admitting that he hadn't actually travelled its length) (Interview, City Council Greenway team, 03/10/2024). But as set out above, this is a project which has actually made almost no enduring changes to Belfast's cityscape.

To some extent, one might argue that this is the archetypal example of an infrastructure which is functioning in what Larkin (2013) calls a 'poetic' mode, where infrastructural 'form is loosened from technical function' (Larkin, 2013, p. 335), so that the 'hierarchy of functions [is rearranged] so that the aesthetic dimension of infrastructure (rather than its technical one) is dominant' (Larkin, 2013, p. 336). In less technical terms, some in the city argue that this is a project which is essentially 'imaginary' in form, in that it is a project which does not actually make any kind of 'real' difference to the city's material streetscape.

It is certainly a project which in many ways aligns with Hilary Angelo's (2021) sense, that part of the reason that people believe urban greening to be 'good' is because of a shared 'social imaginary' regarding what urban nature is and should be. Specifically, as

touched upon in the introduction to this thesis, Angelo argues that urban greening is a particularly 'powerful way of intervening in the urban built environment because, although specific projects are embedded in the political economy of each moment and reflect its biases, in each era they are constructed as universally beneficial investments in the public good by both greening protagonists and their target audiences' (Angelo, 2021, p. 5). In part, she suggests that this is because historic associations with the idea that nature is something which lies 'outside' cities make it possible to use urban greening to convey a sense that projects lie outside urban history and politics (Angelo, 2021, p. 24). Both of these narratives align with the way in which the FMCG has been framed; as a project which benefits 'everybody', and as a project which is creating a 'shared space' which lies outside the city's history and politics.

For Angelo (2021) one of the key problems with this using this imaginary that 'green is good' is that it was originally developed in response to industrial forms of urbanisation and so discourages engagement with the tackling of contemporary urban problems. Again, there is a close match here with the changes which the FMCG has actually made to the city's streetscape. For example, during a walking interview through the Springfield Dam and the Mackies site, one of the city council's ecologists explained to me that, in their view, the city council's planning was based around the idea that the city and nature are separate entities, and that nature can be used to 'resolve' the problems of the city. In the ecologist's view, this is a system of planning 'created for an industrial way of life' ill-suited to contemporary urban needs, and thereby failing to provide the habitats and homes needed for nature and people respectively (Walking Interview, City Council Ecologist, 15/08/2024). She used the example of an open-mosaic habitat, which tend only to exist in ex-industrial spaces, and which are vital for pollination and invertebrate life (as an example of an open-mosaic habitat, see Figure 5.5). Her view tallies with the historical record; since the city council's first plans in 1945, created (as in many UK cities) through the use of military planning tools, nature has been treated as something which is 'outside' the city and can be used as a kind of resolution to its problems, whether these be problems of air quality (1945), social cohesion (1989) or biodiversity (2015). More specifically still, the 'green corridor' which the FMCG now runs along has long been cited, as one which could be potentially useful for resolving some of the city's socio-ecological problems; to some extent the FMCG is not a 'new' idea but the realisation of a very old one, supported by long-standing presumptions about how nature can improve the city.



Figure 5.5: Example of Open Mosaic Habitat, as pointed out by City Council Ecologist, 15/08/2024 (Source: the author)

And yet, as this ecologist's perspective belies, the idea that 'greenness' is 'good' is not something which is accepted universally by everyone who lives in the city. For example, as one community stakeholder explained to me with reference to greening:

In working class areas, especially in West Belfast, we've had a complicated relationship with green space. A lot of people see it as a negative, because of antisocial behaviour, because of disrepair, it's not maintained, so people don't or haven't seen the benefit of green space (Interview, West Belfast Community Partnership Board, 08/03/2024).

This is not, then, a project which has been designed solely to neatly fit with existing understandings of what greening is, and what it might do to Belfast. It is here that the Springfield Dam starts to become particularly important. In part, this site is important because it was a place of education and demonstration; this is a place where a particular understanding of what 'good' green urban environments look like has been realised and used as a demonstration space to educate publics. In more conceptual terms, if this really is a kind of heterotopic mirror then it might be a space where the relationship with symbols and their referents could be rearranged or inverted; in other words, it might be the kind of place where publics might be encouraged to accept infrastructures in their 'poetic' mode (Larkin 2013). Perhaps the best example of this kind of 'inversion' is that some of the community stakeholders who were engaged with as part of the FMCG's animation programme now see the city's infrastructures as part of the greenway; the

community worker and politician quoted above who explains that there haven't been any changes to the streetscape made by the FMCG went on to explain that later that year (when the weather improved), she would be encouraging those in her community to see the space as the FMCG; as she explained, she and her team would be out telling the local community that 'that's Section 5, Section 5, Section 5 [of the greenway].' (Interview, Sinn Féin Councillor, 27/08/2024).

In its original conceptualisation, the ideal of green infrastructure was designed to capture the sense that landscapes can function as infrastructures (Mell and Clement, 2020; Safransky, 2017). Here the opposite seems to be happening; the city's infrastructures are supposed to be part of the city's green landscape. The term landscape itself is one which implies a particular kind of engagement with space. Specifically, the term is often associated with a kind of distanced, visual interaction with space. Wylie writes that classical understandings of landscapes are structured around perspectival ideals, and so, like mirrors have 'vanishing points' (Wylie, 2017, p. 10). Landscapes are, in other words, organised around privileged points, from which a landscape can be seen 'correctly' (Wylie, 2017, p. 10). For the FMCG the Springfield Dam is that vanishing point. It is here that people have been taught to see the project 'correctly.' It is here in other words, that the project as a whole becomes visible, both because of the changes which have been made to the landscape in this space, and thanks to the various forms of training and education which have happened in this space, encouraging people to see the cityscape more widely anew.

But to some extent the project also appears to be playing with an additional form of spatial imaginary; what Cesafsky (2017) calls the imaginary of 'infrastructural solidarity' which promotes the idea that infrastructures help to knit together fragmented cities. As in the case of landscapes, this is an imaginary which relies on a particular perspective; it 'only makes sense to think that infrastructure coheres a polity if infrastructures themselves are imagined as solid shapes (or 'forms')' which is a view of infrastructure associated with 'how it appears on a map' (Cesafsky, 2017, p. 148). However, as she points out, this imaginary belies the reality. Because these kinds of projects are always cutting through dense urban fabrics, as 'when new infrastructure is introduced, earlier forms become destabilized, yet remain integrated in awkward and unpredictable ways. Winners, losers, controversies—that is, social fragmentations—are inevitable' (Cesafsky, 2017, p. 156)

Perhaps the best instance of this, in this chapter, is the example of the conflict caused over signage along the route. For those engaged in the FMCG this illustrates that the city is divided; it highlights pre-existing divisions in the city, and its latent potential for conflict. But trace the history of this conflict in a more literal fashion and the picture is different. The city's linguistic, and toponymical differences, are (largely) managed peacefully by the different communities who live within it; the conflict only started after an attempt to try

to impose a uniform signage regime in spite of this diverse geography. A more literal, infrastructural example is the Albert Foundry bridge, which runs across the ponds in the centre of the Springfield Dam. Whilst it was being constructed, the local community requested that a ‘Peace Gate’ be erected on it (see Figure 5.6). The FMCG’s project protagonists accepted, seeing this as evidence that the city remains divided and fear-filled, and seeing their acceptance of this request as evidence of good community engagement (Interviews 6, 21, 47). Again though, read this example in a more literal fashion and the relationship runs the other way around; the community’s fears came as the space was being changed by the FMCG.



Figure 5.6: The Bridge over the Springfield Dam, and the Peace Gates which have been constructed on it. (Source: the author)

The implication here is that the project has both connected *and* divided the city, as it has traversed and intersected with pre-existing features of city life, from the ponds in the landscape, to the cultures which exist in the communities which are a part of its geography. Those who live in the city are well aware that these types of projects divide as well as connect. But they are also aware that the EU’s PEACE funds only see one side of this equation; these are funds which are forever *promising* to provide connections, by working in a city which is presumed to be already divided. Local community groups have become adept at working with these funding parameters. For example, a women’s group in the upper Shankill explained that after the PEACE III funds, a group of paramilitaries

told the local children that they would have to break off their cross-community friendships (cultivated as part of the programme) in order to ensure that their area received funding in PEACE IV (Focus Group, Ballysillan, 02/05/2024). In other words, these funds incentivise communities to effect urban divisions, to ensure that they are attractive to funds which are predicated upon the promise of connection.

The broader implication is that the project has done little to actually create a new public – or more broadly, a new community – which cuts across the city’s ethno-communal divides. If anything in fact, one of the things which is striking about the project is the lack of community engagement with it; none of the city’s existing communities have engaged substantively with the project since its completion (and as set out in the preceding chapter, they have rejected responsibility for looking after it), and the project has not created any substantial new community around it.

Perhaps then this is a project which is best thought of as a kind of ‘imaginary’ greenway, which has been designed for a kind of ‘imagined community.’ By ‘imagined community’ here I am deliberately using the term developed by Benedict Anderson ([1983] 2006), in order to better grasp the way in which nations and nationalism develop and evolve. Thinking about the spaces created by the FMCG in these terms suggests that it might be useful to think of them as forms of ‘national territory’, which have been created in order to create space for a new Northern Irish national public to develop, commensurate with the institutions of the Northern Irish state. This is, after all, part of the reason that those who delivered the project’s ‘animation’ programme found this space so useful; once the Springfield Dam was completed, these governmental actors had their own territory, from which to launch their own activities and forms of public engagement. Creating this kind of ‘national’ territory in North and West Belfast is, also, something which various governments have long aspired towards; from the late 1960s to the mid-2010s this area of the city has been something of a ‘no-go-zone’ for state actors.

But this framing also provides a useful means of unpacking some of the project’s wider geographical significance. Anderson’s ([1983] 2006) analysis focusses particularly on the way in which particular narratives and texts – the novel is his focus – served to help draw together imagined, national communities. In this case, perhaps the city itself is the text in question; the FMCG is a project which has been designed in order to tell a particular story, not necessarily to those who live up close to the project, but to those who live at a distance from it. First, it demonstrates to those who live in other regions of Northern Ireland that the Northern Irish government is continuing to work towards the task of securing the Northern Irish population against itself, by targeting geographies historically associated with political insurrection. Second, it demonstrates to people like EU funders that Northern Irish government can, and is, intervening in, and gaining control of, a geography where historically it has been unable to do so.

That the project has done very little to actually remake life in the better in this part of the city does little to dispel this narrative – this ‘failure’ can be, and has been, blamed on those who live in the city. In other words, the failure of the project to connect the city back together is not a failure of the Peace Process, or those who have delivered this governmental programme, but is a result (and evidence), of the city’s divided nature. If anything, this simply provides justification for further intervention; it is for this reason, for example, that those who delivered the FMCG claim that there needs to be more projects like it, creating more shared space, if the city is to be improved. That this project fails to deliver space for a Northern Irish public then – or put differently, fails to actually secure a kind of ‘national’ territory in this part of the city – is ultimately not a problem, for those who are part of Northern Irish government. For it is the process of *trying* to secure this territory which provides Northern Irish government with its core *raison d’être*: actually realise a harmonious Northern Irish public and the central rationale underlying the Peace Process and the institutions associated with the GFA would fall away.

Here though the limitations of thinking about this project as something which is purely ‘imaginary’ begin to become apparent, for by sustaining the Peace Process this project helps to sustain an array of connections between urban professionals and the city, associated with flows of funding, which are decidedly material. Specifically, the project has set £5.1 million pounds in motion, which has helped to connect a wide array of professional urbanists, conflict mediators, policymakers, and NGO workers, together, and to the city. Even if the project has not done much to actually connect together Grosvenor and Glencairn, in other words, it has done a good job of connecting together Belfast and Brussels. Even if this project hasn’t created a new public, it has done a good job of sustaining the assemblage of actors associated with the Peace Process.

The result for some living in this part of the city is a sense of suspension; of being, as Irish Rappers Kneecap put it, describing life in this part of the city, ‘caught in a loop like I’m tryna read a book but it’s the same page, over and over and over and over and over and over’ (Kneecap, 2021). Or, as academics Coulter and Shirlow, p. (2019, p. 19) put it, this is a place which ‘often feels like it is forever circumnavigating a roundabout.’ Some suggest that it has also built a sense of frustration in the city; as one of the city’s climate-change team put explained, ‘people are really, really just crying out for action in this city. They’re bored of strategies and plans and they want action. They want to see something in their neighbourhood happen, or something change in their life, for the better’ (Interview with Belfast City Council Climate Team, 17/01/2025). But these calls for the government to act are also rooted in a growing sense, as an experienced community worker explained to me, that those who live in the city are no longer able to act meaningfully to remake the urban worlds they are a part of themselves:

‘It’s not just peace in that context about, you know, the absence of violence. There’s a relative absence of violence [today] most people know that [...]. But if

you talk about democracy, in the context of people having control over their own life and being able to take responsibility, there's probably not an area people's lives nowadays that isn't organised, run and planned elsewhere [...]. And I would argue, not being an expert, when it comes to the environment, what responsibility do people have? Because the responsibility for it has been taken away from them.' (Interview, Lower Falls Community worker, 01/05/2024).

Attempts to try to realise new forms of Northern Irish public, through the creation of new forms of space and territory may always fall short of their aspirations. But over time the gradual erosion of community control of the urban environment has left those who are a part of the city feeling increasingly alienated from the urban worlds which they are a part of. Put differently, as projects like the FMCG have afforded opportunities for governmental actors to connect to and through the city in new ways, they have also broken connections between existing urban communities and the urban environments they are a part of. No longer actors able to re-create their own urban worlds, through education programmes such as those delivered in the Springfield Dam those who live in the city are being taught both how to perform in, and why they should appreciate the city's transformation into, a kind of spectacle, designed to appeal to funders further afield. The next section details the TBTC's alternative proposition.

5.3.2 Green Infrastructures of City Life

Gardens are spaces which do not easily lend themselves to the kind of distanced, one-direction visual interaction associated with more formal landscapes; in his philosophical exploration of gardens, for example, (Cooper, 2008, p. 30) argues that even landscape gardens can be legitimately interacted with – and experienced – in a variety of ways, meaning one 'would hardly criticise or find eccentric the stroller who looks at the garden from perspectives not invited by the designer – not in the way in which one would be perplexed at a gallery visitor who insists on looking at the paintings from the floor or the ceiling.' In a more literally grounded sense, the coordinator of Belfast's emerging community garden network explained that in her view community gardens are 'very human landscapes [compared] to most of the landscapes we live in [as] somebody hasn't designed them from like a gods-eye view of whatever, you know, its more like functional spaces or spaces where people are like tinkering with things or, you know, experimenting with things.' (Interview, Reclaim the Commons activist, 14/05/2024). Those involved in the TBTC's gardens very much subscribe to this experimental ethos, it is a key point of focus when asked about their potential impacts. For example:

'We write this into all our [funding] applications now – not that it does us any fuckin' good whatsoever – but we always write that 'the gardens here are testing grounds for what's possible and that the people most impacted by climate breakdown and biodiversity loss are gonna be poor people.' Like who do you think's gonna live in the fuckin' floodplains like? And who's not gonna be able to

move house when sea levels start rising or food becomes extortionate? Who is gonna be the first to suffer? It's not gonna be people who can afford to go somewhere else like. We write that into our [funding] applications now that these gardens are places where people can see, imagine, start imagining like how realistic it is to grow your own food, solar panels, learn the skills – we're completely off grid here – and start doing things. Like, learning the skills that we are actually gonna need for the future.' (Interview TBTC Activist and gardener, 21/08/2024)

But solely thinking about the experimentation happening in the GaP in technical terms misses out on the forms of linguistic, cultural, and political experimentation happening there too. Dewey might well have approved of these more 'cultural' experiments, and his writings provide a useful framing for understanding why they might be significant. In Dewey's eyes, although 'every aspect of life, from religion and education to property and trade' has been transformed by science, technology, and industrial capitalism, 'nothing approaching [this] transformation has taken place in ideas and ideals. Symbols control sentiment and thought, and the new age has no symbols consonant with its activities.' (Dewey, [1927] 2016, p. 170) Consequently, although the material 'ties which hold men together in action are numerous, tough and subtle' and they are 'intangible and invisible'; we have the 'physical tools of communication as never before' but the 'thoughts and aspirations congruous with them are not communicated and hence are not common (Dewey, [1927] 2016, p. 170). Consequently, Dewey argues that artists have a particularly important role to play in democratisation, because they 'break through the crust of conventionalised and routine consciousness' (Dewey, [1927] 2016, p. 204). In his later *Art as Experience* (Dewey, [1938] 2005) he provides details as to why. As the title suggests, in this text he argues that a particular form of experience occurs in moments of radical presence when 'past ceases to trouble and anticipations of the future are not perturbing [so] a being [is] wholly united with his environment and therefore fully alive.' (Dewey, [1938] 2005, p. 17). For Dewey these moments of harmony are rare in a world marked by 'disruption and conflict' (Dewey, [1938] 2005, p. 14) and the skill of the artist lies, in part, in cultivating them. But the reason these moments are special is because they are different from the norm; consequently, the artist 'does not shun moments of resistance and tension' but rather 'cultivates them, not for their own sake, but for their potentialities, bringing to living consciousness an experience that is unified and total' (Dewey, [1938] 2005). This distinguishes an artist from a scientist, as when the latter has resolved a problem, 'he passes on to another problem using an attained solution' (Dewey, [1938] 2005, p. 14). As Stiegler (2022) puts it – in her close reading of the Lippmann/Dewey debate – this is about working with the 'irreducible heterochrony' of the world, and its different evolutionary rhythms, in order to both make use of and enhance human creativity.

To some extent this provides a useful, if decidedly abstract, description of the kinds of relationships which those involved in the GaP are trying to establish with each other, and the non-human elements of the garden too. Weekly they try to draw them together, in order to try to achieve a kind of moment of harmony, when they might be able to escape both the troubles of the city's past and the darkness of the political futures which might come. This is a place where people try to develop a sense of deep presence; a new sense of 'being' (Field notes, 21/02/2025). And in order to do so, they are developing new forms of language, knowledge, and tools in a more literal sense; working towards this kind of harmony requires a kind of cultural creativity. As one of one of the TBTC's gardeners explains, for example, bringing the life of a child in the city and that of an oak tree into a kind of momentary harmony requires a creative touch:

It's the way of it too. Because if you go that 10-year-old and say, 'listen, do you wanna do something that you won't see for 800 years and in fact you you'll be dead by the time it happens? If that's your methodology, then you've lost the 10-year-old. But if you can go to them ones and say (*spoken in exaggerated tones*) **'who can find me these seeds? Cause these trees will here for one thousand years.'** You know what I mean? So it's all about approach, and framing. (TBTC activist and gardener, 21/08/2024 – emphasis reflects emphasis in tone of voice).

But the *reason* that the garden *maintains* its capacity to draw people back to it is because these moments of harmony are fleeting; there is no possibility of somehow 'resolving' this space, in the sense of ending the tensions and problems which it presents. A gardener's work is never done, and it is because the garden is a space where things always need repaired, cared for, and drawn back into relationship with one another, that it keeps on drawing the community associated with it back together. If the community must develop and deploy their creativity in order to bring the garden together, the garden also creates the community, because of the tensions and challenges which it creates.

And yet, if these gardeners are behaving, to some extent, like Deweyan gardeners, it is not because they're aiming to try to create some kind of 'Great Community' – for Dewey, this was the ultimate aspiration of trying to develop new forms of signs and symbols, which might allow for enhanced communication between one another. Instead, these gardeners are aiming to try to make use of, and enhance, the differences between the city's political communities or, more broadly, places. It is the difference between the GaP and the garden on the Shankill Road, for example, which makes trade between them worthwhile; it is because the GaP is sheltered that it is a good place for nurturing oak trees, but it is only by planting them out on the Black Mountain that it might be possible for them to live for a millennia; the TBTC are aiming to try to build houses because people need places to live in the city, if they're going to be able to come and attend to the garden. By making the GaP a distinctive place, those who are engaged with the garden are in turn helping to create the differences which help to provide the city with its political potential.

As set out in sub-section 5.2.2, part of the reason that those engaged in the GaP are attempting to encourage the creation of this diverse set of communities, and so enhance the city's political potential, is because they want to cultivate hope, about possibilities for the future. But this is not a straightforward process, as the following long quote illustrates:

Me: Part of the problem, I think, is that climate change has been considered a scientific problem for a long time, but... [interviewee interrupts]

Interviewee: But it's not. It's not. It's everybody's issue. You know, that's the problem. You know, I think – and this is like, going to what you said, about maybe coming here and getting a feeling of some control over that and, like, my answer is that I think it's about less control for me. I can't speak for anybody else, but I think for me it's about less control, it's about not trying to control it, it's about accepting it, it's about, you know, what we're doing here isn't going to save the world. It isn't going to solve the problem. It could, you know, ripple out and, you know, maybe down the line have an impact. But ultimately, what's... you know, this here. This garden, isn't going to keep the world safe. So, to try and think you have some sort of control over that within this space is a bit naïve. And I've thought about this, and I think what really gives me sort of like hope within the climate action sort of thing is that like even if we don't succeed, and we drive ourselves to extinction – this is quite brutal – but if we drive ourselves to extinction, the world's like 4.5 billion years old, so, life has been on earth for 500 million, so about 11% of the time the world has existed, life has been on the earth, notwithstanding what's been in the sea. So, if we destroy everything, and it goes into runaway climate change, like there's 5, or at least 5 or 6 chances for life to restart before this planet goes out of existence. So that, like, that sort of in a maybe twisted gives me hope. If we can't maybe, like, get our act together, further down the line when we're like, not even a memory, life will have a chance to come again. And I think, like, accepting that for me takes away that arrogance. Like we don't need to save the planet. The planet can save itself. Do you know what I mean? it can start again. The question is, will it start again and repeat us? (Interview, TBTC Activist, 22/11/2023)

There's a lot in this quote, but broadly one could read it as an example of what Schlosberg and Craven (2019) term a kind of 'humility', which they argue is a common to actors engaged in what they term 'sustainable materialist' practices, like community gardening, which aim to engage with the politics of creating a more sustainable future through materialist means. As Schlosberg and Craven (2019) point out, many of those engaged in these types of movements – like the activist above – recognise and are aiming to work with the potential of the non-human world. It is from this recognition that agency is something which is developed through relationships with others, rather than something one can hold or exercise unilaterally, that these actors develop their humility.

This is not, then, an attempt to control the city and its futures through developing control over a particular patch of community territory – the kind of spatial engagement sometimes aspired towards by the city’s paramilitary actors. Instead, this is an attempt to work with the city’s potential, to try to encourage the development of diverse forms of urban being. One way of thinking about this in more conceptual terms would be to consider it an attempt to realise a kind of ‘right to infrastructure’, which Corsín Jiménez (2014, p. 358) conceives of as an attempt to ‘escape the human–nonhuman and epistemology–ontology dichotomies [...] by opening up the agential work of infrastructures as a source (an open source) of possibilities in their *own right*.’ These kinds of infrastructures ‘invite a reconsideration of the very techno-material nature of that thing called ‘public’ or ‘commons’ (Corsín Jiménez, 2014, p. 358) because they are not ‘something that is ‘added’ to the social, or that traverses or inflects it, but, rather, something that becomes reinscribed as a constitutive ‘right’—the right to define and redefine one’s infrastructural being’ (Corsín Jiménez, 2014, p. 348). Put in plainer terms, one might think of the GaP as an attempt to turn the city’s community territories into infrastructures, which might help to support and sustain the possibility for hitherto unknowable forms of urban being.

Rather than trying to make the city legible in a particular way then, this is instead an attempt to try to enhance the possibilities for forms of urban life which remain as yet incomprehensible, or barely imaginable.²⁸ This is, about trying to turn the city into a ‘place of many places, the city folds over on itself in so many layers and relationships that it is incomprehensible. One cannot “take it in,” one never feels as though there is nothing new and interesting to explore, no new and interesting people to meet’ (Marion Young, [1990] 1996, p. 240). As Iris Marion-Young points out, this kind of potential can be both good and bad; she describes this potential as giving the city a kind of ‘eroticism’, which has always ‘been an aspect of its fearfulness, for it holds out the possibility that one will lose one’s identity, will fall’ (Marion Young, [1990] 1996, p. 239). But this is also what provides the city with its allure, as ‘one takes pleasure in being drawn out of oneself to understand that there are other meanings, practices, [and] perspectives on the city’ (Marion Young, [1990] 1996, p. 240).

In Marion-Young’s reading, this eroticism is part of a normative ideal, which she terms ‘city life’ – by this she means a form of ‘social relations [defined by] as the being together of strangers’ where different groups ‘interact within spaces and institutions they all experience themselves as belonging to, but without those interactions dissolving into unity or commonness’ (Marion Young, [1990] 1996, pp. 237–238). This is about treating the city as something which is both produced by and productive of political differences; it is about treating the tensions which exist between irreconcilable urban actors as a

²⁸ If there is a kind of ‘infrastructural poetics’ here, perhaps it is not akin to the form described by Larkin (2013), but instead one which is based the sense that ‘a lingua franca (humanistic French, Anglo-American Sabir, or Esperanto code) is always apoetical’ (Glissant, [1990] 2025, p. 111).

creative resource rather than as a problem to be eliminated. It is about working with differences in the city, in other words, treating them as spurs for the creation of new forms of relationships, rather than as sources of division which must be reconciled.

5.4 Conclusions

Perhaps what is most striking about the changes that the FMCG and the TBTC have made to Belfast's streetscape is how limited these changes actually are. In the FMCG's case, the project has essentially failed to deliver a piece of infrastructure which substantively changes the way which people move through the city. Meanwhile, the TBTC have so far failed to actually build a single low-carbon social house. The first half of this chapter focusses on the changes which these projects have actually made to the city, in the Springfield Dam, and the GaP (section 5.2). To do so, it draws upon the Foucauldian concept of heterotopia, to frame these different forms of socio-spatial engagement; in doing so, it makes it clear that heterotopias are '*spaces of an alternative ordering*' (Hetherington, 1997, p. 9 emphasis original) rather than being places where social orders straightforwardly break down.

The second half (section 5.3) of this chapter builds upon and deepens this analysis, suggesting that both the Springfield Dam and the GaP are places which have been established to help bridge the gap between the infrastructures which the FMCG and the TBTC have promised, and the actuality of the changes which they have made to the city. The chapter argues that each of these projects have attempted to bridge this gap in different ways. In the FMCG's case, the Springfield Dam has been created and used in order to encourage publics in the city to literally 'see' the city's infrastructures as being 'green.' Meanwhile, the need to repeatedly attend to the GaP has helped to (re-)create the community associated with the TBTC, whilst also helping to create opportunities for the campaign to become a part of a network of communities and place-based movements across the city (and beyond).

The second half of this chapter also argues that these differences are associated with the different forms of public, which these projects are trying to create. In practice, the aspiration of the FMCG to create a kind of 'shared space' for a plural Northern Irish public can be conceptualised, this chapter suggests, as an attempt to try to create a kind of Northern Irish territory (as opposed to the ethno-communally defined territories which are normally associated with Belfast). The TBTC, by contrast, is a project which is trying to make the city's territories function in a more infrastructural way, to help sustain diverse forms of life in the city.

These different forms of spatial politics have important implications, for the way which each of these projects relates to political differences in the city. For those engaged in the Peace Process, improving the city requires expanding 'shared space' – or expanding this particular form of Northern Irish territory – across the city, thereby effacing the city's

different ethno-communal territories. The city's territorial differences are, here, a problem, which need to be eliminated. By contrast, for those involved in the GaP, it is the differences between the city's different territories which both create, and encourage the creation of, new forms of connection in and to the city. Rather than trying to expand a particular type of space across the city then, this is a form of spatial politics which aims to try and encourage a variety of different forms of urban being to flourish, by creating stronger connections to and through particular, unique urban territories.

In neither case has either project actually achieved these socio-spatial ideals. But in each case, these failures have different consequences. When projects like the FMCG fail to create and secure stable forms of Northern Irish territory, it is those who are associated with Northern Irish government who are given the task of trying to deal with this failure. In practice, this means that these types of projects help to sustain governmental programmes like the Peace Process, providing opportunities for the professional urbanists who are associated them to re-engage with each other, and the city. This, then, is a form of spatial politics which is produced by, and productive of, financial flows moving into and out of the city as part of international funding rounds, carrying professional urbanists with them. Meanwhile, when community-led attempts to try and make urban territories infrastructural fall apart, it is communities who are re-engaged, and created anew, as they attempt to try and create new means of connecting to and through space. This, then, is a form of spatial politics which is produced by and productive of political differences, related to the only ever partially reconcilable rhythms of city life.

The most consequential implications which these different forms of socio-spatial politics have for the city's climate politics are with regard to the sense of agency which those living in the city feel, with regard to the urban environments they are a part of. The repeated cycles of connection and division, and gradual expansion of governmental control of territory, in North and West Belfast has left those living there feeling alienated from this urban environment; people no longer feel a responsibility to be environmental actors 'because the responsibility for it has been taken away from them' (Interview, Lower Falls Community worker, 01/05/2024). Those engaged in the GaP have attempted to try to combat this sense of alienation, by creating places 'where people feel like they've some power, some ability to influence change in their communities' (Interview, TBTC activist and gardener, 05/12/2023). But this is not a form of engagement which is based around a sense doing so might save the world. Instead, those in the gardens are trying to create a more sustainable city because doing so might help a plurality of different urban worlds to come into being.

Here those engaged in the GaP have much in common with other 'sustainable materialist' movements – who base their political practices around material engagement with the world through things like community gardens – who often evidence a deep

‘humility’ (Schlosberg and Craven, 2019, p. 142) regarding the significance of their actions in a climate-changing world. Moreover, also like many involved in these types of sustainable materialist movements, those in the GaP evidence attempts to develop more relational understandings of, and engagements with, others. But where, Schlosberg and Craven (2019) argue, many of these types of movements across the global North take their inspiration from ‘new materialist’ philosophies, for those in the GaP it is traditional ‘indigenous’ knowledges, which serve as their key point of inspiration, for these more relational ways of being.

Perhaps one could frame the difference, in the way which the FMCG and the TBTC approach the city’s political differences, in a kind of grand modern/non-modern framework. The FMCG, for example, might be considered an example of a modern form of ‘technopolitics’ which, Timothy Mitchell (2002) argues, is built upon and effects a whole series of divisions, between the human and non-human, the real and the imagined, and objects and their representations. Meanwhile, the GaP might be thought of as a place where the TBTC are trying to develop a more relational form of engagement in and with the world through territory, in a way which is akin to indigenous political movements fighting against coloniality and modernity (Escobar et al., 2024). But this is a conceptual line of thinking that it would take another whole thesis to develop; it is one of several loose ends set out in the following, concluding chapter, which summarises the thesis and points towards future research which might be developed from it.

6 Conclusions: The Unknowable City

‘If anything, working on this project has further estranged me from the city to which it is dedicated. It has also made me more familiar with the failings of my own thought.’

The Manhattan Project: A Theory of A City, David Kishik (2015, p. xv)

6.1 Introduction

This concluding chapter begins by returning to the research questions set out in the introduction and explains out how they are addressed by this thesis (section 6.2). It then outlines the thesis’ main conceptual contributions in more explicit terms (section 6.3). But, as the quote framing this chapter suggests, if there is one thing I have definitely learnt through the course of creating this thesis it is how partial my knowledge is, about cities in general, and Belfast in particular; the chapter therefore also makes clear some of the limitations of this thesis, which present potential avenues for further study (section 6.4) The thesis concludes by suggesting that it is this unknowability which means that cities remain sites of important political potential, in a time when the prospects for more democratic and sustainable futures seem ever more improbable.

6.2 Research Questions

This section is structured around the three research questions set out in Chapter 1 and explains how these questions are addressed in the intervening chapters. Each subsection takes a question in turn.

6.2.1 Research Question 1

How and why has climate action come to be understood as requiring the development of a public across ethno-political divides in Belfast?

The idea that Belfast’s ethno-communal divisions are a climate problem is one which has developed as actors already negotiating the city’s politics have integrated climate change into their political programmes. The Peace Process – as the largest governmental programme in the city, and one which is particularly focussed on the city’s ethno-communal divisions – has played a particularly important role in facilitating this integration. But ‘critical friends’ to the Peace Process – such as NGOs like PPR (Participation and Practice of Rights) – have also started to make this connection, as they develop their own counterproposals for the way which the city should develop. In both cases, these groups of actors have drawn climate change into their work to ensure that their political struggles remain relevant to the changing needs and desires of publics in the city. Both, in other words, are not simply trying to tackle the city’s ethno-communal divisions in order to tackle climate change and create a sustainable city, but are also

developing a focus on climate change in order to sustain their efforts to engage with the city's ethno-communal divisions.

This answer is substantiated, and set out in more detail, in Chapter 3, which follows the 'inquiries' (Farías, 2011) of the actors engaged with this Peace Process, as they go about 'problematizing' the city, bringing together Foucauldian and Pragmatic understandings of problematisation, as advocated by Barnett and Bridge (2016). The main 'Guns to Greenways' body of this chapter explains how the Peace Process has both defined life in Northern Ireland in ways which allow for its governance, and gradually expanded, drawing new elements into its remit. Since the mid-2000s this expanding remit has drawn 'the environment' – first in its built form, but increasingly in its 'natural' form too – into the Peace Process, as part of a broader shift from 'reconciliation' towards 'resilience.' This has brought climate change into the Peace Process, reconstituting it in ways which might make it possible to govern this issue through the institutions associated with the Good Friday Agreement (GFA). Thanks to the fact that these institutions are built around the challenge of reckoning with Northern Ireland's ethno-politically divided communities and their differing territorial claims (most acute in the province's urban areas), this means that climate change has become constituted as a problem of ethno-communal, territorial, urban division. Drawing climate change into the Peace Process has helped to turn climate change into a problem governable through these institutions but has also helped to ensure that this governmental programme remains relevant in the 21st century, when the Troubles have increasingly become a 'history project' (Interview, Good Relations Team, 12/03/2024).

As the chapter also demonstrates, those who have acted as 'critical friends' to the Peace Process have come to similar conclusions about the relationship between climate change and the city's ethno-communal, territorial divisions. The NGO called PPR is the example used in this thesis which, since the signing of the GFA, has aimed to ensure that equality legislation associated with it is enacted in practice. The way in which PPR have aimed to achieve this is by forming participatory action research teams which identify 'problematic situations' (Dewey, 1908 [1998], p108) and aim to constitute them as discrete object-problems, which should be of concern for Northern Irish government. But over time those associated with PPR have become increasingly frustrated with the Northern Irish government's apparent inability to actually resolve these problems. This is especially true with regard to housing; this basic infrastructural need is one which, in PPR's analysis, Northern Irish government appears to be unable to resolve in its current configuration. Consequently, PPR helped to found the Take Back the City (TBTC) coalition; a movement that is trying to create a new form of political organisation and infrastructures in order to sustain life in the city. This shift in tactics is associated with a sense that the institutions associated with the GFA have become increasingly ineffectual and out of step with the changing realities of life in Belfast. Consequently, the TBTC have increasingly aimed to realise a 'systemic' form of change, which in their view requires

breaking with a governmental system which is structured around ethno-communal, territorial divisions, rooted in colonial systems of land ownership and control. Integrating climate change into their work, and framing this as a 'systemic' issue, has helped the TBTC to build this 'systemic' narrative.

To some extent then, this suggests that as climate change has become folded into existing political agendas, it has served to revivify justifications for existing governmental programmes *and* provided support for those who believe that these same governmental programmes must be disassembled, as part of systematic changes to realise better futures. More specifically, the chapter demonstrates that climate change is not a problem which has come to land atop the city's pre-existing political demarcations and organisations. Instead, the problem of climate change and its politics are being made and remade by actors in the city, as they go about trying to engage with the city and negotiate its politics.

If there is a key point of divergence between these two projects it is in the degree to which actors involved with them reflect on their embeddedness in the city and its politics. Where those involved in the Peace Process qualify their 'public' actions on the basis they have access to a 'strategic view' of the city (Interview, City Council Greenway Team, 25/01/2024), the TBTC promotes the sense that it is only when one comes to recognise oneself as being part of a public that one becomes a public actor. This, in turn, requires reflection on the way which one's situatedness within urban life is related to, and may be similar or different from, the experiences of others who are a part of the city. This difference has important implications, when it comes to the way which each of these projects has gone on to engage with publics in their 'engagement' processes, as the next question examines.

6.2.2 Research Question 2

Which kinds of intervention are able to foster politically viable publics across ethno-communal divides, and how do these interventions configure the relationship between urban democracy and sustainability?

Neither of the cases at the core of this thesis has actually managed to create politically viable publics across Belfast's ethno-communal divides. But both have failed to achieve this outcome in different ways. The FMCG has engaged with actors equitably across ethno-communal divides but has failed to create a new public. Instead, it has entangled existing communities and community stakeholders into a governmental assemblage structured around urban territory. The TBTC, by contrast, is creating a politically active new public, but it does not reach equitably across ethno-communal divides. Instead, this is a public which is predominantly made up of those whose identities do not fit neatly into the city's territory-based ethno-communal political frameworks, and so are trying to change the city and its politics, to get rid of this ethno-communal territorial political

system. These different outcomes have shaped, and are shaped by, different understandings of urban sustainability. Where the FMCG is a project based around an understanding of sustainability based around delivering projects for those with established relationships to urban territory, the TBTC understanding of sustainability is based around developing responsiveness to, and responsibility towards, the city's pasts and futures. The implication is that understanding the relationship between urban sustainability and democracy requires not merely understanding how different understandings of sustainability connect actors across the city's different territories. It also requires understanding how these different understandings of sustainability facilitate, or prevent, connections to and between the city's pasts, presents, and futures, *through* the remaking of urban territories.

This answer is primarily detailed and substantiated in Chapter 4. As the chapter explains, for the FMCG sustainability primarily means hitting targets, as set by the EU's Special Programmes body, in turn shaped by the UN's SDGs. Put differently, this is a vision of sustainability associated with delivering projects, by using funding from international organisations, on behalf of publics who already have a connection to the city's urban territories, and to help keep funding from these organisations flowing into the city. The FMCG was made green in order to help achieve this; it was initially titled a 'greenway' in order to try to loosen its connection to the city's ethno-communal urban territories and, more broadly, to their political histories. The hope was that doing so would help to facilitate the project's delivery, by limiting political upset. To further aid project delivery, early engagement was carried out with 'gatekeepers' associated with the city's ethno-communal territories across the city's North and West.

Many of these senior community leaders, however, have some form of association with the city's political past – these initial consultees were largely white men who had 'held on to power since the Troubles' (Interview, Greenway Community Consultation Team, 11/01/2024) (for a reminder as to the many meanings of the word 'community', and the ways in which the spectre of paramilitarism continues to haunt Belfast's contemporary politics, see Figure 6.1). Consequently, in trying to transcend the city's ethno-communal territories, the FMCG actually re-emphasised their importance, and the forms of power associated with them, for the city's political life. More specifically, it served to re-emphasise the importance of existing community gatekeepers, whose power is related to the control and creation of urban territories, and who serve as connections between Northern Irish government and local communities. The length of the project, and the fact that it cut through a dense network of territorial boundaries, meant that these engagement with these actors needed to be widespread, and took a lot of time. For many of those engaged, this was a fatiguing process; the consultants who deliver these kinds of projects are, as one interviewee put it, like 'dementors' (Interview, Sinn Féin Councillor and community worker, 27/08/2024) who suck the energy out of community workers. This served to prevent these actors from having the time and energy

needed to create alternative political projects; something which has particular appeal in a place like Belfast, where these ‘alternative political projects’ have historically included things like armed political insurrection. Here then, the project’s ‘greenness’ is not actually being used to engage actors *in* urban environmental politics (as Wachsmuth and Angelo (2018) suggest) but is *dis*-engaging them, by entangling them in a particular governmental assemblage structured around urban territory. Doing so helps to keep the city pacified, sustaining the political status quo and the forms of funding which flow with it.



Figure 6.1: Paramilitary Mural, Upper Shankill, describing Loyalist paramilitaries as ‘community’ defenders. (Source: the author)

By contrast, the TBTC’s focus on sustainability started out as a response to the ways in which actors who are a part of the TBTC have been affected by the city’s urban environment – specifically, frustration that social housing built in the 20th century is now not fit for purpose. Because this is a coalition made up of actors who are deeply affected by the urban environment – and the past (bad) decisions which have shaped it – these actors themselves feel a responsibility to reflect carefully on the decisions they make today, which will affect the political communities to come in the future. This means that their vision of ‘sustainability’ is based less around ‘delivery’, and more around ‘responsibility’, in two senses. First, in the sense that urban development today must respond to the lessons of the past, embedded in the urban streetscape. Second, in the sense that this development must consider the needs of those who are not yet a part of the city but may become so in the future.

This future focus has helped to turn the TBTC into a hub for those who are new to the city and are trying to turn it into their home, such as the city's growing migrant population, many fleeing civil war in Sudan, who do not fit neatly into the city's PUL/CNR dominated politics. To help qualify the TBTC as a serious political community and so help these actors become part of the city's political life, the TBTC have drawn a number of urban 'experts' with recognised qualifications into their coalition – such as Architects, Academics, and Planners. These urban professionals have brought quite a classic image of the sustainable city with them – that of the 'Garden City' – which the TBTC have placed at the heart of their work. Combined with their concern with responsibility, this means that – in many ways – the TBTC's understanding of what a sustainable city should be aligns quite closely with the classical sense that sustainable development must meet 'the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (WCED, 1987, para. 27).

But the TBTC are not simply aiming to impose this vision of a sustainable future *on* the city, but are also using it as a spur to try to sustain city life in the here and now – they are using it to draw people together into the sorts of dialogue and discussion which they understand to be central to the city and its political life. In addition, they are remaking this ideal, by bringing it into relationship with place-specific forms of knowledge and political practice. A good example is their use of 'na habair é dean é' (don't speak it, do it) – a relational, prefigurative form of political practice developed by the urban Gaeltacht movement in the 1970s, revived by the TBTC and now being used in their London-based architect's practice, as explained in Chapter 5. This is a vision of sustainability which not disrupting distinctions between 'green' and the 'grey' understandings of urban sustainability then – as Danieal Aldana Cohen (2018) suggests right to the city-type movements tend to. It is also a project which is pushing reworking distinctions between the city's past, present, and future. More specifically, this is a form of sustainability which aims to draw different urban pasts and futures into the present, by drawing different urban actors and communities into relationship with one another.

But this has placed the TBTC at odds with those who have long policed the city's political imaginaries and tried to impose particular visions of what the city might be – the best examples in Chapter 4 are ex-leaders of the Provisional IRA and Sinn Féin. In addition though, by focussing on communities which have historically not been part of, but want to become included in, the city's political life, the TBTC's work misses out on communities which are moving in the other direction; once part of the city's public life, now increasingly marginalised, and giving up hope on the city as a political project. In Belfast, this means the city's white, working-class Loyalist communities, once valued as the 'muscle' for the city's ethno-communally defined system of political economy, but now increasingly politically disenfranchised and socio-economically marginalised.

6.2.3 Research Question 3

What implications do the practices of urban greening and infrastructuring employed by interventions designed to create new publics across Belfast's ethno-communal divides have, for the social and spatial reconfiguration of the city in relation to climate change and democratic life?

The FMCG and the TBTC have used two different forms of urban greening and infrastructuring in order to try and create new publics. The FMCG is a project which has been largely delivered by encouraging publics to see the city's existing infrastructures as green. This is part of a broader attempt to try and create a new form of national territory in the city (called 'shared space'), which is different from ethno-communal territories, and separate from the histories and political potential embedded in the city. Meanwhile, the TBTC has attempted to make non-human nature in urban territories infrastructural. In practice, this means they've tried to turn these elements of the urban environment into public infrastructures which sustain particular communities, and connect these communities, in the city.

These different forms of urban greening and infrastructuring have a wide range of different implications for the city's democratic life. Perhaps the most significant, though, is the way which these different forms of greening and infrastructuring relate to the city's political differences. Expanding shared space across the city requires effacing the city's different community territories, by breaking the relationships between communities and space. The FMCG has attempted to achieve this not only by creating a space (the Springfield Dam) which lies 'outside' the city's ethno-communal territories, but also by changing how those who live in the city come to know the urban environment; rather than knowing the urban environment on the basis of experiential knowledge developed through interaction with it, this project has attempted to try and get publics to see the city in a way which aligns with the view of it held by consultants and public relations specialists. Meanwhile, making urban territories infrastructural requires both supporting different urban territories and fostering connections between them; in practice this means treating different communities as both produced by and productive of life in the city. Rather than trying to encourage acquiescence to a particular normative vision of the city, this is a form of socio-spatial politics which aims to make it possible to experience genuine political differences within it.

These different forms of socio-spatial politics have more specific implications, in turn, for the city's climate politics. As the relationships between urban communities and territories have been eroded, many in the city no longer feel capable of developing their agency through the urban environment and so are instead 'crying out' (Interview, Belfast City Council Climate Team, 17/01/2025), for urban professionals to act on climate change, by acting on the urban environment, on the publics' behalf. By contrast, those who are engaged in trying to make the city's territories infrastructural are deliberately

trying to make it possible for publics to establish relationships with climate change through the city. This is an effort based less, however, on the belief that doing so might help to ‘save the world’ (Interview, TBTC activist, 22/11/2023) by resolving climate change, but more on the basis that it might help to keep alive as yet unknown urban worlds and the potential which comes with them.

Some of the ideas pertinent to this question are touched upon in Chapter 4, but it is primarily addressed in Chapter 5, which focusses on the material outcomes of the FMCG and the TBTC. To do so, the chapter makes use of the Foucauldian concept of ‘heterotopia’ (Edwards and Bulkeley, 2018; Foucault, 1986; Hetherington, 1997) to explore the political role which infrastructuring and greening can play in post-austerity post-industrial urban environments. The chapter suggests that green infrastructures are potentially particularly politically useful, in a city where people want to ‘see something in their neighbourhood happen or something in their life change for the better’ (Interview, Belfast City Council Climate Team, 17/01/2025), but both government and activists are increasingly unable to deliver the infrastructures needed to realise this sense of improvement. For those engaged in governmental programmes, it is possible to ‘deliver’ green infrastructures by making relatively limited changes to the streetscape, but by encouraging publics to ‘see’ the city’s existing infrastructures as ‘green.’ Meanwhile for activists, developing projects which aim to make non-human elements of urban territories infrastructural helps to keep actors engaged with their activist efforts, even when these activist movements fail to achieve their goals, as the relative instability of these elements of the urban environment require repeated care and attention.

To explore these dynamics, this chapter focusses in on two spaces/places which these projects have created – the Springfield Dam and the Gardín an Phobail. The chapter suggests that these places have implications which reach far beyond their literal geographical boundaries and into the city more broadly. This is perhaps more obvious in the case of the TBTC’s community gardens, which are part of a network of politically significant community gardens across Belfast. The TBTC have played a role in strengthening this network by providing those who are part of it with education regarding activist skills and knowledge, in the hope that it might be possible to strengthen a ‘movement of movements’, or a plurality of political communities, which are interlinked and working in a similar direction, yet qualitatively unique, thanks to their engagement in unique place-specific circumstances. In this sense, the TBTC’s gardens are animated by, and help to animate, an attempt to realise a normative ideal which is close to Iris Marion Young’s (1996) classic vision of ‘city life’, which ‘instantiates social relations of difference without exclusion’ and ‘takes account of and provides voice for the different groups that dwell together in the city without forming a community’ (Marion Young, [1990] 1996, p. 227).

More broadly, the city's community gardens have become demonstrations that plural political worlds already exist in the city, which go far beyond and can never be neatly fitted into a CNR/PUL/Other grid. They are, in other words, sites where a sense of political possibility is growing. But this sense of possibility is limited, particularly with regard to the possibility of trying to create a sustainable future in a climate-changing world; those engaged in these gardens do not believe that they can 'save the world', in spite of their attempts to use them as experimental sites in which new forms of climate politics might be developed. Instead, the gardens serve as sites for the creation of new worlds, or a world where many worlds fit; those in them are not gardening on the basis of ascription to a hegemonic view that sustainable cities can save the planet (Angelo and Wachsmuth, 2020), but on the basis that working towards the ideal of a sustainable plural city might help many urban worlds and forms of being to flourish. As set out in Chapter 4 then, these are not just spaces where actors are motivated by widespread, existing ideas, about what sustainable cities are and should achieve, and/or what climate change is and should be, but where the very meaning of sustainability and climate politics is being remade, through engagement with contemporary, place-specific forms of urban politics.

Meanwhile the FMCG is more squarely, and ultimately, focussed on the creation of community. But this is not a 'community of strangers' – i.e. a public – but an 'imagined community' (Anderson, [1983] 2006), which aligns with the imagined, plural, Northern Irish nation envisaged by the GFA. In effect this requires the creation of a kind of national territory, distinctive from the city's ethno-communal urban territories; this type of national territory is called 'shared space' on the basis that it is to be shared equally between the city's CNR, PUL, and 'Other' groups. But in describing particular areas of the city as 'shared', the project implies that the rest of the city is 'divided'; many in North and West Belfast feel that projects like the FMCG do not serve to actually 'unite' the city, so much as lock it into a particular ethno-territorial framework, which in turn is adjusted and reinstated with each round of international funding sweeping into and out of the city. As these funds from elsewhere make and remake life in the city, some have been left feeling that there is 'not an area of people's lives nowadays that isn't organised, run and planned elsewhere', meaning that those in the city feel no responsibility for the environment, as 'it has been taken away from them' (Interview, Lower Falls Community worker, 01/05/2024). Through the delivery of projects designed to help the city fit normative green, sustainable, democratic ideals, then, the reciprocal relationship between publics and the urban environment is being broken, leaving some feeling like they are subjects who can do little more than react to a climate-changing, urbanising world, rather than being active participants in the (re-)creation of new urban worlds.

6.3 Contributions

This thesis' core contributions align roughly, but not exactly, with the research questions and answers set out above. First, this thesis contributes to accounts of the relationship

between the Northern Irish Peace Process, climate change, and life in Belfast (sub-section 6.3.1). Second, it makes a more conceptual contribution to understandings of the politics of urban greening, in cities where governments and activists can no longer consistently deliver the kinds of infrastructures which promise to sustain the city (sub-section 6.3.2). Third, it contributes to more theoretical discussions, about the political relevance of the ideal of the sustainable city, on a climate-changing, urbanising planet, where the possibility of creating a sustainable future seems ever more distant, and traditional conceptualisations of the city appear ever more outdated (sub-section 6.3.3). Fourth, finally, this thesis also provides some more practical recommendations, which may be of use to those attempting to remake Belfast's politics today and encourage public engagement with climate change through the city (sub-section 6.3.4). These contributions are evidenced through the empirical material of the chapters, as summarised in the sections above; the high-level summaries below aim to clarify and make explicit these contributions.

6.3.1 Contribution 1: Climate Change, the Northern Irish Peace Process, and Urban Territory

The first contribution which this thesis makes is to the long line of literature which has explored the relationship between the Northern Irish Peace Process and Belfast. In some respects, this thesis picks up where De-Young's (2023) study of the 'Girdwood' barracks – delivered as part of PEACE 3 – leaves off; her final chapter mentions the FMCG, and the TBTC's struggle against it. But more conceptually, it is a thesis which deepens the sense that the particular vision of pluralism associated with the GFA does not fully reckon with the plurality of urban worlds in Belfast (Mitchell, 2011). This thesis builds upon these ideas by showing how climate change has come to become a part of the Peace Process, particularly through the reconfiguration of Belfast's urban territories. In doing so it argues that, through the Peace Process, climate change is being constituted as a problem of ethno-communal, territorial division. This makes the challenge governable through the institutions of the Peace Process, revivifying this governmental programme, but also ensuring that the particular 'strategic view' of Belfast which it has can be held in place. Meanwhile, critics of the Peace Process have also come to understand climate change as a problem which must be tackled by removing the city's ethno-communal territorial divisions. But for these critics, this can only be achieved through a more 'systemic' change, by fundamentally reconfiguring the rationale which underlies existing forms of ethno-communal, territorial forms of government. Specifically, for these actors, what is needed is greater recognition and accommodation of the other forms of territory and place-based needs which exist in the city, which are often related to but not solely defined by ethno-communal affiliation.

Demonstrating this is important because the relationship between climate change and Belfast's ethno-communal territorial politics is of increasing significance for

Belfast's policy development and politics (e.g. Belfast City Council, 2024). But it also provides an empirical contribution to what Elden (2019, p.19) describes as 'the most important and interesting work currently [being] done on the urban [which helps to] understand territory and [...] vice-versa.' The evidence in this thesis demonstrates that whilst those who are involved with the city's government understand the city and its territories as being largely flat, singular, imagined forms of space, those engaged with projects like the TBTC are more attendant to the city's 'multiterritoriality' (Rogério Haesbaert, 2013); here urban territories are neither stable nor flat, nor solely imagined nor material, but made and remade through the politics of urban life and urbanisation. The implication is that contests between groups like the TBTC and the Peace Process are not just over urban space in a literal, cartesian sense, but are more fundamentally about what this space is – and what its possibilities are – in the first place. This is a finding that chimes with the sense that 'Belfast's various aspects of transition are [not only] manifested and performed through conflicts over space but that they are structured around conflicting spatialities.' (O'Dowd and Komarova, 2013, p. 541). Others have demonstrated this with regard to transitions in the past, such as from industrialism to post-industrialism, and into post-austerity (Kelly, 2012). This thesis builds on and goes beyond these literatures, by demonstrating that it is also true for the transitions Belfast is undergoing as it reckons with climate change.

More specifically, this thesis also contributes to the existing literature which has looked at the role which 'greening' can play in the formation of publics in Belfast (Abdelmonem and McWhinney, 2015; Lang and Mell, 2020; Mell, 2019; Mell et al., 2022b). This thesis contributes to this literature by refusing to begin from the premise that the city is primarily defined by its 'post-conflict' nature and its ethno-communal territorial divisions. Instead this thesis has started from the premise that the city is 'ordinary' (Robinson, 2013), and 'multiple' (Farías, 2011); consequently this thesis has aimed to follow the inquiries of different actors involved with the city's politics, as they go about constituting the city, and coming to particular understandings of why it is problematic (Barnett and Bridge, 2016). Specifically, as set out in chapter 2, the thesis has developed and made use of an intra-city comparison (McFarlane et al., 2017), partly as a response to, and as a means of deeper engaging with, the city's political multiplicity.

Ultimately this thesis argues that the Peace Process foregrounds the city's ethno-territorial divisions and community politics, through its attempt to realise a particular normative vision of a plural city, structured around and through a PUL/CNR/Other political framework, mapped out across the city's territories. Meanwhile, those who are trying to realise more 'urban' forms of democracy, which place the problems created by urbanisation at their core, tend to emphasise the sense that the city is at once defined by new divisions and distinctions – such as those which run along socio-economic, gendered, or racial lines – which do not fit neatly into existing Northern Irish governmental frameworks or territorial divisions. The thesis thus demonstrates that evaluating forms of

urban greening in Belfast on the basis of their capacity to contribute to the creation of a public based around PUL/CNR/Other divisions – as existing studies of the politics of urban greening in the city tend to – is itself a political choice, which serves to support a normative vision of what ‘good’ publics are and should be.

6.3.2 Contribution 2: Post-Public Infrastructure, Green Infrastructural Democracy

The second contribution which this thesis makes is to understandings of the role which urban greening can play in keeping a sense of political possibility alive in contexts where both governmental programmes and activists are finding it increasingly difficult to deliver the infrastructures needed to sustain urban life. This thesis does so by attending to the cultural and/or aesthetic significance of practices of urban greening and infrastructuring; in doing so it joins a growing body of literature which is attending more closely to the relationship between the ‘cultural’ and ‘aesthetic’ dimensions of urban nature and its role in urban politics (Angelo, 2021; Anguelovski et al., 2018; Anguelovski and Connolly, 2024; Blok, 2013; Gandy, 2013; Haase et al., 2017; Holgersen and Malm, 2015; James, 2025; Laage-Thomsen and Blok, 2021; Lang and Rothenberg, 2017; Neidig et al., 2022; Pow, 2018; Rosol et al., 2017; Tozer et al., 2020; Wachsmuth and Angelo, 2018). More specifically, to think through the relationship between the symbolic and material facets of urban greening and infrastructuring, this thesis draws upon the Foucauldian concept of ‘heterotopia’ (Foucault, 1986; Hetherington, 1997), and in so doing contributes to understandings of the role which these ‘heterotopic’ spaces can play in creating and shaping forms of conflict and contestation, which play out when urban futures are embedded into the urban present (Edwards and Bulkeley, 2018; Gandy, 2012).

In doing so this thesis shows that green infrastructure projects can be delivered by making publics see the urban landscape anew, turning ‘grey’ elements of the urban into ‘green’ infrastructures. This makes it possible to deliver ‘new’ infrastructures, whilst only making minor changes to the streetscape. These projects also have a reputation for causing significant public conflict, because they cut across densely variegated urban landscapes; writing about a similar project to the FMCG in California, for example, Gray, p. (2026, p. 10) writes that while ‘internal community division is common in environmental conflicts, [...] such divisions are actively constituted and mobilized through procedural planning processes’ meaning that as ‘urban greening becomes a key strategy for climate mitigation and adaptation, projects framed as universally beneficial may still generate conflict—not necessarily because communities oppose environmental interventions, but because they hold different visions of what environmental care entails.’ (Gray, 2026, p. 11). There is, however, a potential utility in this, as it makes these particularly good projects for engaging publics with particular visions as to what a ‘good’, sustainable city should be, and what ‘good’ forms of urban publicity associated with this vision are. But it also means that these types of projects

tend to channel public monies towards consultants and public relations specialists, rather than towards materially remaking urban space for public benefit. The forums for public engagement which these consultants set up, in turn serve less as a means for engaging publics with the city its politics than as a means of channelling the energies of potential political actors into the sustenance of existing governmental assemblages.

In more theoretical terms, these findings chime with and go beyond Braun's (2014) sense that green infrastructures are forming part of a new 'urban dispositif', through which life is coming to be governed in a climate-changing world, which draws together the urban and the global whilst helping to prevent 'ruptures' in the smooth, liberal, 'eternal present' (Braun, 2014, p. 61). Alongside Foucauldian theory, Braun develops his argument, in part, from Gilles Deleuze's (1992) essay regarding a shift from societies of 'discipline' to those of 'control'; this shift is partly defined, Deleuze says, by a shift towards 'perpetual training' (Deleuze, 1992, p. 140) of publics, in an array of arenas which exist far beyond traditional sites of education like the school. The implication is that green infrastructure projects which are seemingly materially minor may be an increasingly important means by which publics are drawn into public engagement and education programmes, whereby they are taught to see and know the urban environment in particular ways.

But green infrastructures can also play an important role for groups like the TBTC, who are trying to take over responsibility for the provision for the creation of public infrastructures from existing governmental actors. As in other post-industrial and post-austerity contexts these more 'grassroots' forms of movement, treating 'green' elements of the landscape as 'infrastructural' serve to engage communities in the work of trying to re-create the city themselves, realising the kind of democratic future they aspire towards in the present (Apostolopoulou and Kotsila, 2022; Barron, 2017; Boyer, 2024; Safransky, 2023, 2017; Thompson, 2015). More specifically, spaces like community gardens help to bridge the gap between future aspirations, for community-led low-carbon future infrastructure projects, and the actuality of contemporary urban life; because these are infrastructures which are 'pre-broken' (Corsín Jiménez, 2014, p. 348), and display constant instability, and are constantly breaking down; conflicts here primarily play out on a 'material' plane, encouraging forms of 'material participation' in the remaking of the city (Deflorian, 2023; Marres, 2015; Schlosberg, 2020; Schlosberg and Craven, 2019).

These contrasting forms of 'green infrastructural democracy' are set out in Table 6.1. This table is based upon – but does not exactly match – the details of the two cases at the core of this thesis. In basic terms, the aim of setting out this typology is to provide a framework, which might be useful, and testable, in other contexts. But the table also makes a more specific urban contribution, to understandings of relationship between political tensions and conflicts, and climate (re-)politicisations; a relationship which recent scholarship has argued needs refined, in an increasingly conflictual, fragmenting

world (Blühdorn, 2021; Marquardt et al., 2025; Tobin et al., 2025). Specifically, this table corroborates and expands upon the sense that when it comes to understanding how climate change comes to be made political through cities, a neat ‘binary between “stability” and “politicisation” is overly simplistic’ (Tobin et al., 2025, p. 5). The ‘consultative’ form of green infrastructural democracy described here, for example, aspires to destabilise the connections which existing communities have to urban territories, in order to try and encourage connection *across* them, by encouraging acquiescence to a stable consistent vision of what the city is and should become. Meanwhile, the ‘compositional’ form of green infrastructural democracy described here aims to work with the tensions between elements of the city which are changing quickly and slowly; between the busy lives of urbanites and slow-growing oak trees; between those aiming to sustain and those looking to disrupt the political status quo; between the urgency of the housing crisis and the need to create stable, long-term living conditions for those who want to become a part of the city.

A key difference between these two different forms of green infrastructural democracy is how they aspire to engage with these different forms of tension and conflict; where consultative forms of green infrastructural democracy ultimately aspire to resolve the tension between the vision of the city brought by governmental programmes and the relationships which those living in the city have to the urban environment by breaking these relationships, compositional forms of democracy accept and work the conflicts and tensions of urban life, treating them as things which are not only produced by, but also productive of, the city’s political potential. It is from this difference that, ultimately, the two different forms of climate politics associated with these two different modes of green infrastructural democracy develop; where consultative forms of green infrastructural democracy aim to try and develop some form of control ‘over’ this issue through the urban, in order to try and resolve it, compositional forms of democracy are more focussed on trying to maintain a sense of possibility, that hitherto unknowable public potential remains in the city.

Table 6.1: Forms of Green Infrastructural Democracy

Forms of Green Infrastructural Democracy		
Characteristics	Consultative	Compositional
1. Origins	Created when those tasked with delivering new forms of public infrastructure re-categorise existing urban infrastructures as 'green.'	Created when communities aim to maximise the potential of non-human urban nature to act as infrastructure which sustains urban publics.
2. Significance of 'greenness'	Makes it possible to 'infrastructure' urban space without significant material change, by changing 'spatial imaginaries' through public engagement programmes.	Relative instability and vitality of non-human nature as compared to other elements of urban environment promotes relations of care, and repeated interaction.
3. Relationship with the future.	Teleological: try and draw the city towards particular vision of aspired-for future.	Experimental: multiple potential futures exist, realisable through present action.
4. Temporality	Aspires towards the delivery of projects as fast as possible, in order to demonstrate efficacy to the public.	Aims to keep open the conditions in which hitherto unknowable forms of public composition might be possible.
5. Form of Climate Politics	Solutionist: aims to try to create control 'over' this issue through the urban in order to 'resolve' it.	Possibilist: aims to encourage, and relies upon, a sense that multiple possible futures exist in the present.
6. Sources of conflicts.	Between the vision of the city being promoted, and already existing relationships between urban communities and territories.	Between actors which are stabilising and destabilising the contemporary urban environment.
7. Means of engaging with conflicts.	Aims to break the relationship which communities have to urban territories, in order to allow for connections across urban space.	Works with the tensions created by different rates of change in the urban environment, treating them as something produced by and productive of the city's political potential.
8. Form of engagement with city encouraged.	Connects urban professionals, consultants, public relations specialists, and financial flows to each other and to the city.	Encourages the (re-)establishment of relationships within, and between, communities and territories across the city.

6.3.3 Contribution 3: The City and Sustainable Futures

The third contribution which this thesis makes is to discussions about the ongoing political relevance of the city – and more specifically, the ideal of the sustainable city. As a wide number of urbanists have now argued, the ideal of the city is one which appears ever more outdated and distant in a time when urban worlds are increasingly diverse in form and urbanisation is increasingly planetary in scope (Angelo and Goh, 2021; Bathla et al., 2023; Merrifield, 2018). Meanwhile, the possibility of achieving some form of socio-ecological urban sustainability appears increasingly unlikely (Derickson, 2018; Hodson and Marvin, 2014; Long and Rice, 2021; Wakefield, 2022). And yet, as others have pointed out, some of the ‘thought structures’ associated with old, modernist ideals of the sustainable city endure (Angelo, 2021, 2017). More specifically, ‘the city’ remains the medium through which many around the world attempt to engage with the process of urbanisation, and its effects on urban life (Beveridge and Koch, 2023b; Davidson and Iveson, 2015a).

The thesis shows that movements that are struggling to claim a right to the city are important climate protagonists, not solely because of the types of infrastructures or political coalitions which they create (Cohen, 2018). These movements are also important because they are changing the very meaning of what climate action is, and who climate actors are, in ways which serve to diversify and democratise opportunities for engaging with this issue. In part, these types of movements achieve this because they both promote, and make use of, the city’s capacity to spur imagination; these are movements that are interested in what the city might be, both in the sense of what it might become in the future, and in the sense that there may be aspects of the city which exceed contemporary forms of urban representation and knowledge. Where this is of most relevance for climate action is with regard to the question of what it means to make cities more sustainable; these types of movements rely upon and encourage *responsibility* towards the urban, whilst their governmental counterparts are more concerned with delivering projects which demonstrate continued *relevance* to contemporary urban problems.

The evidence in the thesis demonstrates interesting points of resonance between movements aspiring to realise urban democracy and emerging ‘sustainable materialist’ (Schlosberg and Craven, 2019) movements, responding to climate change and democratic deficits by trying to materially reform the systems which underpin the reproduction of everyday life. Specifically, the cases in this thesis show that in their conceptualisations of democracy, movements aspiring towards urban democracy push not only beyond the boundaries between ‘green’ and ‘grey’ urban ecologies (Wachsmuth and Angelo, 2018), but also beyond distinctions between the human and non-human, and between past, present and future, which remain prevalent in ‘classical’ discussions of sustainability. But while Schlosberg and Craven (2019) argue that this is a change

which has been driven by the adoption of ‘new materialist’ philosophy in social-movements, in this case it is instead the adoption of place (or territory) based forms of traditional knowledge; as in other (post-)colonial contexts, where social movements are trying to move beyond the visions of pluralism embedded into existing systems of political representation, here the ‘modern’ ideal of the sustainable city has been reworked by bringing it into dialogue with forms of culture and knowledge which literally exist ‘in place’, or as part of territory (Escobar, 2018; Escobar et al., 2001). More broadly, this thesis argues that the aspiration for creating sustainable cities goes beyond hegemonic acceptance of a particular idea, spread by international development organisations, and following flows of capital, that ‘cities can save the planet [...]’ (Angelo and Wachsmuth, 2020). Instead, those engaged with this process have – again, in common with ‘sustainable materialist’ movements more broadly (Schlosberg and Craven, 2019) – a deep ‘humility’, regarding their aspirations. Rather than being motivated by a belief that creating sustainable cities will help to save the world, this is instead a form of action which is aiming to sustain the possibility of plural urban worlds by working towards the creation of a more sustainable city.

The evidence in this thesis shows that this aspiration is somewhat future focussed, given the focus on the city’s possibilities; this is where there is the closest alignment between the sense of responsibility engendered by these types of movements and classical understandings of sustainability. But this thesis makes clear that there is a retrospective element to this sense of responsibility too. Specifically, drawing upon a theorisation of the relationship between the urban and democracy developed from American Pragmatism (Barnett, 2014; Barnett and Bridge, 2013), and ‘streaming it’ together with other bodies of urban theory as called for by Purcell, p. (2017, p. 500), this thesis shows that urban democracy draws its energies from the ‘problematic situations’ which urban life throws up. In part this is because these movements are often built around those who are most deeply affected by the issues created by contemporary forms of urbanisation. But, as hypothesised by Barnett and Bridge (2013) these movements also help individuals to recognise their own situatedness against broader political conditions, by bringing their particular experiences into relation with others; damp on the walls of a social house *is* the housing crisis and, in addition, is an effect of past decisions taken without adequate consideration for future urban communities. These types of movements encourage responsiveness to the problems created by urbanisation but discourage straightforward reactions to them, by encouraging recognition that one’s life here and now is materially entangled, through the urban, with a broader public, stretching through space and time, whose lives must also be considered in present decision-making. By contrast, it is those who claim a whole, ‘strategic view’, who are most likely to deny their own entanglement in urban life, so shutting down opportunities for learning from the lessons which are literally, materially embedded, into the urban, best perceived not through the eyes and the brain, but the body and the heart too.

These findings support the argument, advanced by Beveridge and Koch (2022, 2023), that although urbanisation may be dissolving the actual, material city, it does not dissolve the city as an important democratic project. But it pushes against the sense that democratisation requires that we ‘see democracy like a city’ (Beveridge and Koch, 2023b) - one of a number of calls for new forms of urban ‘vision’ in order to deal with contemporary changing urban conditions and restore democratic possibilities (Amin and Thrift, 2017; Angelo, 2017; Magnusson, 2011). Instead, I suggest that movements for urban democracy are important because they both rely upon, and encourage more careful attendance to, the range of possibilities which are materially embedded in the urban fabric, which go far beyond existing forms of urban knowledge or representation. In so doing, these types of movements are changing the very meaning of urban climate action. Here climate action does not simply nor solely mean cutting emissions through things like reducing urban energy usage or planting more trees. Here climate action requires becoming more responsive to the many possible urban worlds which might exist in the city, and acting with reference to them, in order to open up opportunities for diverse forms of urban being.

This sense of possibility can be hard to remember, in a time when urbanisation appears to be increasingly dissolving many traditional urban political communities, and climate change is making it ever harder to perceive the possibility of a sustainable future. These shifting conditions often seem to narrow the imaginations of both urban practitioners and critical scholars too; the latter are sometimes inclined to shut down questions like ‘is planetary urbanisation the necessary telos and spatial limit of life in the Anthropocene? Is urban resilience the final form of urban responses to climate change?’ (Wakefield, 2022, p. 919). More broadly, in a time when the word ‘crisis’ is increasingly ubiquitous across urban worlds (McFarlane, 2025), it is frequently invoked as an ‘injunction to act’ (Angelo, 2025, p. 277) and attempt to resolve problems created by urbanisation, rather than as a prompt to think anew, about how to act differently as part of it.

Dewey, for one, considered the dichotomy between thought and action a false one. Movements fighting against various forms of urban crisis demonstrate this in practice, along with the falseness of the distinction between reckoning with urban today and tomorrow: past bad decisions are part of the city’s present just as actions today are always entangled with the city of the future, something which is best felt by being deeply embedded in the struggle to reckon with contemporary urban life and its many problems. But embedded in the city are unrealised dreams of better futures too, which stretch far beyond contemporary political discourse and imagination. Perhaps it is by helping us to actually *feel* the as yet unthinkable good and bad possibilities – and therefore responsibilities – which remain embedded in our contemporary world that the city, and those struggling to take it back, retain their most significant contemporary political relevance.

This is a sentiment to which I return in the conclusions of this chapter. But first, I provide some more practical recommendations, set out in the following section.

6.3.4 Contribution 4: Practical Recommendations

The final contribution which this thesis makes is a series of practical recommendations, which I hope are of use for those who are currently engaged in the task of remaking Belfast and its politics. These recommendations are set out below and are structured roughly around the key stakeholder groups with which I engaged throughout this thesis.

Municipal Government

- **To engender effective climate action in the city, focus less on project delivery.** Put differently, rather than reacting to funding flows, public pressures and new pieces of legislation, there is a need to reflect more carefully on how the actions of municipal government today are already affecting the future. There is a wide range of different policies and projects being delivered today by Belfast City Council which will lock the city in to high-carbon trajectories for decades to come, or which will require carbon-intensive forms of maintenance and repair in the future. If the city is to tackle climate change more effectively, it does not need more action, nor more projects, but instead more careful consideration of how and why the projects already being undertaken in the city today will affect those who are a part of it in the future. In more basic terms, this means dedicating more time, funding and energy to learning and reflecting on past projects, rather than creating new ones.
- **Recognise and accept that greenway projects (and similar forms of linear green infrastructure) cause public contestation and conflict.** This is frequently viewed as a negative feature of these projects, or sometimes as a ‘failure’ to deliver adequate public consultation and engagement. Instead, it is perhaps better off thought of as a key feature of these projects. By virtue of the fact that these projects cut through dense urban fabrics and across existing urban demarcations, these types of projects almost invariably stimulate public contestation and conflict. Accepting this means recognising that it is potentially useful; it is because these projects stimulate public interest that they can be particularly helpful for engaging publics in discussions about what it might mean to create a sustainable urban future, and/or tackle climate change through the city. Rather than trying to prevent these kinds of challenges, the city council needs to ensure that they provide opportunities for learning, both for the publics engaged, and for the council workers delivering these projects.

Peace Process Actors

- **Fund projects which support un-constituted communities.** Funding projects which are designed to support already-existing communities equitably serves to

support the existing political status quo, rather than helping to transform politics in ways which might further democratisation. Projects which aspire to benefit all communities in practice end up engaging almost no communities. When it comes to developing climate projects, more specifically, develop projects which provide support for communities on the political margins of the city, who are struggling to become a part of it. This will help to create projects which are appealing to a diversity of actors concerned with trying to engender more sustainable futures for the city, rather than those who are interested in maintaining the carbon-intensive status-quo.

- **Loosen deadlines.** One of the reasons that governmental actors feel a pressure to deliver projects – shutting down opportunities for the kinds of reflection which, as set out above, are important for creating sustainable urban futures – is because of tight deadline pressure. More broadly, tight deadlines make it challenging for actors to really learn from projects, making funding delivery more effective next time round. Those who are involved in trying to deliver projects in the city want to complete them; loosening deadlines would help to ensure that these types of projects are delivered *well* and provide long-term benefits for the city. At the moment, too many projects are rushed and left half-completed; this serves to frustrate those living in the city and means that these projects never realise their full potential.

Community Stakeholders

- **Question the integration of climate change and the peace process.** The integration of climate change and the peace process is as much a means of sustaining the peace process, as it is a means of trying to create a more sustainable future for Northern Ireland. Rather than accepting the idea that concerns about peace and climate-change fit seamlessly together, this connection must instead be interrogated on a case-by-case basis. The best way to do this is to begin with a question: ask those delivering these projects ‘how, exactly, is this a “peace” problem?’
- **Recognise that consultations usually transfer power from communities to governmental programmes.** Not only do these consultations often produce reports, which then provide justification for governmental programmes, they often erode the energy and capacity of community stakeholders to create their own political projects. Enter these types of consultations with the presumption that it is the consultants, not the consultees, who will be empowered by the interaction. Only engage with these types of consultations, therefore, if one wants to show support for the governmental programme in question.

Urban Activists

- **Develop new means of evaluating the climate impacts of your work.** Contemporary forms of urban activism are changing what it means to be a climate activist and/or to be engaged in climate politics. And yet, somewhat paradoxically, even as they change the meaning of climate politics, urban activists tend to evaluate their climate impacts upon outdated understandings of what climate change is, and what climate activism should be. To develop a better understanding of how and why urban activism is of significance for climate change requires leaning in to the sense that climate change is a ‘cultural’ issue, not merely a socio-technical one. By leaning into this idea, urban activists should be able to develop more effective means for understanding the climate relevance of their own work.
- **Make clear that you’re not just engaged in a struggle over urban space, but about what urban space is and can be.** Activist work makes clear that urban territory is something which is both created by and helps to create the city; here urban territory is something whose capacity to sustain urban life is shaped by and shapes the relationships which different political communities have with it. By contrast, Northern Irish government depends upon and creates an understanding of urban territory as something flat and map-like, carved up and shared out between different ethno-political stakeholders. Those who oppose activist work in the city try to confine urban politics to this flat, map-like understanding of urban territory; this makes it easier to fit activist struggles into the city’s ethno-political frameworks. Activists must therefore make clear that their work is about much more than claiming particular patches of urban territory but is instead about challenging understanding of what urban territory is, how it is created, and how it sustains particular forms of urban life.

6.4 Limitations and Paths for Further Research

This final section sets out some of the limitations of this thesis. Perhaps the most obvious limitation is empirical; it is a thesis which is closely focussed on a very particular area of Northwest Belfast (sub-section 6.4.1). But it also has substantive limitations, particularly regarding the many possible forms which contemporary climate politics can take (sub-section 6.4.2). In addition, by drawing on a range of different theoretical traditions, this thesis also has limitations, regarding the way which it makes use of and develops these scholarly tools (sub-section 6.4.3). However, each of these limitations also presents possibilities for further research, extending and deepening the lines of thinking set out herein. Consequently, each of the sub-sections below also sketches out possibilities for future research which builds upon and goes beyond the ideas set out here.

6.4.1 The Challenge of Comparison

This thesis is based around an ‘intra-city’ comparison which, as chapter 2 posited, was developed and used on the basis that it might help to shine a light on the dynamic of urban politics in a way that is sometimes missed by inter-city alternatives. This is especially the case, chapter 2 argues, in situations where the very question of what the city is – or what ‘residual category’ (Robinson, 2022) it might fit into – is under question, and/or being contested. But there are two central limitations to this method.

The first is that, of course, this thesis is geographically narrow in a literal sense; it’s focussed on contemporary Belfast, and actually only a relatively small portion of Belfast. If nothing else, this is a thesis which consequently runs the risk of falling into the trap of the kind of Eurocentric urbanism which chapter 2 is critical of. This thesis attempts to push against this kind of geographical ‘confinement’ by drawing upon a variety of different methodological tools, and through comparison via literature – literatures from North American post-industrial cities have proven particularly useful (e.g. Safransky, 2023), and Latin American literatures (some not translated into English), have proven to be an interesting point of inspiration, particularly regarding territory (e.g. Rogério Haesbaert, 2013). To some extent this kind of expansive comparison has been made easier by my refusal to begin from the foundational premise that Belfast could be neatly confined to the ‘residual’ category of a ‘divided’ and/or ‘post-conflict’ city. But, in other regards, this also made comparison more challenging; to some extent this thesis might have gained from more deliberate comparison with other cities frequently categorised as divided and/or post-conflict.

The second shortcoming of this comparative approach is that, to some extent, this thesis has leant upon this comparison in the hope that it will serve as its core generative ‘engine.’ However, there is, of course, no reason that a comparison between two cases *should* lead to interesting insights. Moreover, this kind of playing two cases against one another can lead to exaggeration of their differences – or points of overlap – rather than recognition that they are simply moving on different trajectories. Again, this is a challenge I have tried to reckon with through the writing of this thesis by pushing against the temptation to ‘bounce’ the cases off one another, or place them in some sort of hierarchy (I have tried to avoid the labels ‘top-down’ and ‘grassroots’, for example, as they contain a set of scalar presumptions which I don’t think fit well with the actual geography of these cases). Perhaps inevitably, however, if only for structural reasons (or attempts to retain clarity), the writing sometimes slips into this kind of dichotomisation.

One way of pushing beyond these limits would be to take the material in this thesis and make use of it in a wider comparison, between different urban territories, as Jennifer Robinson (2022) advocates for. One such comparison was suggested to me by a group of Loyalist activists one afternoon, when they invited me into the back room of a community centre off the Shankill Road to ‘explain myself.’ After they had become content with the

fact that I was only ‘looking information about the wee greenway’ they explained they’d become increasingly interested in ideas about Environmental Justice and wanted to know if they could learn from North American communities – such as those in Appalachia – about this concept (Field notes, 07/06/2024). I later discovered there is a cultural connection here too; the term ‘Hillbilly’ is one which was originally coined to describe Ulster-Scots communities who revered King Billy and lived in the hills. Those who are a part of the TBTC are also aware of this connection; one night in the city’s MAC theatre, I watched a keen member of Gardín an Phobail chart a history of trans-Atlantic solidarity between Ireland, West Africa, the Caribbean, and Appalachia, through the histories of traditional folk music, slave songs, and bluegrass (Field notes, 07/08/2025). Attending to the rhythms and melodies of these songs, he argued, one could ‘get beneath’ modern political histories, and feel more closely the forms of solidarity, resistance, and intercultural connection which exist between marginalised communities across the Atlantic Ocean. Engaging with this comparison would, perhaps, offer a means of attending to the possibility that the forms of embodied, cultural knowledges described as being so important in this concluding chapter, are not merely bedded in particular urban communities, but also extend across oceans too.

6.4.2 Locating Climate Change

As set out in the introductory chapter, this is a thesis backgrounded by the sense that there is a need to rethink how we study climate change, as its politics have become shaped by a constantly ‘diversifying and expanding set of sites and actors’ (Paterson et al., 2026, p. 60), turning it into a ‘condition’ of many facets of life and politics (Bulkeley, 2019), meaning much of climate change’s politics is ‘implicit’ (Paterson, 2021), and goes beyond domains formally ascribed as related to the climate. The thesis started from a sense that, as Bulkeley suggests, this emerging condition ‘creates new progressive possibilities for politics and action’ (Bulkeley, 2019, p. 16), and diversifies the sites through which climate change’s politics might be engaged with. To some extent this thesis has added to this project; if nothing else, there is no other scholar I am aware of who is systematically studying and writing about the way that Belfast’s ethno-communal divisions are related to climate change, even though it is something which scholars in the city reflect upon, and is something which has become a key part of urban political practices in the city. And yet, this thesis stays relatively close to what might be termed ‘typical’ domains for the study of urban climate politics; greenways and community gardens are hardly ‘novel’ sites for the study of climate change and are sites of climate politics which remain associated with the kind of environment-society dichotomy against which Bulkeley (2019) pushes.

Perhaps more fundamentally, as I progressed through my fieldwork, it became apparent that one of the most interesting questions which arises today in case studies like the FMCG and the TBTC is not ‘how and why do these projects engage with climate

change?’ but ‘how and why do they *not* engage with climate change?’ Answering a question like this – exploring climate change’s ‘absences’, for want of a better term – is something which I wish I had done more of, through the course of this thesis and the fieldwork which is associated with it. Locating an absence is perhaps harder than a presence. This is, however, one of the things which urban social movements often do very well; the absence of climate change in the City Council’s plans is one of the issues which the TBTC have drawn attention to, precisely by drawing attention to alternative political worlds and possibilities which exist in the city.

Building on the sentiment described at the conclusion of the preceding sub-section, one of the areas of ‘absence’ which it would be interesting to explore in Belfast today is the relative absence of climate-politics in the city’s Loyalist communities. This is an absence which is, perhaps, not surprising – like many white, working-class communities across the United Kingdom, this is a community which is not typically associated with progressive forms of climate action. But it is also, perhaps, precisely these kinds of presumptions – about who or what climate actors should be – which serve to exclude these communities from being engaged with the issue of climate change in the first place.

6.4.3 Patchwork Pragmatism

Finally, this is a thesis which, as set out in the introduction, is founded upon ‘Pragmatist’ ideas, about public formation and democracy (Lippmann, [1922] 2013, [1925] 2020; Dewey, [1927] 2016), as developed by a variety of urban theorists (Barnett, 2014; Barnett and Bridge, 2016, 2013; Farías, 2011; Lake, 2017), and science and technology scholars (Latour, 2005; Marres, 2015, 2007, 2005b). But this is a thesis which has used this Pragmatic theory pragmatically; it has selected from it in order to answer the questions at its core, and to illuminate the cases, rather than adhering rigidly to the details of Pragmatic (political) philosophy.

This is an approach which is deliberate; this is a thesis, as set out in the Chapter 1, which aims to treat Pragmatism as an ‘idea about ideas’ (Menand, 2011). To follow this ethos, Trevor Barnes argues, geographers should not use pragmatism ‘as if it were a machine for explanation, to feed through relevant geographical cases. Voila! Pragmatist geography.’ (Barnes, 2008, p. 1551). Instead, in common with more recent arguments for the continued utility of pragmatism in the social sciences, he argues that geographers should adopt it as an ethos for developing ideas in relationship with the world, as part of attempts to make it better (Barnes, 2008; Willis and Lake, 2023). More specifically, it is a thesis which takes inspiration from Mark Purcell’s (2017, p.500) sense that furthering democracy requires ‘streaming together’ pragmatism and different theories and approaches to democracy, in ways which are contextually appropriate, in order to achieve what he calls democracy’s ‘deep down delight’ (Purcell, 2017, 2013).

But this ‘patchwork’ approach to building a theoretical framework also has its limitations. In part, this is because this stitching together of theoretical approaches can serve to ‘warp’ them, twisting the intent or underlying ethos of the author, in order to better fit with the empirical narrative. But it also prevents the deepening of theoretical insights; this is not a thesis which has, for example, advanced a Pragmatic theory of urban democracy (nor though, must it be emphasised, was this ever the aim).

If I were to start this thesis over again, I would remain interested in making use of Pragmatism to shape my approach. But perhaps I would be more inclined to lean on ‘secondary’ approaches to pragmatism, which have attended more closely to the way in which this (political) philosophy is of use in (post)colonial contexts; Eddie Glaude’s *In Shade of Blue* (2007), which develops Dewey’s writings in an African American context, is an excellent example. More alluring still is the *Evolution of Pragmatism in India* (Stroud, 2023), which has started to explore the links between Pragmatism and the thinking of Bukanyo Ambedkar, who was Dewey’s student at Colombia in the 1920s. Ambedkar is sometimes remembered as Gandhi’s ‘Dalit’ counterpart, and for writing the Indian constitution. During the Indian struggle for independence, in his most famous work *Annihilation of Caste* (Ambedkar, [1936] 2013), Ambedkar outlined a cosmopolitan, urban vision of India, in contrast to Gandhi’s rural, Hindu, community-based ideal. Ambedkar drew on Dewey’s pragmatism to qualify his vision, arguing that any form of decolonial struggle which fails to reckon with the forms of division which lead to the creation of minority concerns is harmful, not just for the minority, but for the majority too. He used Northern Ireland as his prime illustration, noting that, for fear of becoming a minority in a Catholic-led Republic, the island’s Protestant minority fought for the island’s partition, in turn precipitating wave after wave of political self-destruction, both North and South of the new border (Ambedkar, [1936] 2013).

A similar eventuality, of course, resulted in India, and a particular sub-branch of critical theory known as ‘subaltern studies’ has developed, in order to reckon with the challenges of reckoning with the legacies of partition. For McFarlane (2024), this body of subaltern studies presents a potentially useful set of tools for developing both academic and political practices, which attend to the political possibilities of a fragmented, and fragmenting, urban world. Recent scholarship focussing on the challenges of realising sustainable futures in Indian cities have started to reckon with what it might mean to draw some of these ideas into dialogue with contemporary socio-ecological challenges (Reddy, 2021; Anantharaman, 2024). Perhaps there is the makings of an ambitious intellectual project here, which reads across American Pragmatism and Subaltern Studies, examining their potential points of resonance and dissonance when it comes to thinking about sustainable cities in fragmented urban worlds. But perhaps there is also a more practical project, which reckons with the possibilities and problems of drawing together urban knowledges and communities, not just between places like the Shankill Road and the hills of Appalachia, but between the Ballymurphy estate and the slums of

Bengaluru too. Perhaps, however, this is a project best explored not in the pages of a thesis, nor by digging through the pages of old texts, but by recognising that each of these places have their own, living, political traditions, which must be engaged with, in an embodied, experiential way, to be known and drawn upon. Perhaps then this is a project which is best started over a cup of tea in the back room of a Belfast community centre, or by turning a compost heap with some friends in the rain.

6.5 Conclusion: Not Giving up the Ghost

‘She remembered reading somewhere that even after people died, their hair and nails kept growing. Like starlight, traveling through the universe long after the stars themselves had died. Like cities. Fizzy, effervescent, simulating the illusion of life while the planet they had plundered died around them.

She thought of the city at night, of cities at night. Discarded constellations of old stars, fallen from the sky, rearranged on earth in patterns and pathways and towers.’

The Ministry of Utmost Happiness, Arundhati Roy (2017, p. 214)

Near the end of my fieldwork, I dropped up to the house of one of my contacts – ‘the Shankill historian’ – to return some historical documents. He was excited to see me. To explain why, he brought me round to his garage. On a big table he rolled out an 18th century map of North and West Belfast. Tracing his finger along the page, he told me he’d discovered that the United Irishmen had marched along the route of the FMCG, as they’d set out from Belfast on their ill-fated rebellion, in 1798.

But beneath his excitement at this discovery was a touch of frustration too. He’d been recruited by the FMCG team to provide information for the history panels associated with it, and he felt that if the project’s timelines had been more generous he would have been able to find and include this information – information, he pointed out, perfect for a project aspiring to create more democratic futures by bringing people together across sectarian divides. He laughed when I reminded him that the history panels and signs for the project had never actually been put up, because of a dispute in the city council about which language they should use. Rather than bring his discovery about the Irishmen to the city council then, the historian decided he’d bring it to a regular meet-up of ex-UUVF and IRA combatants, who have coffee once a week and discuss the city and its politics (Field notes, 21/02/2025).

As the opening paragraph of this thesis touches upon, the United Irishmen are often associated with the first substantive attempt to realise democracy on the island of Ireland. Today, they’re enjoying something of a comeback in Belfast, as people begin to look for alternative political histories which go beyond those associated with the

Troubles. But excavating the Irishmen from the ruins of the 19th and 20th centuries is a tricky task – Israeli historian Guy Beiner (2018) argues their history represents the archetypal form of ‘forgetful remembrance’, whereby a particular historical event is selectively repressed and revived in order to suit particular political agendas. Most obviously, as he explains, the rebellion was followed almost immediately by violent governmental repression. But the history of the Irishmen has also been used, in the intervening years, as justification for murderous campaigns by Irish Republicans, who have developed their own selective misremembering of this past (Stewart, 2001).

To get beyond these warped memories, sociologist Claire Mitchell (2022) argues that those who call Ulster home must try to feel what she calls the ‘ghost limb’ of histories, severed from the body politic through generations of political violence, but which remain embedded into communities, cultures, and places across the province. One might consider this a call for a kind of hauntology; a term coined by Jacques Derrida but remade and popularised in the United Kingdom by Mark Fisher, most famous for popularising the idea that contemporary neoliberal forms of capitalism lead to a form of ‘realism’ which shuts down the possibility of even imagining alternative forms of social and political organisation (Fisher, 2009). Fisher was particularly interested in popular culture and developed the term hauntology with reference to the gradual collapse of novelty in 21st century music, in favour of nostalgic forms which sample and remix genres and tracks from the past. Critiqued for his pessimism, Fisher instead maintained that his work focusses upon the possibilities which still exist in this new political and cultural juncture; for those interested in this reading of hauntology, the question is how to ‘find gaps in the seamless surfaces of “reality”’ (Colquhoun, 2022, p. xxii) by placing the dreams of futures past ‘once again in tension with one another, denaturalising our persistent retromania’ (Colquhoun, 2022, p. xxiv). Maybe the best example of what this might look like in contemporary Northern Ireland is the music of Kneecap. Their track ‘Parful’, for example – which tells the story of hedonistic solidarities in Belfast city centre nightclubs (Kneecap, 2024) – samples a piece of dialogue from a documentary about Belfast’s 1990s rave scene called ‘On Narrow ground’; a title borrowed from a pre-history of the Troubles written by Anthony Stewart ([1977] 1997), which he in turn developed from a piece of travel writing about Ulster from the 19th century. The weight of history here is inescapable. But it is also a resource which, once remixed and overdubbed, layered and looped, can be used to undermine the gravitas of that same history; Kneecap’s music is both loved and loathed in contemporary Belfast because it satirises the nostalgic political aspirations of everyone from the DUP to Dissident Republicans, demonstrating the space between these outdated political dreams and the realities of life in the city today, so mapping out the space where a new politics might be imagined and realised.

For Fisher ([2014] 2022) the end of the future really started with the roll-out of neoliberalism and gathered steam in the aftermath of the financial crash of 2008. As the introductory chapter of this thesis touches upon, for many of those who are interested in

liberal democracy, the financial crash marked the beginning of the end of this particular political form. More specifically, as popular political theorist Wendy Brown puts it, this crisis marked the beginning of the end of the idea that humanity has the capacity to 'secure its future' or to 'craft and sustain a world that is human, free, [and] sustainable' (Brown, 2017, p. 221). For those interested in the continuation of democracy this loss of optimism is itself cause for concern. John Dewey, for one, argues that democracy is the form of politics which most effectively rewards, but also requires, faith in the human capacity to (re-)create the worlds it is a part of for the better (Dewey, [1939] 2021); put differently, it both requires and rewards what Deweyan scholar Robert Westbrook (2005) calls 'democratic hope.' This is why, as the opening chapter of this thesis points out, Dewey was concerned about the fact that, in his time (as now), '[o]ptimism about democracy [lies] under a cloud' (Dewey, 2016). More specifically though, the ideal of a common future has lain at the core of hopes for a sustainable future since at least the publication of the Brundtland report (WCED, 1987), and has consequently gone on to become a central tenet of aspirations for tackling climate change through collective action.

But perhaps as this belief in a single common sustainable future comes apart, it might leave space for other democratic futures to emerge; a plurality of futures, long repressed or forgetfully remembered, but still haunting places, communities, and cultures around the world. If this is to happen, urban geographies might have a particularly important role to play. These are the geographies where past human dreams for better tomorrows are realised most frequently in material form – from the hopes of expectant parents-to-be as they paint the wall of a spare bedroom anew, to the vision of an architect encapsulated in the structure of a new municipal building. Cities are, consequently, particularly dense entanglements of these hopes and aspirations. But it is their unknowability which makes them *especially* good repositories for dreams and nightmares too; it is because one might encounter something which is genuinely unknowable around the next corner that city life is both alluring and alarming. Much like Kneecap's lyrics then – incomprehensible to all but the few who have an intimate knowledge of Ulster Irish, Belfast English, and West Belfast politics – the city retains its possibilities because something always eludes neat comprehension, definition, or classification.

As this thesis demonstrates, attempts to govern the city often aim to eliminate this unknowability, for fear of the futures it might bring with it. Rather than promoting more careful study of the city, however, attempts to govern it often aim instead to eliminate this unknowability, by forcing the city to become what those who govern believe it to be; in Belfast's case, a city which is divided into ethno-sectarian communities, locked into particular territories, always threatening to conflict with one another. Meanwhile, those who are interested in trying to develop more urban forms of democracy work with this unknowability; it is the political possibilities which it brings that make political action worthwhile. Recognising this unknowability requires imagination, as it requires

recognising that there are aspects of the city that extend far further than one's own experiences of it. But it also requires keeping different places, communities, and cultures alive, some of which might contain as yet unknown and unrealised possibilities for better tomorrows – ghosts, in other words, from unrealised political projects which continue to haunt the present.

As the promise of a 'common future' increasingly comes apart then, these ghosts from futures past may become increasingly important reminders that different futures still exist to the one currently described by ever-steepening global temperature graphs, ever-widening gulfs between the richest and the poorest, and ever-faster unravelling of the ecologies and infrastructures which hold life together. If this is the case, then creating sustainable and democratic cities is a project which is more important than ever. But not because doing so will save the planet, nor guarantee a common future. Instead, it is because sustaining any city requires sustaining many worlds, and many possible futures, whose political potential will remain forever unknowable.

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