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Crafting Territory and Negotiating Identity in Third Places in Belfast

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Abstract: I analyse how informal urban territories, particularly third places, are build and negotiated, and argue that access to good third places is an important component of spatial justice and the development and expression of identity. I use Belfast, which is a city in which territory negotiation and place identity have been intense and fraught for decades, as a contrast agent for understanding these issues more broadly. I conducted ethnographies of the built environment in Belfast in 2024, focusing on sectarian third places and on third places that are attempting to be nonsectarian. Based on these ethnographies, I analyse the material, social, geographic, and aesthetic structure of these spaces, and how they function as territory and for whom. I show that Belfast faces distinctive challenges in developing inclusive third places that support insiders' identities without being defined by antagonism toward outsiders.

Keywords: territory; third places; Belfast; sectarianism; aesthetics of place; place and identity

1: Introduction

Third places are neither our places of residence nor of work, but fluid shared spaces for informal socializing, community building, and playful conversation. They have insiders and outsiders, and they are concrete sites of place-based community and belonging for their insiders – our local bar, diner, or barbershop, or the corner park or alley where we hang out to converse, socialize, and play with others with whom we share a sense of a "we." In a third place, our identity is on display and shared with others—we get to "be ourselves" along with other selves who belong in the same place. Third places are lived *territories* for their insiders.

The ontology of territory is complex. While laws, treaties, and physical barriers may mark a place off as an official or jurisdictional territory, it is harder to spell out what makes a place a lived territory that functions as a site of belonging and shared ownership for a group of insiders. This is especially tricky in the case of third places, given that they characteristically do not have formal membership or entry requirements. The process by which a space becomes a third place, a living territory for people with specific social identities, is a subtle and unpredictable one.

Belfast is a city of contested territories, negotiated boundaries, and charged identities. Those of us over for-

ty or so remember when its violent conflicts over territory and identity dominated the news. The Good Friday Agreement of 1998 succeeded in stopping much of the dramatic sectarian violence in Northern Ireland, known as "the Troubles" to outsiders and "the Conflict" to locals. But while Belfast no longer experiences rampant sectarian violence,[1] it remains a city in which people are constantly and dramatically negotiating and defending territory, and it is spatially and socially structured by elaborate divisions and complex identities. Now that territory negotiation is no longer primarily a violent process, it takes alternative forms.

As a roving philosopher/geographer, I headed to Belfast in the spring of 2024, to figure out how its third spaces were territorialized. My goal was to use Belfast, with its history of division and conflict and its obsession with identity and territory, as a kind of a contrast agent with which to clarify my understanding of the nature of territorialized third places; how they get made, negotiated, and sustained; and their role as stages for relational and collective identities.

I conducted an *ethnography of the built environment* in various social spaces in Belfast. My structured observations were of the material spaces themselves. I attended to their location, architecture, aesthetics, and signage, as well as to who was inside and who wasn't, and how people moved around in them and used them. While I did converse naturally with people in the context of our joint use of these spaces, I did not conduct formal interviews. In order to understand the social structure of material spaces, interviews are not the best tool. People are not always aware of or able to articulate the social meaning or functioning of a space they frequent. Moreover, pulling them out of their use of a space to interview them is decontextualizing. Instead, I documented spaces themselves, as dynamic, material social entities.

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1 - Or at least not usually. Belfast turned violent for over a week in August of 2024 after the United Kingdom elections. This violence was directed against immigrants and was hence not technically sectarian, although it was loyalist Protestants, who are generally more anti-immigration, who attacked immigrants and their businesses and homes.

Before I turn to my findings, I explain why third places are theoretically important, and I explicate the current spatial, social, and aesthetic character of Belfast.

2: Third Places, Identity, and Spatial Agency

In 1989, Ray Oldenburg suggested that a full and flourishing life requires access to third places, not just to residences and workplaces (Oldenberg 1989).[2] When you to a new city, even if you have a place to live and a job, it is the lack of third places of your own that most makes you feel still not really a part of that city, not yet at home there. Third places are more than just comforting and pleasant. They are distinctive sites where we can develop and enjoy a kind of identity in community, a form of belonging that is neither domestic nor public and does not depend on formal institutional recognition. They are sites where our relational, embodied, emplaced identities can be developed, enacted, and displayed.

Not all spaces designed to be or marketed as third places succeed. Starbucks tries hard to market itself as a third place, but its faceless corporate character is overtly orchestrated; its surfaces are too slippery for any kind of place identity to develop and stick. Meanwhile, other third places emerge organically, in spots that were not designed to have any particular place identity. The sidewalk and handful of rickety chairs outside the mediocre Thai take-out restaurant on my residential street in Berlin has become a territorialized third place for local young Turkish men in the neighbourhood. You can tell this right away when you walk by: Not only do they congregate there, but their body language indicates the casual ownership and sociality that lets us know instantly that this bit of street *belongs to them*: their eyes face the street; their legs jut out over the sidewalk; their beers rest on the stone fence.[3]

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2 - Oldenburg himself was a reactionary misogynist, who thought that third places should be only for men engaging in vaguely erotically charged homosocial activities, safe from the restricting and emasculating influence of their wives. We can bracket ignore this unfortunate fact when making use of his notion and exploring its philosophical shape and social importance.

3 - An excellent ethnography of how bits of sidewalk become negotiated territory is Duneier 1999. Another good source on

Figure 1 Union Jack and Paramilitary Flag along with signage objecting to the Irish Sea Border in a Loyalist neighbourhood. Photo by author, 2024.

It is in the nature of third places that they are, in a sense, exclusionary. A place cannot have insiders without having outsiders; in order to be some people's territory, there must be other people whose territory it is not. This always risks being toxic, especially (but not only) in a context such as Belfast, in which identities are often defined in sharp and antagonistic opposition to one another. But there is a difference between a territory that celebrates and supports a specific insider identity and community, creating outsiders as a byproduct, and a turf, in which insiders define themselves partly via their desire to separate themselves from outsiders, out of fear, elitism, hatred, or resentment. Sometimes if you go into a third place as an outsider, you are welcomed as a guest, even though it's clearly not *your* space. Other third places make clear that they are not happy with explorers and intruders.

In a city such as Belfast, in which identities are often entrenched and oppositional, it is tricky to build healthy third places. This is especially so since they cannot be legislated or designed top-down into existence, but at best nurtured through clever and careful architecture, aesthetics, and management. As we will see, Belfast's material landscape, social norms, and history raise special challenges for the cultivation of good third places—challenges that cannot be solved simply through benign intentions or top-down planning.

3: The Paradox of Third Places in Belfast

Before I arrived in Belfast, my plan was to research how third places in the city marked themselves as sectarian spaces, designed to provide community to Republicans (overwhelmingly Catholics) or to Loyalists (overwhelmingly Protestants). I quickly realized that this research question was quite boring, because it was far too easy to answer. Sectarian areas in Belfast are extremely explicitly marked to make clear which sectarian "team" they are

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the transformation of pieces of street space into third places, which does a good job of looking at the role of body language, is Mehta 2014.

Figure 2 a, b Palestine solidarity in a Republican neighbourhood on an interface wall, and an Israeli flag and anti-immigration signage in the "Loyalist village." The bottom sign reads: "Attention Landlords/Housing Associations/N.I.H.E.: We have had enough of undesirables and immigrants being placed into our community. The time has come for locals only. The village community must come first. We will protect our families at all costs. This we promise!" Photos by author, 2024.

on, via flags, murals, memorials, graffiti, political signs, colour coding (green for Republican and orange for Loyalist—even the bongs in the head shop come in green or orange), specific fonts (loopy Celtic font in Republican areas and gothic old English font in Loyalist areas), Irish language signage or the lack of it,[4] sports team logos, and more. Loyalist neighbourhoods are festooned with Union Jacks, Ulster Crosses, and a variety of flags from competing paramilitary groups. Curbs are painted in red, white, and blue. Giant murals commemorate William of Orange and the British royal family and celebrate paramilitary sacrifices and missions. Memorial gardens document attacks by the IRA and mourn Protestant deaths. Republican areas display photos of hunger strikers and Blanketmen, and IRA graffiti is widespread. Irish tricolour and EU flags fly; the street and store signs are in both Irish and English; many things are green; and Irish symbols such as clovers and harps as well as Celtic designs are common. There are just as many memorials,

but these memorialize attacks by Loyalists and mourn Catholic deaths.

The political divide between the two sides is complex but bivalent. Loyalist areas support Brexit but object to the creation of an Irish sea border that cuts them off economically from the rest of the UK (Figure 1). Republican areas are anti-Brexit, and object to the creation of a land border that would cut them off culturally and economically from the Republic of Ireland. Even political signalling that seems orthogonal to the sectarian split is sharply aligned with one side or the other and absorbed into the primary binary identities. Republican neighbourhoods are festooned with Palestinian flags and queer and trans pride flags, as well as with graffiti supporting diversity and inclusion, such as Black Lives Matter graffiti, while Loyalist neighbourhoods are covered in Israel flags,[5] Scottish and Welsh flags (but almost

4 - Although a new law passed in the Fall of 2025 will expand Irish signage, including into neighbourhoods where it is not wanted.

5 - This was what I documented in 2024. Interestingly, when I returned to Belfast in 2025, the Israeli flags had been almost completely removed, although there were still no Palestinian flags in Loyalist areas, and no diminution of Palestinian flags in

Figure 3 Violent paramilitary mural in East Belfast. Photo by author, 2024.

never English flags), and anti-immigration graffiti (Figure 2 a, b).[6] The two kinds of neighbourhoods support different sports teams, wear different brands of clothing, listen to different music, and use different colour motifs. (Interestingly though, there is little overtly religious signalling on either side.) The political tone is also different. In Loyalist areas, murals are often violent and defensive, showing men in balaclavas with guns and emphasizing the right to violent self-defence (Figure 3). These neighbourhoods cultivate an aesthetics of resent-

ment, aggression, and insularity. In Republican areas, murals emphasize social justice and inclusion, and distance themselves from violence, often explicitly pushing back against the conflation of Irish nationalism and terrorism. All this signalling is especially intense along "interfaces"—the local word for seams dividing sectarian neighbourhoods from one another. Interface signalling makes the borders between territories easy to spot. For all these reasons, it is usually immediately obvious which kind of neighbourhood one is in.

The territorial identity of third places such as bars is normally clear from their location. They are also typically clearly marked using the same signalling as the rest of the neighbourhood (Figure 4 a, b). Additionally, they are differentiated by what brands and colours of clothing people are wearing, what game is on the television, and more. Republican bars often play Irish music, including

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Republican areas.

6 - Many locals claimed to me that while the activist and organizing ties between the Irish Republican Army and the Palestine Liberation Organization are real and longstanding, and Irish-Palestinian solidarity is based on a meaningful history, the Loyalist support for Israel is quite shallow and opportunistic, based in contrarianism more than any knowledgeable political alliance.

Figure 4 a, b The Rock, a Republican bar in the Catholic neighbourhood of The Falls Road, and The Royal, a Loyalist bar in the Protestant neighbourhood of Sandy Row. Photos by author, 2024.
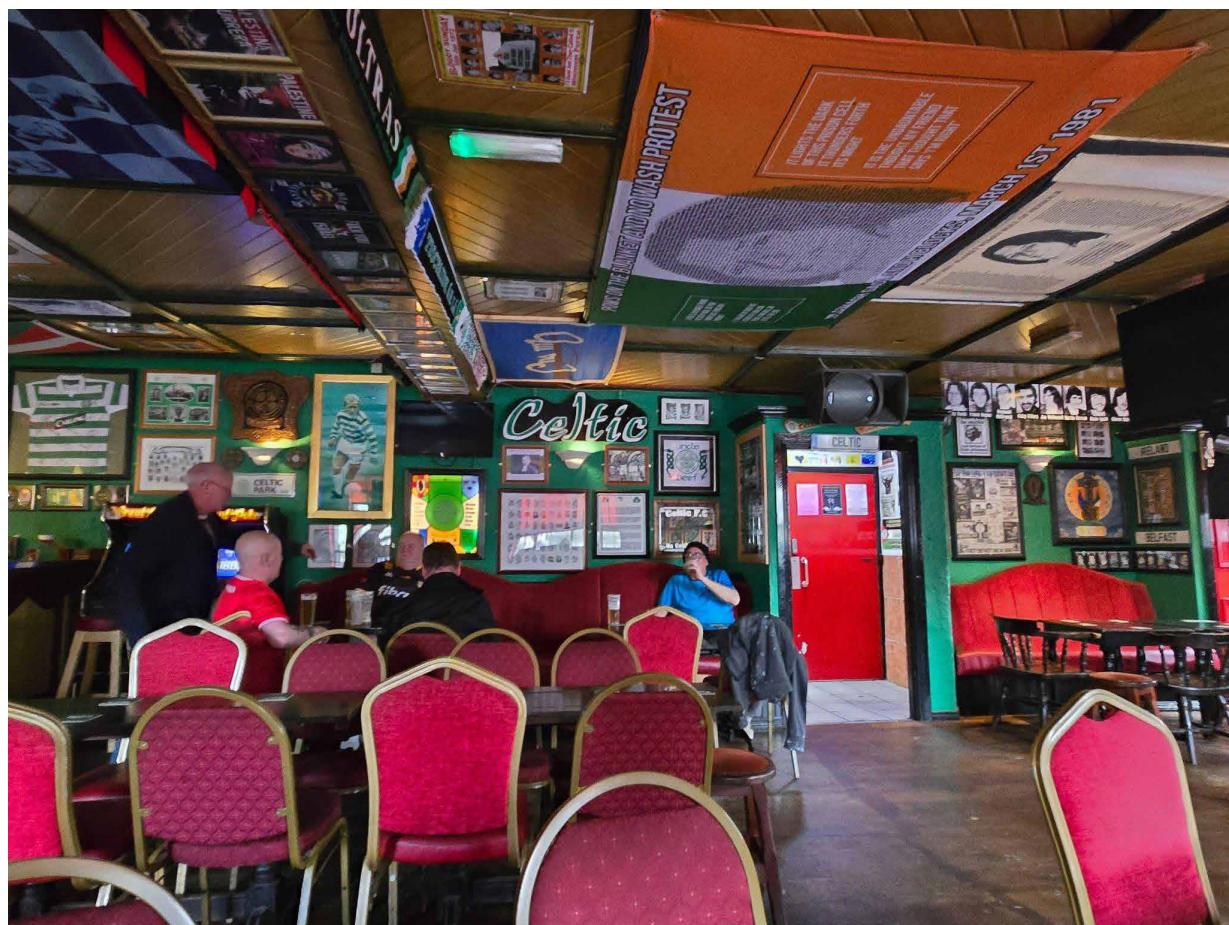
Figure 5 Interior of The Red Devil on the Falls Road. Photos by author, 2024.

IRA freedom ballads. Loyalist bars lean towards 80s and 90s British pop music.

Red Devil is a bar in the Republican stronghold of The Falls Road, an area that notoriously experienced violence and oppression during the Conflict and incubated many Republican activists and IRA members. The outside of The Red Devil uses Celtic font and Irish language signage as well as an array of flags to signal whose territory it is. The green walls and ceiling inside are festooned with memorials to hunger strikers and other pro-IRA political messaging, including a banner reading "Wanting freedom for Ireland doesn't make you a terrorist" (Figure 5). The Rex Bar is a Loyalist bar, only a kilometre and a half away but on the other side of the largest conflict wall, the Orwellianly named "Peace Wall," which serves as a barrier between the Republican

Falls Road neighbourhood ("The Falls") and the Loyalist Shankill neighbourhood in West Belfast. The Rex has an array of Union Jacks out front, as well as a World War I memorial, which is a Loyalist signifier (Figure 6). One Google review reads, in typically indirect Belfast fashion, "A pub that, like many in Belfast, has a particular clientele. Nothing wrong in that, however to enjoy the pub, ensure that you are fully aware." The inside is spare, but a picture of Queen Elizabeth and a Union Jack sit on a shelf behind the bar.

Both bars clearly function as territorialized third spaces for their clientele, which mostly consists of older men who have drunk together for decades. Customers greet one another by name and banter with the bartender in both. In The Rex, I watched the whole bar playfully try to have a conversation using only the word "fuck" and its

Figure 6 Exterior of The Rex on the Shankill Road. Photo by author, 2024.

cognates. At The Red Devil, customers float in and out, smoking out front and re-entering, sometimes wandering behind the bar to change the music.

In both bars, I was immediately clocked as an outsider and received curiosity about who I was and what I was doing there. At The Red Devil, the curiosity was friendly. People wanted to feel out my knowledge of and stance on Irish politics, but they were eager to chat and wanted to know about my research. At Rex Bar, I did not encounter hostility exactly, but one older male customer loudly and pointedly informed me unprompted that the people at the bar were "good people who wouldn't make any trouble" for me. He noticeably bristled when I mentioned that Queen's University was sponsoring my research and made a quip about my being "fancy." Queen's is a nonsectarian university, but it is associated with elite

education and wealth, as well as progressivism, all of which are coded as Republican by working-class Loyalist communities c and treated with suspicion. At The Rex I took only a few photos, because I learned quickly that Loyalists don't like feeling under surveillance. In contrast, at The Red Devil, people wanted selfies with me. I was a welcome outsider in Red Devil and a suspicious outsider in The Rex, but in both there was no ambiguity that this was not my territory. All this was anthropologically fascinating but not subtle.

I figured out that a much more interesting research question to ask in Belfast was how a space could manage to mark itself as a third place for a specific community *other* than along sectarian lines. Binary sectarian identities in Belfast are pervasive and swallow other identities. For example, being openly queer is coded Re-

publican. Being politically conservative is coded Loyalist. People of colour, immigrants, Muslims, Jews, and others whose identities cannot be integrated into one side or the other are difficult to see or discuss.[7] Given all this, how can a third place support a different, less antagonistic identity? This problem is especially thorny, because inclusion and diversity are already marked as Republican values, so places with signalling that explicitly promotes inclusion will be read as Republican spaces.

Many Belfastians are interested in creating what they call "shared spaces," which are by definition open to and used by "both sides." "Shared space" in Belfast *means* space containing both Catholics and Protestants. There is no pretence that the term refers to other kinds of sharing, such as that between different races, or ages, or genders; it is presumed that the relevant spatial split is the sectarian one. Because the two sides are hostile to each other's identities and symbols, and because these identities and symbols are so totalizing, "shared spaces" are almost always created by making *neutral* spaces that are cleansed of any identity or signalling of any kind. But neutral spaces are not third places. They are not territories; they have no insiders and outsiders; and they support no particular identity or community. They are everyone's by being no one's in particular. There is also some discussion in Belfast of "plural spaces," which would be spaces used by both Catholics and Protestants while displaying their respective identities.[8] But there are no plural spaces in Belfast that I could fine. I never saw Republican and Loyalist signalling in the same space. Plural spaces function only as an ideal, and the practical focus is on creating shared spaces.

A distinctive feature of identity in Belfast that emphasizes and deepens sectarian divides is what some call its "double minority" structure. Protestants experience themselves as minorities on the island of Ireland. Catholics experience themselves as minorities within the United Kingdom. As Feargal Cochrane points out, "The partition of Ireland in 1921 led to a numerically dominant but hugely insecure unionist community and a marginalized, frustrated, and angry nationalist community" (2023, 15). Loyalists have in some sense "won," given that Northern Ireland is in fact part of the U.K., but they have "lost" in that they are less educated, poorer, and left out of the culture of Ireland that surrounds them. In Belfast, virtually everyone identifies with a place that is not where they are and that does not care about them.[9] Almost all Belfastians, when asked what their national identity is, say either "Irish" or "British," with very few listing "Northern Irish" (although this label is more popular with younger people), and there is no significant movement for Northern Irish independence.[10]

Residents over the age of forty or so have vivid memories of violence, loss, and risk. One has the strong sense in Belfast that PTSD is a widespread public health problem.[11] The standard generational cuts are especially salient in Belfast. Boomers (born 1946-1964) lived most

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7 - Belfast is over 90% white and almost 90% Christian, so these other groups are small. There are small Asian and African immigrant communities, and a few thousand asylum seekers. Third places specifically for immigrant or non-white communities are few, and unfortunately when they do exist, they are treated with racist suspicion. This was tragically vivid when many of them were attacked during the anti-immigration riots of August 2024.

8 - For an interesting analysis of plural space, identity, and territory in Belfast, see Bryan 2015.

9 - Even the main sports fan investment is in Scottish football teams, the Rangers and the Celtics, who are mostly oblivious to their Northern Irish fan base. This too splits along directly sectarian lines: Rangers fans are Loyalist and Celtics fans are Republican.

10 - Yet neither the Republic of Ireland nor Westminster have shown much interest in supporting Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland–the only country without its own flag, because any flag would be too divisive–is effectively disenfranchised in the U.K. parliament in virtue of the fact that it has its own political parties, which of mathematical necessity will never have enough seats to hold power in Westminster. This in turn means politicians from the major U.K. parties have no incentive to protect Northern Irish interests. This was vivid during Brexit, when Britain gave no serious attention to the problem of how to keep Northern Ireland from being culturally and economically stranded.

11 - Calame, et al (2012, 79) argue for this, citing widespread nightmares, obsessive survivor guilt, and more among residents who are Millennials or older. The local band Kneecap, which has seen a meteoric rise since 2023, makes the case through their lyrics and interviews that younger Belfastians suffer from serious intergenerational trauma, even though their experience of the conflict was not direct.

of their lives during the Conflict. Generation X (born 1965-1983) were children during that era, whose parents were out fighting and who grew up taking elaborate safety measures. They had the distinctive challenge of adapting abruptly to a new reality in which "everything was fine" as they entered adulthood. The older generations are most likely to keep to their own territories. Sectarian bars tend to have an older, working-class, and predominantly male clientele.

Millennials (born 1984-1997) may have only dim childhood memories of the conflict but grew up in its shadow. Many left for university and returned with a more "cosmopolitan" perspective. They seem the most invested in stifling signs of sectarian identities or origins, keeping their visual signalling and their conversation pointedly far away from anything that would give away their "side." I met millennials who were fighting for an inclusive Belfast, who bragged to me that they had close friends they had known for decades whose last names, home neighbourhoods, bus routes, and family origins they did not know. This is an odd idea of intimacy to outsiders, but Millennial culture in Belfast is constructed around keeping things friendly and inclusive by suppressing any hints of identities or views that might be divisive.

Generation Z and younger people, sometimes labelled the "peace generation" because they were born after the Good Friday agreement, experience a mixture of second generational trauma and impatience with what they experience as the stifling and anachronistic character of sectarianism. They are more comfortable talking about the division and openly fighting or mocking it. Yet Protestant and Catholic children are still colour coded with different school uniforms, and they go to and from school at different times. Children are still inducted into norms about which colours they can wear where, which sports teams to root for and when not to mention them, which neighbourhoods to avoid, and so forth.[12]

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12 - There are social punishments for violating these rules. For instance, Dom Bryan, a local kids' football coach (who is also an anthropologist specializing in sectarianism) explained to me that coaching in Belfast involved constant managing of sectarian tensions and training kids in how to avoid igniting them.

With its history of antagonistic identities, how can Belfast craft positive, affirming third places that are not sectarian? Where could they be located? What sort of creative aesthetic devices could invite in people from both sides into a space and give them a sense of territorial ownership over it? I set out to answer these questions, which turned out to require understanding more about the spatial structure of Belfast and how it is shaped by and enforces sectarianism.

4: The Spatial Structure of Belfast

Belfast remains a materially divided city. The interfaces are well-marked and hard to cross. Ninety-nine "conflict" walls still divide Catholic from Protestant neighbourhoods. These are no mere relics; they are still being built. They are often high and topped with barbed wire, and locked at night, with new security cameras and floodlights still being added (Figure 7 a, b). Residents resist proposals to remove them. Highways and industrial zones are used as informal but effective and widely recognized dividers at interfaces. Some of these are obvious sectarian borders, like the Westlink highway, impassible by foot, built in the early 1960s to stem violence, lined on one side with Union Jacks, Ulster Crosses, and paramilitary flags, and on the other with Irish tricolour flags, Palestinian flags, and IRA memorials. Other interface dividers are subtler, such as bridges and tracks that locals know not to cross. Jon Calame and his coauthors (2012) point out that areas near interfaces in Belfast are uncomfortable to live in and function as "stigmatized space," used for low-value purposes such as factories and warehouses, which in turn make it harder to cross between neighbourhoods.

Belfast is formally divided into five districts. The majority of East Belfast is Loyalist and Protestant, and the majority of West Belfast is Republican and Catholic, although there exists a fortified enclave of the opposite side in each region (Short Strand and The Shankill respectively). North Belfast is a patchwork of sectarian neighbourhoods with a chaotic array of interfaces and barriers; in North Belfast one often sees competing schools or medical clinics, designed to serve different

Figure 7 a, b Interface wall in West Belfast between The Shankill, a Protestant/Loyalist neighbour-hood, and The Falls, a Catholic/Republican neighbourhood, and one of the gates through the wall that is locked at night. Photos by Eli Kukla-Manning, 2024.

Figure 8 Sectarian wall dividing Alexandra Park in North Belfast, from the Catholic side. Photo by author, 2024.

communities, on opposite sides of an interface street.[13] North Belfast is so micro-divided that, for example, its Alexandra Park is split down the centre with a wall, with separate playgrounds and toilets for Protestants in the upper half and Catholics in the lower half (Figure 8). A sign in Alexandra Park solicits community input on making the park more "inclusive," but residents consistently ask to keep the wall up.

South Belfast, where Queen's University lies, is the wealthiest sector. Sectarian divisions are primarily working-class divisions (Calame, et al 2012, 216). Educated and wealthy Belfastians often treat sectarianism as uncouth or beneath them. Moreover, younger residents who were not around before the peace agreement are less invested in the divide. For both reasons, South Belfast is a bit of a haven from sectarianism, although there are some patches of it, including the intensely Loyalist, paramilitary-run Sandy Row.[14]

Belfast City Centre is the shopping, business, and entertainment district. There are empty apartments with huge, beautiful windows over most of the storefronts, but this region has almost no residents (and many of the commercial spaces are also empty). The centre is designed to be a shared space that all Belfastians can dip into for a day of shopping or a night out in restaurants, bars, or clubs. These spaces in the centre are, by design, no one's home territory. This district is kept scrupulously "neutral," and scrubbed of any political or sectarian signalling. Football jerseys, sectarian clothing, Irish lan-

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13 - In Belfast as in most divided cities, much infrastructure, such as pools, medical clinics, real estate agencies, and schools, has to be inefficiently and expensively doubled, because people from opposing communities do not feel comfortable sharing services and often cannot easily reach one another's neighbourhoods (Lang and Mell 2020).

14 - Sandy Row was the original site of the Loyalist-based racist anti-immigration riots that broke out in August 2024.

guage signage, and flags are forbidden, sometimes formally (as in nightclubs and bars) and sometimes informally. Even City Hall has only an empty flagpole.

These spaces in the centre are difficult to turn into third places. They are not marked as the territory of any particular group; they are not in anyone's home neighbourhood; and since people coming into these neutral spaces are, for the most part, either Catholic or Protestant, people cannot freely converse or have their identities on display in them. Indeed, working class Belfastians with sectarian identities sometimes experience them as elitist, unsafe, and stressful due to the self-monitoring required.

Mobility in the city is shaped and constrained by sectarianism. All the buses in the city radiate out from the centre. The system is designed so that bus lines do not cross through opposing communities. Thus, the different sectors of the city are not conveniently accessible to one another but instead require an indirect trip into the city centre and back out again. This helps enforce the divisions between the neighbourhoods, as do the literal physical dividers that make passing between competing sectarian neighbourhoods by foot or bicycle difficult.

The large-scale landscape of the city also marks sectarian divides. Belfast is organized around the giant iconic yellow Harland and Wolff shipbuilding cranes, where the Titanic was built. These cranes give dramatic visual

Figure 9 The Harland and Wolff shipbuilding cranes in the harbour, visible from an East Belfast Loyalist neighbourhood with multiple vacancies. Photo by author, 2024.

focus to the cityscape. They are generally visible from Protestant neighbourhoods but not Catholic neighbourhoods. This is no accident. There was discrimination against Catholics during the shipbuilding era, so skilled workers in the shipbuilding industry who could afford to live near the harbour were overwhelmingly Protestant. The yellow cranes give Loyalists a visual tie to an historical Belfast narrative and shape their sense of territory. There are clear streetscape differences between the neighbourhoods as well. The landscape of Loyalist areas, which are typically poorer, is often disorienting landscape, with empty homes, derelict vacant lots that were never rebuilt after bombing, and closed storefronts (Figure 9).

Paramilitary presence in Belfast is still pervasive, although in general the paramilitary groups have been transformed into drug and crime circles, with enormous influence on local economics, politics, policing, and terri-

torial divisions of the streets. Within Loyalist neighbourhoods, paramilitary factions such as the UDA (Ulster Defence Association), UVF (Ulster Volunteer Force), and others, all of which are illegal, defend their turf against one another and not just against Republicans. One can tell which paramilitary territory one is in, not just by flags and signage but also by which kind of British signalling is on display. For example, UVF areas use World War I signalling (significant battle dates, poppies, etc.), while UDA areas identify as British but reject anything associated with the British Army. (Thus, it is visually clear that the Rex Bar is not just Loyalist but UVF territory.) On the other side, there are divisions between the Real IRA, the Provisional IRA, the Irish National Liberation Army, Saoradh, and so forth. There are mini-interfaces between paramilitary group territories, many marked by graffiti and makeshift fences or vacant lots rather than more formal dividing infrastructure.
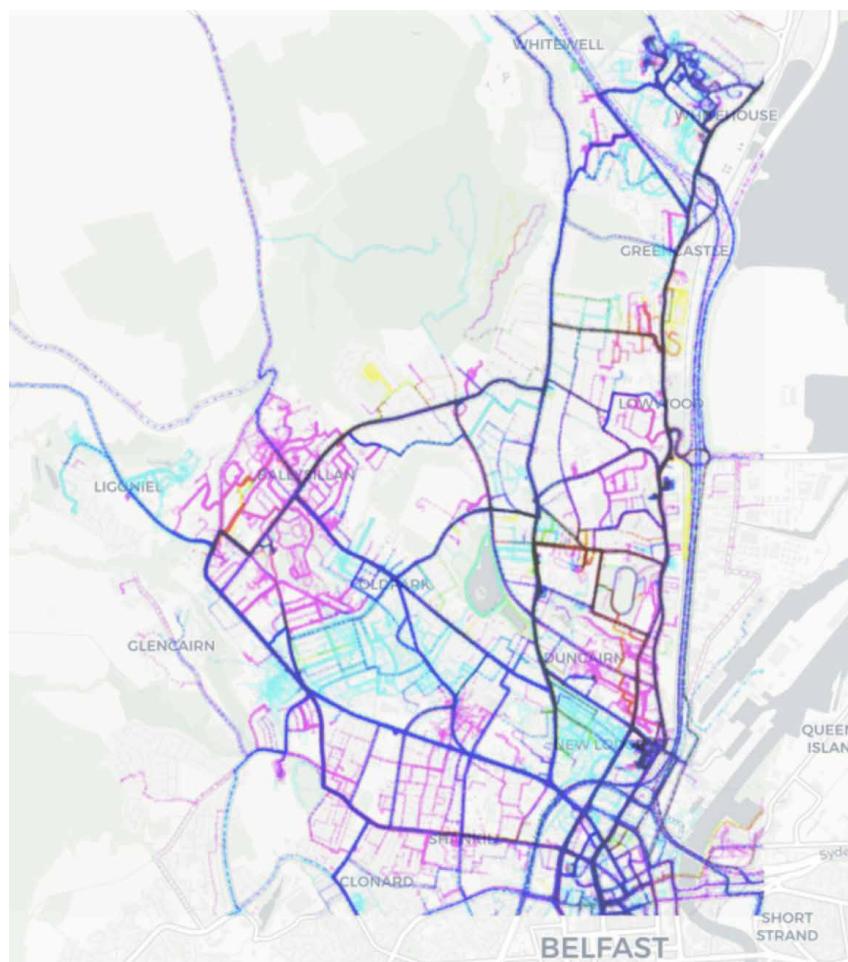

Figure 10 Paths of Catholics (pink), Protestants (blue), and other (yellow) through North Belfast. From the Belfast Mobility Project, https://belfast-mobilityproject.org/gps.html, 2018.

All these divisions structure people's paths through the city. The Belfast Mobility project has used GIS mapping to track the paths of North Belfast residents, and their maps show how Catholics and Protestants move very differently through the district (Figure 10). Catholics and Protestants in Belfast no longer face much overt violence, but they still feel safer and more comfortable when they have a clear sense of their territory and its boundaries. Partly because there are no detectable physical differences between members of opposing sects in Belfast, residents need clear signalling and barriers to mark their territories.

In artificially divided cities such as Berlin and Johannesburg, physical barriers forced the separation of formerly mixed populations. But in Belfast, walls and other dividers emerge to provide security to neighbourhoods that are already separate and in conflict. Yet such dividers also contribute to feelings of danger, difference, and separation between communities. In fact, working class areas of Belfast are more homogeneous and divided now than they were at the start of the Conflict. Unlike the Berlin Wall, conflict walls in Belfast are circumnavigable in a pinch, although this may be extremely inconvenient, so they are not literally stopping anyone with nefarious intentions from crossing territories. But they do make it clear to people where they do and do not belong. They create feelings of safety and fear simultaneously. As Calame, et al put it, "In many cases, these partitions also postpone or even preclude a negotiated settlement between ethnic antagonists because they create a climate of dampened violence, sustained distrust, and low-grade hostility...If there were no actual danger, the logic goes, the walls would no longer be standing" (2012, 5).

Much of the landscape of Belfast is one of memorialization. Memorial gardens and murals cover the city. Several neighbourhood organizations are systematically replacing violent, aggressive murals with approved memorial murals, supposedly designed to commemorate the past rather than sow conflict in the present. But arguably, this memorialization freezes local identities and neighbourhood meanings in place rather than letting them evolve and heal and keeps memories of harm alive. Meanwhile, the tourist industry profits from maintaining gory memorials, aggressive murals, and other markers of violent division that create a comprehensible and dramatic narrative spectacle for outsiders. Feargal Cochrane argues that "dark tourism," organized around presenting a narrative of conflict and tragedy that compels tourists, dominates in Belfast, commodifying "the Troubles" and the suffering of the city. Cochrane argues that this kind of dark tourism commodifies vulnerable residents themselves, sustaining tensions and conflicts in their neighbourhoods for marketing purposes.

Meanwhile, the policies and political structure of Northern Ireland sustain its binary, divided identities. Large employers are required to ask whether applicants are Republican or Loyalist, for "balance," but the effect is to interpellate each employee into a binary "side." The First Minister and Deputy First Minister in parliament must be from opposite "sides," which ensures "balance" but also means that no politician or party who does not identify with a "side" can even in principle be in a primary position of power. Thus, the physical, political, economic, and aesthetic landscape of the city collude to maintain sectarian turfs and identities.

5: Building Nonsectarian Third Places

Despite the challenges I have described, there are a few places in Belfast that work hard to be shared third places, using aesthetics and setting to cultivate a specific kind of aesthetic territory, and they do so in interestingly different ways.

a: Voodoo

In the city centre, some clubs and bars cultivate a clientele unmarked by sectarianism by focusing on a specific subculture that has not been swallowed by one side or the other, allowing for another axis of identity. Voodoo, for instance, is a hangout for punks, goths, and metalheads, as is clear from its colour scheme, decorations, and music, as well as from the fashions of the customers.[15] Unlike most places in the centre, Voodoo

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15 - Punk has long been a sectarian unifier in Belfast. Several historically influential local punk bands, including *Sticky Little Fingers* and *The Undertones*, had members from both sides and spoke out against the division.

Figure 11 Territory claiming at Voodoo, a punk, goth, and metal bar in Central Belfast. Photo by author, 2024.

has a third place feel to it, partly because of the body language and space occupation habits of the regulars, who spill out of the bar and hang out in the alley outside, creating a definite territory (Figure 11). Although Voodoo does have a pride flag on the outside, the inside is, unlike most punk venues, eerily politically neutral. Voodoo feels somewhat like a third place, because it has a definite "insider" group who is clearly in their element there. But like other spots in the centre, it is no one's daily hangout spot, because no one lives nearby. Rather, people make the trip for specific shows or for a special night out on the town.
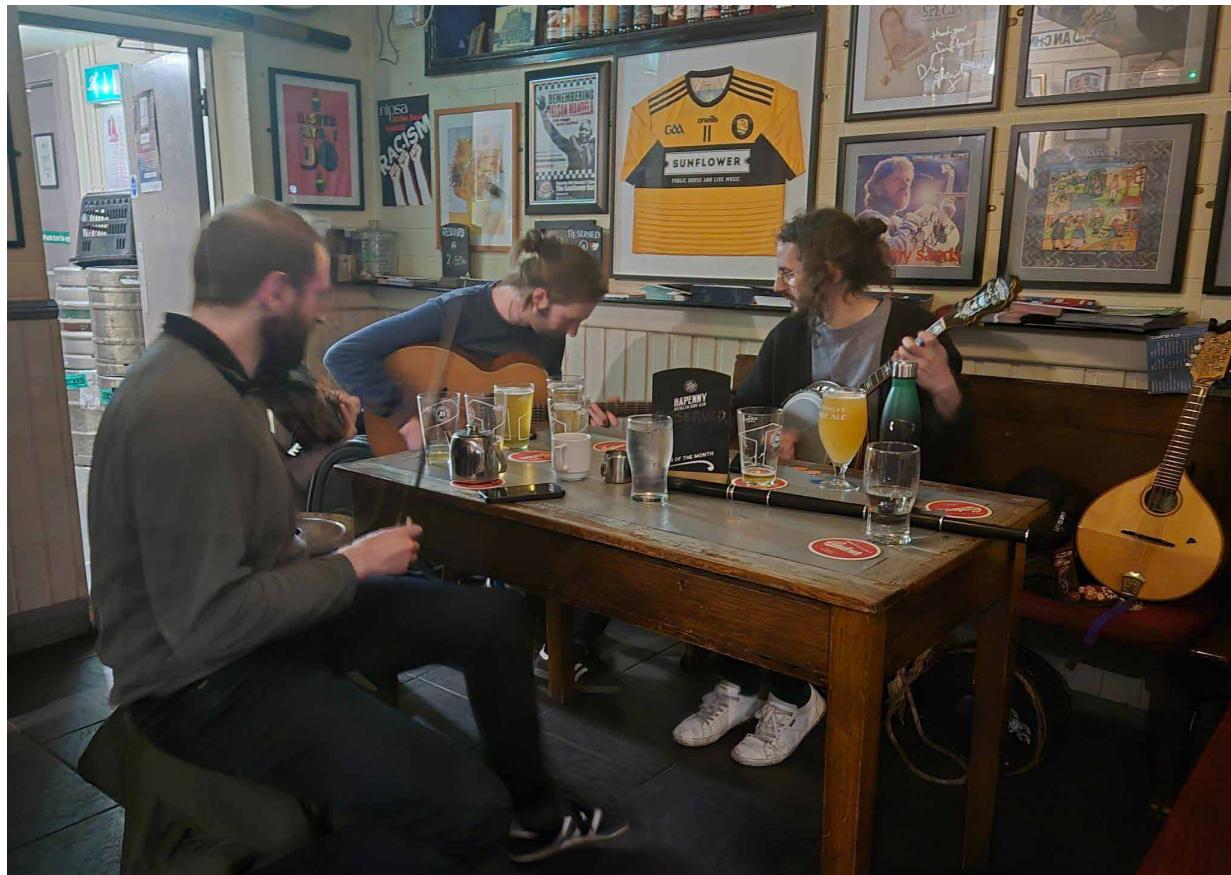
Figure 12 Amateur musicians in the Sunflower. Photo by author, 2024.

b: The Sunflower Public House

The Sunflower Public House is likely the most famous place in Belfast that tries to function as a third place welcoming both sides. It was founded by a gay Catholic leftist, Pedro Donald, who wanted to create an inclusive shared space and, more generally, to resist entrenched Belfast norms for how to use space and build third places. It is the only bar in Belfast that does not serve Guinness or display its swag, despite the British owner of Guinness, Diageo, using economic blackmail to try to force its products and branding on all bars in exchange for licenses. This notable absence signals that the bar is a space for anti-authoritarian freethinkers who do not want to be absorbed into pre-packaged identities.

Like Voodoo, The Sunflower is in the city centre, but on the northern edge, in one of the few spots in the centre that is an easy walk from residential neighbourhoods of both sorts, including the North Belfast Catholic neigh-

bourhood of New Lodge, as well as to Carlisle Circus, which is an interface among several competing sectarian neighbourhoods. Situated on a graffiti-filled corner, The Sunflower occupies a spot in the city that has been claimed by leftists, with a vacant lot converted into an art and rave space next door. Its embedding in a street that matches its aesthetic helps it to function as a territorialized third place. The inside is cozy and welcoming, with an art-covered beer and pizza garden in back, and a cramped bar and small tables in front, one of which is often occupied by local amateur Irish musicians (Figure 12). Despite being in the city centre where such signalling is generally taboo, it displays some political signalling inside, including rainbow flags, Ukrainian flags, Palestinian watermelon decorations, and pro-labour messaging.

Unlike Voodoo, which makes no reference to place, The Sunflower cultivates a shared Belfast and Ulster identity based upon collective past struggle. Pictures of strikes
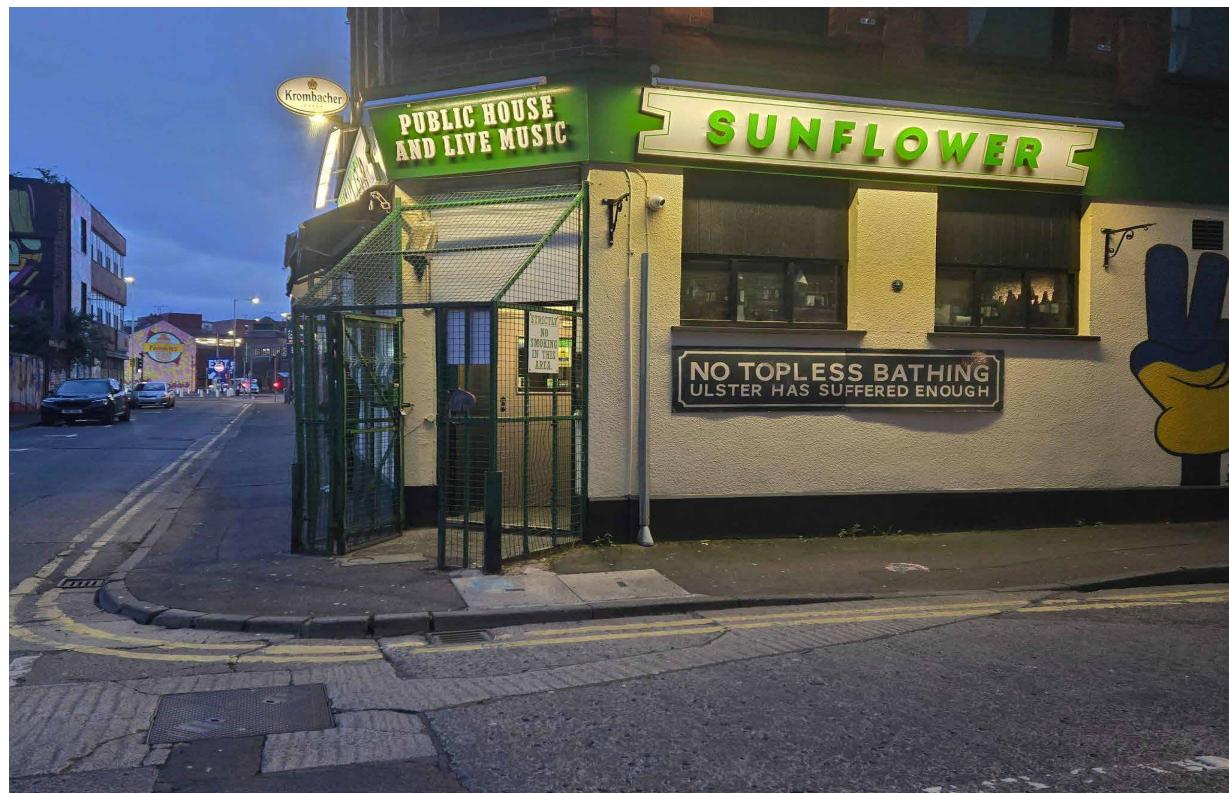
Figure 13 Exterior of the Sunflower Public House, with its original security cage. Photo by author, 2024.

and labour unions adorn the walls. An iconic mural on the outside reads: "No topless sunbathing: Ulster has suffered enough." The door to the bar retains its "security cage," a formerly common metal cage outside the door that prevented cars with bombs from ramming into buildings where people congregated during the Conflict, as a reference to a shared history of precarity (Figure 13). The space reminds users that Belfast has a history of activism, resistance, labour organizing, and nonconformity, as well as a shared history of trauma; these are points of pride and identity for both Catholics and Protestants. The Sunflower thus carefully constructs a specific shared Belfastian identity – one that does scrub away politics or recreate standard Republican or Loyalist tropes. It is successful in large measure; the place is always lively, and it has a cozy third place feel.

There is a clear sense, though, in which The Sunflower falls short as a "shared space." Everyone I spoke to acknowledged that despite its pointed efforts at in-

clusivity, it is ultimately a Republican space, albeit one that goes out of its way to build an identity tied more to social justice and activism than to nationalism or insularity. Protestants do frequent the bar, and on my last night in Belfast, it hosted a rave in the lot next door that featured a British-identified Protestant feminist DJ. But its political signalling and its embrace of Irish music and culture code it as Republican. Belfastians speak fondly of the Sunflower's "pretence" at being a nonsectarian space.

c: The American Bar

The American Bar is Pedro Donald's other local bar. There is nothing particularly American about it, although being named after a place without sectarian significance may have a helpful effect. The American Bar is in Sailortown, on a desolate block surrounded by pedestrian-hostile multilane roads and highways. Sailortown is a mostly abandoned neighbourhood lying just north of the City Centre, near the docks and harbour. It used to

Figure 14 a, b The American Bar. Photos by author, 2024

be one of Belfast's only mixed neighbourhoods, inhabited by Catholic and Protestant ship builders and dock workers. As the Conflict heated up, the neighbourhood was mostly destroyed to build a highway designed to be an interface, and residents were forcibly relocated into more segregated neighbourhoods. Sailortown is now undergoing a bit of 'regeneration,' and the area is scheduled for redevelopment, but it still feels quite empty. Memorials and murals in Sailortown celebrate the labour and shipbuilding roots of the city, and they are notably nonsectarian. In a way this is a perfect setting for a third place designed to be a shared space. It is neither in the forcibly sanitized centre nor in a sectarian area, and it is in North Belfast, with its patchwork quilt of Catholic and Protestant residents.

The American Bar leans heavily into the shared history of the neighbourhood. Its visual signalling presents Belfast as historically a city of shipbuilding, labour organizing, and worker solidarity. One wall is dominated by a cloth wall hanging with a picture of the Titanic. In huge letters, it reads "The National Union of Dock Labourers–Union is Strength–All Men are Brethren–Belfast Chapter" (Figure 14a). There are no memorials in the bar; the past is celebrated as a source of current identity but not as something to be mourned. Where the Sunflower builds a narrative of Belfast identity as resistant and nonconformist, the American Bar builds a slightly different narrative of working-class history grounded in the physical landscape of Belfast.

The American Bar takes a unique approach to solving the paradox of shared third places in Belfast. There are no explicit messages of inclusion – messages that can backfire, as we have seen. But every customer is invited to leave behind a scarf from their home football or rugby team, and these cover the walls and ceiling. The scarves represent a variety of countries and cities, but also a wide range of small local neighbourhood leagues, kids' teams, a local gay team, a Satanist team, and radical leftist teams such as Hamburg's FC St. Pauli (Figure 14b). The messaging of this practice is quite brilliant. Anyone who comes can, in a tangible way, make the place *their place* by concretely contributing to the aesthetic of the space, and doing so in a way that signals their own

place-rooted identity. It is as if the bar is a little outpost of the home of everyone who hangs out there. An effective method for building a proper third place is letting its users tinker with it and shape it in ways that give them a sense of ownership and voice in it. The scarves are a vivid marker of this tinkering and ownership. The inclusion of scarves from kids' teams and gimmicky teams keeps things light. The internationality of the offerings situates the bar in a wider cosmopolitan world, where identities and territories go beyond the sectarian binary. While the bar remains free of any overtly sectarian signalling such as flags or religious symbols,[16] many of the teams represented are those of sectarian neighbourhoods, and so the bar verges on functioning as a "plural space" where people can show off their roots in and identification with sectarian neighbourhoods.

The problem the American Bar faces, in its quest to serve as a third place, is that Sailortown is desolate and not a functioning neighbourhood. While The Sunflower, The Red Devil, and The Rex all build continuity with their surroundings, and Voodoo spreads out onto and claims the street, The American Bar feels like an isolated outpost. It is close to many neighbourhoods, but it has no usable or human-scale streetscape, and getting there by foot is unpleasant, inevitably requiring walking for long stretches along exhaust-filled giant roads with no street access to businesses or homes, and crossing many lanes of traffic using slow, complicated traffic lights. The American Bar cannot serve as anyone's quickly accessible corner pub. For this reason, the bar straddles the line between a third place and a destination bar. Yet as I explained, its location is also its strength, and Belfast, by design, has no perfect options for where to locate shared third places.

d: Bullhouse East

The Bullhouse East brew pub is the only site I found that strives to be a shared third place buried within a sectarian neighbourhood. It is located in East Belfast, in Protestant territory along Newtownards Road. The inner

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16 - There are also no Rangers or Celtics scarfs. I don't know if they are explicitly banned or if no one wants to disrupt the space in that way.
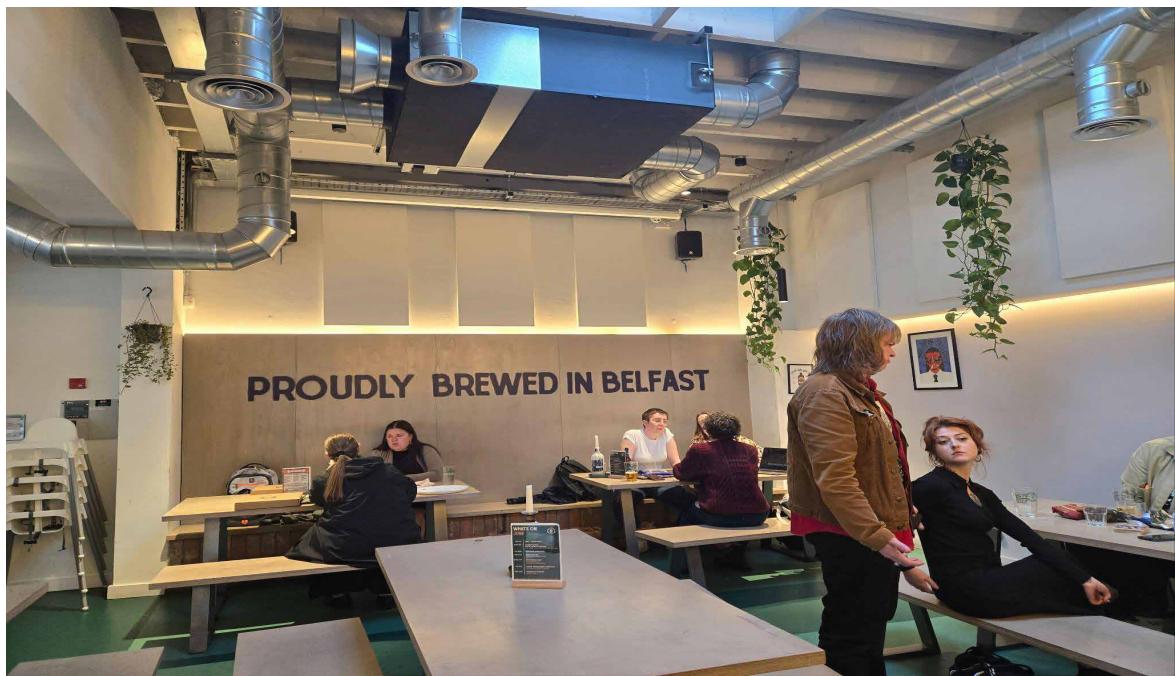
Figure 15 a, b Dogs and industrial minimalism in Bullhouse East. Photos by author, 2024.

section of Newtownards Road is dilapidated, covered with Union Jacks, Loyalist paramilitary flags, and violent murals, as well as the Loyalist "Conflict Museum" and souvenir shops focused on cheap British and Israeli trinkets. Most storefronts are empty. But once one gets far enough east on Newtownards, past C.S. Lewis Park towards Ballyhackamore, the area becomes wealthier and the aggressive sectarian signalling tapers off, although the population remains almost entirely Protestant. This part of the city is gentrifying, and many gentrifiers have an interest in creating a more cosmopolitan neighbourhood free of aggressive sectarianism.

Bullhouse East sells its own microbrew varieties and a selection of other mostly local beers, and it hosts softly left-wing local readings and performances. The pub advertises itself as dog friendly. This contributes to its third place feel, by making it homey and by encouraging interactions between customers, who predictably want to pet and meet one another's dogs. It is populated almost entirely by millennials with a slightly hipster vibe.

Bullhouse East cultivates a different aesthetic than The American Bar or The Sunflower. The decorations are carefully chosen to be politically and regionally neutral yet somehow to give the illusion of a specific identity. On the walls hang small paintings of racially ambiguous people surrounded by the words "The World is Ours"—a vague message of empowerment and common identity (the plural first person is crucial) with no definite political message or demographic markers. Giant letters across one wall proclaim, "Proudly Brewed in Belfast," emphasizing a Belfast identity rather than an Irish or British one (Figure 15). The overall look is spare, with exposed ducts and a minimalist warehouse vibe. This aesthetic gives Bullhouse East a bland, neutral, neoliberal feel that is reminiscent of corporatized spaces for digital nomads around the world. But in Belfast, neutrality is not just a marketing tool; it is a meaningful political statement. Bullhouse East is not actually unmarked territory, but a territory for Belfastians whose identity includes their commitment to building inclusion through the suppression of their sectarian roots.

The insiders at the Bullhouse are millennials whose identity is in part defined by their rejection of sectarianism and their skill at nimbly navigating Belfast while avoiding sectarian confrontations. A coy Reddit thread about the bar says that it "Attracts a wide spectrum (not just East Belfast's free range hipster population) that wouldn't normally be attracted to traditional bars (or maybe that's my own bias talking)." "Attracted to traditional bars" here means willing to frequent sectarian bars. So, Bullhouse East is a kind of anti-sectarian space, but not a neutral one; its specific brand of anti-sectarianism *is* its identity.

The Bullhouse East website is masterfully constructed via meticulous wording and graphics to curate a nonsectarian third place that still allows a sense of identity and belonging. This website is worth a close reading. Under the "Our Approach" section, it reads:

> Our mission is to do our bit to **bring Northern Ireland together** by serving world class beer in **welcoming, inclusive environments**...

> We take a **light-hearted approach** to making world class beer.

> We believe **beer is just that, beer.** It's great to drink something challenging and it's great to push the boundaries of what beer can be. But at the end of the day, we go back to what beer is for. **We wholeheartedly believe that beer is about bringing people together and we're passionate about the power of sitting down and sharing a beer with friend or stranger alike and having a chat.**

> We create world-class, award-winning beer with a **light-hearted, inclusive** approach that's reflected in our ethos and our outlook. **We work with people we like and get on with and we try to avoid transactional relationships.** The beer industry can be a cliquey place. When you come into our venues, we don't care if you don't know what a Geuze is, we'll happily tell you over a beer and share our passion, but **we want you to feel included, no matter what age you are or where you come from.**

Despite being an urban brewery now, **we're proud of our heritage and where we've come from in very challenging conditions.** Our **logo is centred around the fact that we're hopheads.** ... The **skull reflects our heritage**, as the original Bullhouse is on Greengraves Road, a short distance from **the Kempe Stone, a Mesolithic burial chamber**.

(https://bullhousebrewco.com/pages/about, accessed October 28, 2025, emphases mine)

To those unaware of the politics of Belfast, this description could sound vapid and unremarkable, but every line is carefully phrased. There are multiple references to inclusion, although never with any direct reference to who needs to be included. The comment about "bringing Northern Ireland together" is clearly about sectarianism, in context, but the site avoids mentioning sectarianism directly and in effect warns customers not to either. "We work with people we like" is an oblique way of saying that they are willing to work with people from "both sides." They repeatedly emphasize keeping the conversation "light-hearted" (implicitly as opposed to serious and political) and focused on beer. Just come here and talk about beer, regardless of where you are from! Only beer! Beer here is repeatedly flagged as the social glue around which people can bond without having to negotiate political and identity differences. "We're passionate about the power of sitting down and sharing a beer with friend or stranger alike and having a chat" signals that having a place for pointedly apolitical discussion–talk about beer, damnit!–is *politically* significant in the context of Northern Ireland; such a place will be politically successful, ironically, only if its central political goal is suppressed.

The discussion of the owners' own identity is also carefully crafted. They identify as "hopheads"–people focused on "beer," which is to say, light-hearted sociality that avoids conflict–rather than as Irish or British.[17] They

remind the reader again that there is an underlying political goal here by mentioning that part of their heritage is coming from "challenging conditions." Significantly, the symbol they choose for this "heritage" is the Mesolithic Kempe Stone, a symbol of place so ancient that it predates all national and regional borders and Christian sects. They are rooted to the physical place and its physical history, not to its political regions.

Yet Bullhouse East, like The American Bar, is challenged by the physical structure of Belfast itself. Deep in East Belfast, it is difficult to get to from any Catholic neighbourhood, or from neutral South Belfast. Anyone wanting to visit the bar from West, North, or South Belfast would need to travel all the way into the centre of the city and back out again. The buses stop running at 10:30 pm (another anti-conflict measure), and so a proper night out there would be nearly impossible for them, especially since taxis and Ubers are often loath to take rides that cross interfaces. Furthermore, in order to make this inconvenient trip, potential Catholic patrons would have to travel through the closer-in parts of East Belfast, which are aggressively Loyalist.[18] Indeed, because of the segmented and pointedly mobility-resistant structure of the city, I doubt that many people from other areas of Belfast know that the bar exists; certainly, they would not run into it by accident. I could not find out whether there were both Catholic and Protestant insiders hanging out at Bullhouse East, because avoiding this topic is core to its. There was no good way to ask without violating the norms of the space. But I suspect that while the pub and its patrons successfully eschew any display of sectarian identity, it's probably almost exclusively Protestant Millennials who go there in practice.

6: Territory, Identity, and Third Places

Belfast is a city of sharp identities, and these are embedded in elaborate and entrenched aesthetic and physical

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17 - It may seem surprising that beer isn't just as sectarianized as everything else in Belfast. But because of the corrupt hold that Guinness has over the local liquor licensing, it dominates the beer-related aesthetic branding of space and

has depoliticized beer. The beers at Bullhouse are mostly local microbreweries but the sectarian affiliations of their owners are not signaled.

18 - I found that people Catholic neighbourhoods described walking or biking through Loyalist neighbourhoods as unacceptably dangerous. This is backed up by interviews conducted by the Belfast Mobility Project (belfastmobilityproject.org).

partitioning. For this reason, the city provides a powerful magnifying glass through which to explore the relationship between identity, territory, aesthetics, and place, and how these relationships are negotiated. The physical, historical, and cultural situation in Belfast make it especially challenging to create non-antagonistic third places that support positive identities, as opposed to turfs. While the sectarian third places serve important social purposes in the city, they are rooted in conflict, fear, and exclusion. Many Belfastians are working actively, creatively, and with passion to build good third places that transcend traditional divides. We have seen that some of these places have had significant though not unlimited success.

Spatial justice, as I use the phrase, is appropriate material and social support for people's right to use and move through space and to build and find territories that support their emplaced flourishing, agency, and sense of belonging. Access to third places is a component of spatial justice. Third places allow us to develop and exercise a relational and communal sense of self that can be quite different from the private and public selves we cultivate at home and work. They also materially and socially embed us in our communities. Hence, a just city should provide good third places to all its dwellers. If a city systematically fails to offer satisfying third places to some of its residents, it fails to support their flourishing and the right to fully inhabit their city and build their identity within it. Some stigmatized neighbourhoods are third place deserts, because of a lack of businesses and services, hostile city planning or infrastructure, and revanchist policing of what could be common spaces. This is a violation of their residents' spatial rights.

But third places face an inherent tension. They cannot support a shared "we" without creating a "they" who don't belong. It is therefore always a danger that third places will become exclusionary, gatekeeping, or antagonistic to outsiders. When third places define themselves in the first instance by who they exclude, they become toxic. A central puzzle for third places is how they can build a positive insider identity that is not defined adversarially. While any insider identity necessarily has an outsider complement, not all insider identities

are carved out through hostility towards outsiders. For example, plenty of queer spaces are not *for* straight people, but their development as a queer terrain supporting queer identities and agency does not necessarily depend upon the antagonistic denigration of straight people. In contrast, "female only" spaces (especially in England) have come to be antagonistically defined specifically by their exclusion of men and (especially) trans women.

I do not think there are general principles that can tell us how to create third places that are healthy, playful, and joyful rather than adversarial turfs, or even how to make something work as a third place at all. A business owner can never guarantee that their bar or coffee shop will become a third place, although they can encourage this through its policies, location, and design. People need to make a space their own for it to truly become their third place. This can be through tinkering with the space, or by claiming a favourite seat, or by contributing to the regular embodied rhythm and activities of the place. But also, as we have seen, whether a third place comes to life and what kind of identities it supports depend on a range of ecological factors, including its physical location, its architecture, the political scene within which it is embedded, the history it grows out of, and more. The material and cultural context in which a place is embedded, including the infrastructure around it, shape its potential to serve as a third place, in ways that can't be simply overridden by design or good intentions.

Our urban planning needs to focus not just on ensuring that people have access to private and public places, but also on ensuring that cities foster a wealth of diverse third places. This means getting rid of laws that impede their development—loitering laws, for instance—and giving small business loans and other funding to people who want to create flexible spaces of this sort. In the case of a place like Belfast, it also may require some serious restructuring of the infrastructure and aesthetic landscape of the city. The city is full of people, especially but not only younger people, who are seeking to leave behind identities structured by fear, trauma, resentment, and antagonism, but those identities are still built into the material fabric of the city. Belfast has a responsibility to try to provide positive shared third places that

concretely support residents who wish to move past the sectarian divide and build alternative shared identities.

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