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Hardlines, Softlines

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HARD LINES, SOFT LINES

words by Garrett Carr

photos by Joe Laverty

Garrett Carr, Donegal-born map-maker and writer, has spent years walking the border of Ireland, fascinated by how borderlands shape our sense of place. As we strive to celebrate our corner of the world, we are grateful for those who come along and give voice to things so often left unnoticed, exposing us to our own landscapes. This is not a story about people from a certain place; it is a story that asks us questions about design, boundaries, and if we are paying enough attention.





Before moving to Belfast I had impressions of certain neighbourhoods, names that appeared often in news reports and histories of ‘the Troubles’. The Lower Ormeau triggered images of armoured police cars, protests and killings. A lot seemed to have happened there so I expected a big place. Instead, when I arrived ten years ago, I discovered that it’s only a handful of streets, squeezed between a busy artery and the river.

Then there is the case of Short Strand, which I took to be very small. Hardly a place at all, just a line. Journalists called it ‘an interface’, a boundary where two edges meet, rub each other up the wrong way to produce heat and noise. News reports showed a stretch of four-lane road and a couple of junctions, usually with riot police in the foreground and someone throwing a brick in the middle distance. I thought this gully was Short Strand in its entirety. Not a place, just a problem. My lack of understanding persisted after I came to live in Belfast, even when living close to Short Strand, about ten minutes’ walk up the Ravenhill Road, I had no sense that Short Strand had breadth as well as length. Belfast is a city that lets you write off whole neighbourhoods easily, you can go years without considering them. I worked out Short Strand’s size when driving on or off the dual carriageway to Bangor. The road takes a wide arc near the site of the Sirocco Rope Works. One day I realised that I was circumnavigating something, something big.

That moment was a flash of insight into the city’s character. In Ciaran Carson’s poem ‘Smithfield Market’ he describes a similar flash. He is looking at a map of the city when: “something many-toothed, elaborate, stirred briefly in the labyrinth.” I ate up Carson’s writing when I first

moved to Belfast but that line stays with me most. This is Belfast as maze; dead-ends, high walls and confusing about-turns – a city failing to function. But there is another meaning to be found in Carson’s line and it is almost the opposite. The poet has glimpsed something intricate, mechanical, a well-oiled machine that functions smoothly. “Many-toothed, elaborate” suggests a reptilian cunning hidden in plain sight, holding neighbourhoods in its coils.

I look at Short Strand on a map of Belfast Peace Lines and discover the neighbourhood is almost entirely surrounded by barriers. It looks like a citadel. In most other places these walls and fences – over a hundred in number – form broken lengths. On the map they are roughly linear clusters of dashes rather than solid shapes. Short Strand, on the other hand, is inside a rough circle that is almost whole. If you visit the biggest ‘gap’ it turns out to be another high wall, although this time it is the perimeter of a bus depot so not strictly categorised as a Peace Line.

I take a walk along Mountpottinger Street into Short Strand to discover this Belfast neighbourhood. It is a place that is completely new to me although I find nothing unexpected; just a couple of dozen streets with densely packed terraced housing and a sprinkle of retail. You can buy a sandwich, bet on a horse and get a haircut. I assume these establishments get no business whatsoever from through-traffic as there is very little of it. The businesses survive on local custom and as if in recognition of this inevitable inwardness many have ‘Strand’ in their name. You can take a Strand Taxi home from the Strand Bar. I sense that everyone I see lives here, an unusual thing in a neighbourhood so

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close to a city centre. The place feels like a village. I stroll about for a while. Two women with shopping trollies stop to gently taunt each other with knowledge of the other's misbehaviour. 'I did not!'...some laughing ensues. Nearby a frustrated mother roars at her son in a tiny front-yard. In response he pulls his jumper over his head and stays that way. A council employee is sweeping up crisp packets. A queue of girls are waiting outside the community centre. Here they all were, all along.

I go in search of the Peace Line. It is most striking along Bryson Street. Nearly eight metres tall, brown brick topped with metal railing. There are steel doors in the wall here and there but they look as if they haven't been opened in years. At one end the wall angles back and forth, like a stretched-out zig-zag, like a serrated-edge. "Many-toothed" indeed. Terraced houses face the wall's 275 metre length. I think it must be a grim way to live, looking out at this wall every day but then I remember that in Dublin I lived opposite a wall of Mountjoy Prison and it didn't bother me too much. One thing I do remember – and perhaps this is the reason it didn't bother me – was how abstract the lives on the other side were to me. The prisoners' daily lives were unimaginable, and I guess they never thought to try and imagine my life either. I step back as far as I can across Bryson Street to look at the tops of the houses on the other side. I see a man on a ladder washing his upper windows and he seems a thousand miles away.

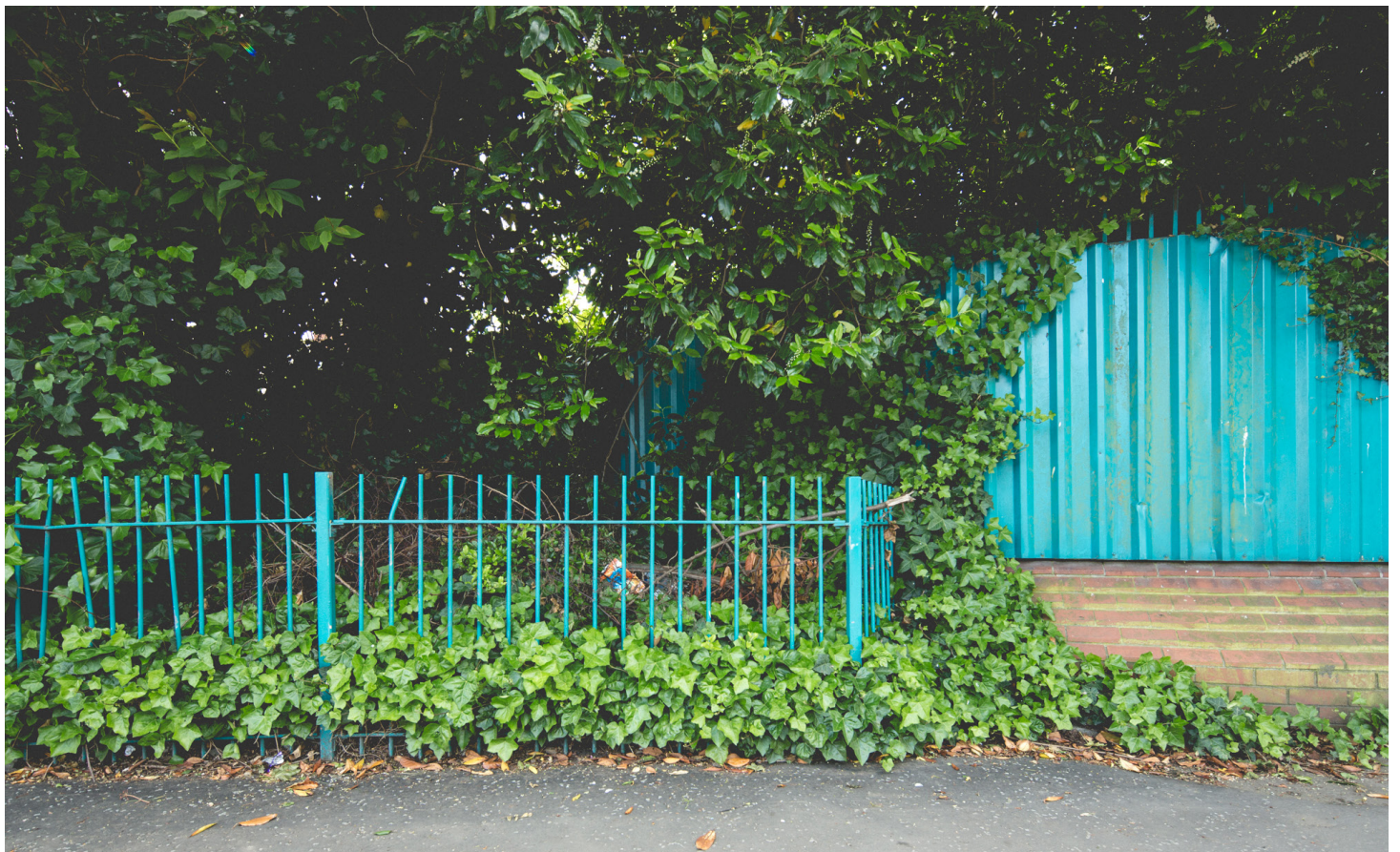
A resident is standing in her doorway, smoking a mild cigarette and taking a mild interest in what I'm doing. I tell her I'm following the wall all the way around her neighbourhood. "It's not much to look at," she says, looking at it. The stretch I am at is 1970's Peace Line, built in reaction to near-daily violence. It is brutal, profoundly discordant, a battlefield amputation conducted

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without anaesthetic. It is too high to throw a bottle over although if you were of a certain age and disposition it might make you want to try. That's the thing with so many of these walls, they put shape on a sectarian tension and don't let anyone forget it. This wall and all the others are due to be dismantled by 2023, the government has made this commitment. From what I've read few expect them to hit the deadline, but the process has begun in other parts of the city.

Further around, where Short Strand meets the Newtownards Road, the Peace Lines are less aggressive. The walls aren't so tall, but look carefully and you notice pillars crowned with concrete pyramids so that nobody can stand on them. Older barriers are topped with revolving steel Xs, making them near impossible to climb, but here spinning plastic tubes are fitted instead. Functionally, they do the same thing but their appearance is softer, you'd hardly notice them. The new Peace Line designs go for width rather than height. Fences are backed up by shrubs chosen for their hardiness and dense branching. The result is as much a visual shield as a defence. You wouldn't throw a bottle at the houses over there because you forget there are houses over there at all, and the bushes will deny you the satisfaction of hearing glass shatter. This stretch is 21st Century Peace Line. To use the new terminology, the Peace Line has been "reimaged".

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Reimaging has reached its utmost expression back out on the Albertbridge Road, near where I began. This is a busy commuter road and the area many people will picture when they hear the name Short Strand. As I mentioned, for years I thought this intersection actually was Short Strand. I study the roadsides and realise that almost every inch of this area contributes to defence. There are shrubs and two-metre fences, the softened Peace Lines, but it is more than that. There is an impenetrability to the whole area that tends against people doing anything here. Not just rioting, anything, any human activity apart from passing through. It is a multilane roadway for cars going in and out of the city centre. There are wide pavements for the trickle of pedestrians, all of whom have earphones in and eyes ahead. The area is barren and contains no interest, nobody dawdles. It is not that the area is grotty or crumbling, much of the stone work is new and still gleaming – large granite slabs that are too big to prise out and lob at a police car. Tidy beds of bright green grass in low buffer walls look as if they were grown in a laboratory. There is a five-foot tall mound in the middle of a traffic island covered in this grass, but I bet no one has ever climbed to the top and sat down. The area is depressing, unfriendly to humans, kinder to cars, and hemmed in by barriers, although they don't at first look like barriers. The area is part of what some urban planners have started calling Belfast's Grey Donut, a wide band encircling the city centre, an unpopulated ring of roads and car parking, designed for the ease of motorists but at the expense of people who live in the city, such as the residents of Short Strand.

This roadway constitutes the southern rim of Short Strand and part of my excuse for not understanding the area. From here Short Strand is so successfully concealed that instruments of concealment are hidden too. The Peace Lines have crept beyond their linear forms and are now embedded in the landscaping of an area bigger than a football field. Many details are almost pretty; the rows of trees, the bright sandstone capping. Then you notice how uniform the trees are and how closely planted. Branches have been cut and woven through shrubbery until not even light can get through. One stretch of shrubs is almost as wide as the Albertbridge road itself. "A deep buffer of vegetation" is how a survey by the Belfast Interface Project described it. This too is Peace Line, reimaged into a strip of inaccessible urban forest, complete with planted undergrowth.

The unapologetic 1970s walls, the hard lines, will be the easiest to remove. The harder they are the more cleanly they shatter, the more easily they can be dismantled and trucked away. In addition, they usually have just one owner. It is these softened, widened, barriers that will surely remain long after 2023. Barriers that stretch across properties. Barriers that have been landscaped so deeply into the fabric of the city that you might hardly notice them. You'll just get the vague sense of a zone as unwelcoming, uninteresting, before you're funnelled away. If a person is not moving too fast though, perhaps if they're walking, they may get an inkling that some design is at work, willing them to move on as quickly as possible. They will move on, but in the corner of their eye something will briefly stir. ●

explore more at: www.garrettcarr.net

