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The neoliberalisation of the Cathedral Quarter and its contestations

Dr. Andrew Grounds & Dr. Brendan Murtagh

Introduction

Over time Belfast has been well researched as a site of ethno-sectarian conflict, segregation and fear see (Boal et al 1976) and (Gaffiken and Morrisey 2011). The study of socio-spatial patterns of 'ethnocracy' is useful, but this article will argue how it is equally important to understand local forms of urban restructuring in terms of global processes that are linked to neoliberalism. To better understand the neoliberal urbanisation of Belfast this article is organised into two parts. The first part will demonstrate how the Northern Ireland State has sought legitimacy in the free market as 'therapy' for the production of neutral socio-spatial formations such as the Cathedral Quarter. Secondly it will examine this performance of neoliberal urbanism, as it 'actually exists' and demonstrate how market-led renewal has been extended through the clustering and non-sectarian interests, 'soft' arrangements of urban governance, cultural re-branding strategies, economic development incentives, and the development of various flagship projects. Critically this place-based grounding of neoliberalism is useful, as it also allows for the contestations of neoliberal urbanism to become real rather than just theoretical. The second part of the article will draw attention to the responses of local, and sometimes marginal, interests that have looked to challenge, adapt and, at times, divert the extension of market-led renewal. To be clear, this article does not want to overstate the performance of such interests. Nor does it want to claim that they significantly impact or obstruct the wider neoliberal urbanisation of Belfast. Instead it is interested in their behaviours and their different methods of working to explore what may be constituted as 'alternative', at least in the locality of the Cathedral Quarter. By studying how and why these interests have responded to the extension of neoliberal urbanism over time, it may just be possible to provide a better platform to articulate what more progressive forms of urban resistance might look like.

The time, place and the therapy of neoliberalism in Belfast

It could be argued that Northern Ireland's troubled past has given birth to a unique species of what Brenner et al (2010) label as 'variegated' neoliberalism. Here the Northern Ireland state has sought legitimacy in the free market as 'therapy' for the production of neutral areas throughout Belfast city centre. This prescription of neoliberalism as therapy is theoretically useful and needs to be better understood. For example how is neoliberal therapy distinctive with respect to the divided urban context of Belfast? Through what circumstances or strategies has it been rolled-out over time? And finally what are the implications of this response in terms of the production of neutral socio-spatial formations such as the Cathedral Quarter? Zukin (2010) has referred to the extension of neoliberal urban processes like gentrification as "pacification by cappuccino". This describes a scenario in which contemporary urban space is "imagineered" as a spectacle for the consumption of those who can afford to pay. For Davis (2007) this usually occurs at the expense or displacement of those that cannot. Since the 1970's, Hackworth (2006) has demonstrated how cities the world over has looked to roll out a template of neoliberal urbanism to tackle wider urban problems related to decay, deprivation and disinvestment.

Over time, Nagle (2009) and Murtagh (2010) have argued how the Northern Ireland state has adopted a similar approach to distract investors and tourists from local patterns of segregation and territorial division. In his article "See you in Disneyland" Sorkin (1992) recalls how the Disney strategy attempted to inscribe "utopia on the terrain of the familiar and vice versa". Originally, the concept of Disneyland was conceived as a dedication to the ideals and dreams

behind the development of modern America. It attempted to ‘dramatize’ these ideals and ultimately, export them as a source of hope and inspiration around the world:

“Disneyland will be something of a fair, an exhibition, a playground, a community centre, a museum of living facts and a showplace of beauty and magic. It will be filled with the accomplishments, the joys, the hopes of the world we live in. And it will remind us and show us how to make those wonders part of our lives”

(Sorkin, 1992 (b), p. 205)

In the context of Northern Ireland, it could be argued that neoliberal expressions of urbanism represent the utopian against a wider terrain that has been divided by over 30 years of violent conflict. For much of the political and economic elite, the delivery of such market-led interventions represent a step towards ‘normality’ as well as an opportunity to globally re-position the province as a place that is attractive to corporate interest, foreign investment and tourists. These interventions could be similarly read as therapeutic; as for much of the population they also represent a greater hope that Northern Ireland can develop into a politically stable, economically prosperous and peaceful society. But how and through what devices has this neoliberal therapy been administered in the divided context of Belfast?

The neoliberalisation of the Cathedral Quarter area

Over time, the clustering of non-sectarian identities has encouraged the cultural rebranding of inner city areas like the Cathedral Quarter. During the 1980’s community artists and later LGBT interests reclaimed a disinvested area called Northside as a space that was increasingly tolerant of non-conforming lifestyles and alternative political cultural or social beliefs. This clustering of such non-sectarian activity encouraged Laganside—Northern Ireland’s only development corporation to formerly re-brand Northside as the Cathedral Quarter in 1998. Laganside invested in various physical improvements throughout the area and helped to restore the Victorian character of the historic streetscape. They also installed a series of managed workspaces for local arts groups and also provided annual funding opportunities for creative activity that committed to remain in the locality. The development of this creative infrastructure and financial resources like the Laganside Events Grant gradually encouraged more creative industries and arts-based groups to move into the area. The performances of these distinctly non-sectarian groups and identities are today still visible in the growing expression of Belfast’s student/hipster culture. This is reinforced during the annual production of fringe cultural events such as the Cathedral Quarter Arts Festival or the Festival of Fools. These alternative cultural activities have helped to re-position the area as a neutral spectacle that is tolerant of individuals regardless of their religion, sexual orientation, gender, race or age. However the clustering of these activities has gradually de-risked the area and for some private interests has presented it as a viable opportunity for speculative investment. This has occurred despite the Cathedral Quarter being geographically adjacent to some of Belfast’s most segregated and deprived communities located in the inner north and west of the city.

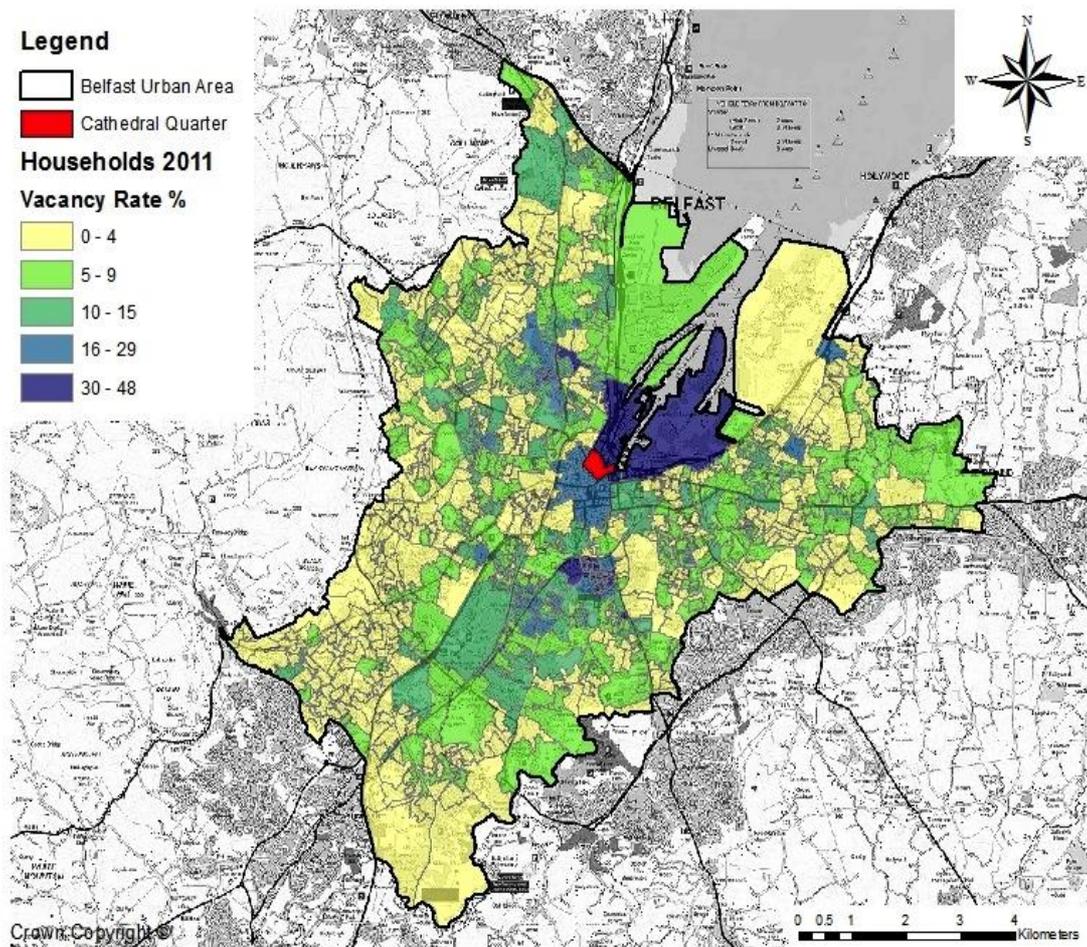
The clustering of alternative or non-sectarian identities is not the only driver behind the extension of neoliberal urbanism as therapy. During the 1980’s policies such as the Urban Development Grant looked to incentivise a wider model of property-led renewal throughout the centre of Belfast, even during the height of the conflict. In the Cathedral Quarter many commercial interests capitalised on highly generous economic incentives (in some cases up to 75% of the re-development costs) and steadily gravitated back to the area. This market-led therapy has intensified post 2000 through the increasing financialisation of the Northern Ireland economy as well as through Belfast’s unique encounter with the global property market. The outcome of which has seen the increase in the construction of private apartment complexes located around the Cathedral Quarter area as well as along the urban waterfront. Collectively these policy interventions have motivated a growing part of the population that had previously psychologically distanced themselves from Belfast during the conflict, to re-

engage with the city centre. A significant proportion of this emerging population are young, single, well educated and employed in the service sector. Not only is this demographic working and socialising around neutral parts of the city, but there is also evidence to suggest they are now beginning to live there as well.

Neoliberal urbanism as therapy has also been extended by what Almendinger and Haughton (2013) refer to as 'soft spaces' of governance. Emerging 'soft' spaces of governance such as the Cathedral Quarter Trust (CQT) have demonstrated an ability to de-stabilise traditional modes of urban governance, which in the past have served to legitimise rather than mediate sectarian claims and territorial disputes. In the divided context of Belfast, the CQT has effectively allowed for the development of a new regime of urban governance that is for the most part 'colour-blind' and does not endorse the promotion green (nationalist) and orange (Unionist) politics. Instead the fuzzy boundaries of the Trust have brought together a new formation of stakeholders that are seemingly united around discourses of development that promote inward investment as well as property and culture or arts-led renewal. Finally, neoliberal spatial development has been encouraged by the development or proposed construction of flagship projects. These have included a completed metropolitan arts centre called the MAC and two projects that are unfinished but underway. One project is the relocation of the University of Ulster campus and the second project is a mixed-use boutique retail development called Royal Exchange. The Royal Exchange currently has planning permission but the scheme has stalled due to complications over finance and how the eventual development will be integrated into the wider Cathedral Conservation Area. Flagship projects like those mentioned are positioned as therapeutic due to their ability to provide Belfast with spaces that do not serve to legitimise sectarian politics, practices, interests or disputes. They also represent a certain neutrality that is also hip, vibrant, creative tolerant, pluralistic, diverse and ultimately, redundant of the sectarian identities and imageries associated with the city's troubled past.

Despite the hope created by flagship projects and other highly neoliberal modes of urbanism, this article argues that they have not always delivered a just and equitable model of renewal. The remit of Laganside also involved clearing and priming numerous sites on the waterfront side of the Cathedral Quarter boundary. This encouraged private investors to develop a number of high density—in some cases luxury apartment complexes. One notable example that is located adjacent to the MAC is Saint Anne's Square. Since 2001 Belfast's encounter with the wider global property economy certainly encouraged the unregulated speculative development of these city centre apartment complexes. In some cases Figure 1 demonstrates how the supply has outstripped the demand and central areas like the Cathedral Quarter were left with some of the highest vacancy rates in Belfast.

Figure 1 Vacancy rates in the Cathedral Quarter



Produced by author

Nolan (2014) has shown how the wider implications of this property crisis were also reflected in a drop in houses prices throughout the rest of the province. During the last decade the crisis has simultaneously had an increasing bearing on the performance of the Northern Ireland economy. This impact can be read in terms economic recession and a decrease in economic activity across all sectors combined with job losses and redundancies, particularly in the service and construction industry. Despite offering the potential to imagineer neutral and non-sectarian spaces, it could be argued that emerging modes of neoliberal urbanism have just imposed new patterns of socio-spatial segregation that have just overlapped existing forms of territorial division. This would suggest that neutral spaces such as the Cathedral Quarter are far from shared and are becoming increasingly re-orientated around the needs of those that have the ability to pay. How both the neoliberal and ethnocratic geography of Belfast continue to overlap and fragment the city is a pressing concern and will certainly demand further research in the future.

This promotion of certain identities or populations at the exclusion of others is re-enforced by the stakeholders that make up the Cathedral Quarter Trust. Given the prevalence of underlying ethnosectarian interests that exist on the edge of the Cathedral Quarter, it would seem that neighbouring ethnocratic communities like Carrick Hill are deliberately excluded from participating in not only the Trust, but also the wider vision of urban renewal for the area. Especially, when the residents' demands for social housing were recently rejected against plans by the University of Ulster to develop a new campus in the area. The place of low-income residents in the area in relation to the re-development of the University campus represents an ongoing urban struggle. A discussion of what tactics of resistance these interests

have used to respond to this development will be discussed in the next section. On the other hand, the highly fuzzy boundaries of the Cathedral Quarter Trust have provided an opportunity for some marginal interests to participate in urban renewal. However, how the demands of marginal cultural and arts interests that participate on the Trust have done so in a strategic manner. Granted, their neutral characteristics dovetail nicely with the promotion of a wider property and culture-led model of renewal. However, through such tactics of Kunkel (2011) calls 'co-option' marginal cultural interests have utilised their position on the Trust to get closer to land-owning interests and political elites.

Neoliberal urbanism and its contestations: a response from below

These examples have demonstrated how the extension of neoliberal urbanism in the Cathedral Quarter has been far from smooth. In reality it has emerged over what Peck and Tickell (2002) label a unique 'path-dependency' that has been shaped by external crises linked to wider economic restructuring, the spatial re-organisation of labour and global cultural change. It has also been compromised by challenges created by internal conflict and local patterns of segregation. Like in many other urban contexts, this article has demonstrated that the species of neoliberal urbanism that currently 'actually exists' in the Cathedral Quarter has also been subject to multiple 'contestations' from non-sectarian interests on the inside (Sheppard et al 2007). The previous section demonstrated how the extension of neoliberal urbanism has not yet displaced the organic socio-cultural activity and that had re-colonised the area back in the 1980s. This is significant and has provided the opportunity for a number of local marginal interests to remain within or close to the Cathedral Quarter area.

Over time these interests have been, and still are for the most part represented by a vibrant community arts scene united under the umbrella of the Community Arts Partnership, an ever-growing LGBT community and a spree of autonomous cultural groupings. There are also a host of 'fringe' socio-cultural associations that originally developed ties with a sub-cultural hub called the North Street Arcade and now more recently with the Cathedral Quarter Arts Festival. Moreover, they also showed to include a number of small community organisations like the Belfast Interface Project, the Belfast Centre for the Unemployed and its adjoining social enterprise called the John Hewitt Bar. In 2014 these organisations have also been joined by an ethical development trust. Despite being subject to advancing waves of market-led processes, many of these marginal interests, have been able to re-negotiate their survival in the Cathedral Quarter. Over time, this response has been represented by various strategies that have oscillated from a position of protest and resistance over the construction of large projects such as University of Ulster, towards more 'co-opted' practices of participation and ultimately, incorporation into emerging forms of soft governance such as the Cathedral Quarter Trust. This incorporation into the Trust could be read as many marginal inside interests effectively selling out. Given the vibrant nature of their creative activity, some marginal interests like the community arts scene possess certain 'neutral' qualities that dovetail extremely well with de-risking the area and encouraging a wider property-led model of renewal.

It would also seem that these non-sectarian interests are essentially absorbed or incorporated into the consumerist logic and competitive re-branding of Belfast as a neoliberal city. However some of these interests like the community artists were not just aware of their usefulness but also, more importantly, the potential frailties that can accompany the re-branding of the urban as a cultural spectacle. The active incorporation of the community artists into emerging formations of 'soft spaces' like the Cathedral Quarter Trust was deemed to be a deliberate choice and a highly necessary act. Ultimately they have had to exploit this participation in the Trust to secure legitimate survival and potentially guarantee the allocation of centrally administered funding opportunities such as the Laganside Events Grant. The community arts subsequently hold in tension utilitarian practices to guarantee such important resources, whilst they simultaneously look to deliver social change and wider benefit via an

extensive programme of community-led arts. This programme includes hosting a variety of local cross community projects that link to health, early year’s education, substance abuse and youth justice. The next section of the article will provide more analysis on local interests that have looked to resist, challenge or divert the extension of market-led renewal.

The survival of the community arts and the fringe socio-cultural sphere

Over time this alternative cultural community has repeatedly faced and successfully navigated a series of obstacles that have jeopardised their future in the Cathedral Quarter area. One of these obstacles has been the millions of investment that Executive departments like Department for Culture and the Arts have committed towards the construction of emerging cultural flagship projects like The Metropolitan Arts Centre (the MAC). The development of the MAC has raised subsequent tensions between the ‘fringe’ expressions of cultural activity supported by the community arts scene vs. the pastiche brand of culture that is being promoted by the curators in the museum. Despite such growing discontent, the community arts scene aligned with other fringe socio-cultural interests has never actively resisted the concept of The MAC publicly. Instead of forming a position of protest against the development and the extensive financial privileges it receives from other funding bodies like the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, some marginal socio-cultural interests have been very deliberate through their efforts to mobilise a legitimate claim to exist alongside it through experimenting with their own expressions of artistic and creative activity. This experimentation has been distilled in the annual production of an array of ‘fringe’ cultural festivals like the Cathedral Quarter Arts Festival, Culture Night and the Festival of Fools. It has also been witnessed in alternative venues such as the Black Box that promote local comic talent, alternative music genres, and performance spaces for local dramatic societies. These have all remained open as a counter-culture to the official produced programme of creative arts found at The MAC. One important organisation that is effectively looking out for community artists in the Cathedral Quarter is the Community Arts Partnership.

The Community Arts Partnership

CAP, formerly known the Community Arts Forum, were established in the late 1980s as an umbrella organisation for local arts groups under threat to central cuts as well as vulnerable to the presentation of elite more pastiche formations of ‘arts’ in the Cathedral Quarter. This latter threat has been accelerated given the recent introduction of The MAC. CAP advocate for policies that prioritise the arts and extend the provision of cultural resources, lobby on key decisions (like the withdrawal of the Laganside Events Grant) support their members with technical assistance (especially around keeping accounts) and in general attempt to make the community arts sector financially more resilient and sustainable. Over time they have deliberately accessed and used government grants to help acquire their own assets, which as the table demonstrates have grown steadily over the last five years. Their numbers are not strong, but they create an annual surplus for reinvestment in the local community arts scene at nearly £100,000 per annum. Figure 2 summarises the financial position of the Community Arts Partnership (CAP).

Figure 2 Financial position of the Community Arts Partnership

Financials	2012 (£)	2011 (£)	Year on Year change
Total assets	171,007	125,550	+35%
Total liabilities	49,666	45,129	+10%
Profit and loss account	95,193	38,782	+146%
Shareholder funds/net worth	80,421	80,421	+51%

(Taken from Dudil 2014)

Various community arts interests like CAP have over time been active in trying to develop associations with other interests in the Cathedral Quarter area. This began in the 1990s through collaboration with local commercial interests and the development of the Northside Business Trust. It continued after the millennium through a new wave of community artists positioning themselves closer to land owning interests via the formation of the Cathedral Quarter Trust. Not only has their involvement in the Trust helped to re-install and protect the Laganside Events Fund, but it has also allowed them to get closer to interests that are politically well connected. To do this effectively community artists have to know how to behave in the company of such interests, become fluent in the entrepreneurial discourse of the Cathedral Quarter Trust and ‘co-opt’ with the positioning of the Cathedral Quarter as an economic asset. But at the same time they must remain aware of their community obligations and the social value of their work. Ultimately, they must exercise utilitarian practices to deliver services, which they see as both socially progressive and locally meaningful.

The Lets Get It Right campaign

These efforts to conform alongside the extension of neoliberal modes of urbanism and attempt to experiment rather than protest have also been reflected in the Let’s Get It Right campaign. Made up of various local socio-cultural interests that included representation from local community artists this campaign articulated some concerns against the retail-led flagship project called Royal Exchange. Along with Belfast based architectural ‘do-tank’ Forum for Alternative Belfast (FAB), local interests involved in the Let’s Get It Right coalition did not resist or challenge private investment mechanisms, the commercial focus of the ‘big box’ scheme, nor its scale and impact on the surrounding part of the central business district. Instead they used their own design skills and other creative epistemic techniques to present a design that retained fabric of a historic listed building called the North Street Arcade, provided more arts-based/cultural infrastructure and extended the provision of affordable housing.

Over time wider market conditions have certainly conspired to halt the delivery of the Royal Exchange project. Despite this, the ideas of the LGIR campaign have been reflected in the final plan which has been modified to include a designated arts centre and also a small provision of affordable apartment units. How and when these will be actually delivered in relation to the rest of the scheme has yet to be discussed, so there is every possibility that they may not even materialise. But by strategically choosing to ‘co-opt’ and not resist the wider property-market objectives, local socio-cultural interests have potentially secured some consideration in the final proposal and effectively enhanced their legitimacy to exist in the Cathedral Quarter area. The motivations behind the campaign varied but all interests involved were pragmatic that developers held most of the cards. Whether it was the attempts of historic built interests securing the arcade or the community arts scene obtaining more creative performance space, all interests were utilitarian in their approach to securing what they wanted from the development. These gains have come at the expense of promoting even more retail-led investment within Belfast’s urban core.

Social Enterprises: co-option or altery?

The Belfast Centre for the Unemployed (BCU) moved into the old Northside area during the 1980’s. Through forging alliances with other commercial interests the BCU was an influential stakeholder in the formation of the Northside Business Trust. Using government incentives like the urban development grant, the BCU purchased and restored a building in the Cathedral Quarter area. In addition to their office buildings on Donegall Street, the BCU also currently owns and manages a neighbouring bar called the John Hewitt as a social enterprise. Over time the John Hewitt has evolved into a significant hub for local artists, musicians, poets and playwrights as well as a popular venue as part of the annual cultural events calendar. The

profits generated from the bar are re-invested back to support the promotion of local cultural events as well as the formation of creative alliances. To name a few of significance these include the Open House Festival, Belfast Blues Festivals, the Cathedral Quarter Arts Festival, The Bruiser Theatre Company, Belfast Humanist Group, Catalyst Arts, and Belfast Creative Writers Network.

When it opened in 1984, the BCU originally focused on challenging the austerity politics of Thatcherism and carried out research on the impacts of this political shift by examining rising trends in social deprivation and poverty across Northern Ireland. They also developed training programmes that sought to up-skill young people to enter a local labour market that was becoming increasingly re-orientated the development of a service-led economy. Finally they sought to develop their own, albeit small, nexus of social enterprises to create alternative businesses based on collective ownership and social use value. It is important not to overstate these examples of alternative economics. The cases identified here with the BCU are not linked to each other and do not tend to think of themselves as part of an alternative economic collective. Accessing finance (grants and loans) and developing the skills to create social enterprises that respond to local needs and accumulating assets are all an important part of such strategies. But there are limited consequences even among the BCU about the possibilities of such alliances, how to replicate these models and scale the social economy so that it represents a meaningful counter to neoliberal urbanism. They have their own logics, resources and perhaps highly local uses but they have not been sufficient to make an imprint on the rolling out of neoliberal urbanism in the Cathedral Quarter.

Carrick Hill residents and their campaign for collective consumption

The residents of neighbouring Carrick Hill represent another increasingly marginal population that have tried to exercise a claim to land in the surrounding locality of the Cathedral Quarter area. Despite mobilising traditional forms of urban protest, the Carrick Hill residents have repeatedly lost out on land that was originally designated for social housing use. During the 1980's the residents successfully secured the re-development of social housing scheme called the Unity Flats. The DoE later over turned these re-development claims and instead decided to prioritise the investments demands of the Northside growth thrust. More recently they also lost out on a social housing designation on site in Fredrick Street. Here the recent construction demands of the University of Ulster's campus were again prioritised at the expense of local social housing claims. To challenge the construction of such projects, the residents of Carrick Hill (united behind the Carrick Hill Resident Association CHRA) have repeatedly voiced their concerns by attending statutory consultation meetings, building coalitions of residents groups, trying (unsuccessfully) to bring political representatives on board, as well as by writing long and multiple letters of objection. Moreover, they have organised collective displays of community discontent outside the central Housing Executive offices as well as close to the University of Ulster itself. But despite exhausting such traditional methods of urban protest the CHRA have exerted very little influence in over- turning the eventual decision in their favour. Significantly, they have also never formally participated in any arrangements of soft governance like the Cathedral Quarter Trust. This would suggest that given the majority of ethnocratic residents that populate Carrick Hill, unlike the community artists, their presence is seemingly held by policy makers and urban elites as 'disruptive' to the extension of a property-led renewal.

Despite their limited success to secure social housing designations within or close to the Cathedral Quarter area, over time the Carrick Hill residents have started to use more sophisticated mechanisms of protest that have included the use of legal challenges. These were represented by residents seeking technical advice from local planning advocacy forum Community Places to table a Judicial Review (JR) regarding the final decision of the Northern Ireland Planning Appeals commission (PAC) to overturn the original decision at Fredrick Street. The JR failed on a technicality by not involving the appellant sufficiently

early in the decision making process that was ultimately to be challenged. The judge ruled that the said person had insufficient material interest in the case by not objecting at the appropriate statutory points (for example to the public advertisement) and the CHRA was not given permission to further the case.

The final judgement said nothing about the procedural irregularities or the ‘unreasonableness’ in repealing the social housing designation in an area of Belfast with the highest waiting lists in Northern Ireland. The fact that the legal system is seemingly weighted towards the property rights of a flagship development interest is not the only issue but also the inability of the CHRA, the advocacy support organisation (Community Places) or their solicitor to follow the exact procedures involved with tabling a JR. Furthermore, the reliance of the CHRA on traditional street-level urban protest may well have gained some traction in the 1970s. But these tactics seemingly do not extend to the fuzzy realities of soft- governance like the present Cathedral Quarter Trust. Nor do they challenge the primacy of the private development interests like the University and their ability to access key interests (and even individuals) to help realise their development aspirations in what appear to be fairly hidden and protected ways.

A range of actions as well as possibilities

Despite their lack of success in the Cathedral Quarter there have been a range of tactics and strategies mobilised by marginal interests in response to oncoming modes of neoliberal urbanism. This has involved such interests infiltrating soft spaces of governance like the Cathedral Quarter Trust as a means to get much closer to more influential interests and attempt to secure the survival of economic resources like the Laganside Events Grant. This demonstrates that the outcomes of soft governance are seemingly not always fixed or even pre-ordained and that decision making arenas are being used differently by various interests to achieve very different objectives. But what is most striking about the making of the Cathedral Quarter is the way in which a fairly limited development agenda has been repeatedly justified over time. There was much evidence presented in this article to suggest that a range of governance arenas, plans, resources, people and experts are important to understanding how the Cathedral Quarter was initially discovered by alternative socio-cultural interests, re-discovered by the DoE and Laganside and how it has been most recently raided by speculative development interests linked to Royal Exchange and the University of Ulster. But as Healey (2010) demonstrates, these ‘structures’ are not always fixed. Ultimately they exist to be manipulated and potentially re- worked by local interests.

In the case of the Cathedral Quarter, they have seemingly been re-worked to benefit those interests looking to deliver a property-led model of renewal. The recent Cathedral Quarter strategic vision and development plan (2011-2015) has cemented this direction by making ‘attracting investment’ and ‘commercial interest’ a fundamental objective throughout the document. Experimental resources and incentives like the Urban Development Grant were extended to de-risk the space and encourage property speculation as far back as the 1980s. Whilst the formation of current ‘soft’ spaces of governance like the Cathedral Quarter Trust have represented flanking mechanisms that help to drive forward the investment-led agenda and choreograph or buy-off any dissent raised by the local population. But as we have seen with the Trust, it has also provided scope for some local marginal interests like the community artists to participate and get closer to interests with higher amounts of economic capital and useful political connections. On the one hand there are some interests, like those involved with flagship projects that occupy key positions of these emerging formations of soft governance, that have seen their objectives to accumulate capital infused into visioning documents like the recent plan. Whilst on the other hand, there is other less marketable identities like the residents of communities in Carrick Hill who are unable to penetrate such arenas and exist very much on the outside and away from regeneration resources. There are also other interests such as the community artists or social enterprises like the BCU that

occupy a position that exists somewhere in between. These are interests that have effectively had to ‘learn how to behave’, abide by the entrepreneurial discourse of the Trust yet remain committed to delivering an alternative programme of community arts and social projects. This article has demonstrated how both the extension of neoliberal urbanism and how it is worked or challenged (in its actually existing state) is certainly complex, even within small localities such as the Cathedral Quarter. The article will now conclude by trying to illustrate some of the implications for the practice of urban resistance.

Conclusions: Implications for practices of urban resistance

Ultimately the question is how radical have these alternatives been in terms of their performances in the neoliberal urbanisation of the Belfast? And do they represent a politics of resistance that is capable of challenging the authority of market-led urbanism? By reflecting on these practices in the Cathedral Quarter it would seem that the actual usefulness of resistance in itself has been questionable and highly limited. Essentially, much of this article has demonstrated how the various urban protests based within the area over time have left the exploitive effects of neoliberal urbanism relatively unchanged. This would suggest that we need to learn more about resistance as a process that tries to work and re-work the modalities of neoliberal urbanism where it ‘actually exists’. Again future enquiry needs to be dedicated around finding out more about how these marginal interests actually respond and try to re-work the transmission of neoliberal urbanism in their own interest.

The Occupy movement is a recent interesting recent example of resistance that has sought to destabilise the global hegemony of neoliberal capitalism. Despite globalising awareness about the immoral practices of Wall Street, bankers’ bonuses and the lack of financial regulation, we have to be pragmatic about what the movement has altered with regards to actually altering the exploitive effects of neoliberalisation. Although having a base in cities across the world—there was even a camp in Writers Square within the Cathedral Quarter for a short time—the politics and practices of neoliberal capitalism on Wall Street remain distinctively unchanged. The failure of the Occupy movement has been read largely in its inability to ground itself in local urban struggles. This article argues that we have thus tended to ignore or devalue micro-struggles in the everyday or evolving of what Harvey (2013, p.124) termed the “termite theory” of evolutionary change: ‘eating away at the institutional and material supports of capital until they collapse’. This article has also demonstrated to some degree these local termites can, during certain periods of time, have some value and present certain opportunities for progressive reform. Particularly in terms of the popular street protests that were delivered by the CHRA during the 1970s/1980s who successfully challenged to NIHE to respond to the deteriorating conditions of Unity Flats.

But interestingly, such practices of resistance failed to register in the post-conflict and post-political epoch of Northern Ireland. Even recently in 2014 this article has shown how such practices have been incapable in terms of the Carrick Hill residents mounting a legal challenge like a Judicial Review, gaining wider political support or even developing productive networks with other local interests that were simultaneously wrestling with the onset of market-led renewal. Unlike the community artists the Carrick Hill residents have not gained access to sites of decision-making arenas like the Cathedral Quarter Trust, developed some degree of influence, enhanced their legitimacy and safeguarded resources that had been previously threatened to be withdrawn. The community arts interests are not ignorant of the sacrifices they have to make in order to be considered as a legitimate interest and a formal part of the Trust; particularly when it comes to making compromises over the retail-led investment of Royal Exchange. They must be considered utilitarian, as they seem to understand where decisions about urban regeneration are being negotiated, and ultimately what trade-offs are necessary in order for them to guarantee their survival in the Cathedral Quarter.

However, the response of the community artists must not be viewed as an attempt to take down neoliberalism from the inside. The Belfast Centre for the Unemployed should possess the ideological capability to generate a vision about what a socially inclusive cultural quarter might look like. Whilst its social enterprise, the John Hewitt represents a well-used cultural hub, the BCU have done very little to move beyond this and present a counter strategy that could be meaningful for other marginal interests in the area. Despite being an active founding member of the Northside Business Trust during the 1990s and an important interest in re-discovering the area strangely the BCU have seemingly taken a step back from the politics of renewal in the Cathedral Quarter. There is also a need to look more critically at the practices of umbrella cultural organisations like the Community Arts Partnership. Are these groupings simply out to get resources by whatever means they can get them? If so, are utilitarian practices emerging as vital strategies for countering neoliberal urbanism?

Finally there are some possibilities to better articulate how alternate practice and social innovation might be worked or reworked to create meaningful alternatives to neoliberal urbanism. The Ethical Development Trust along with another similar association in North Belfast represent two organisations that are looking to offer a social model of property investment. However at this stage they are still very much conceptual rather than real. But at present, fluctuating property market conditions Belfast are attracting these social investors as well as flagship interests like the University of Ulster to the area. It is important to stress here that resistance is not only possible on the terms offered by neoliberalism. However its usefulness can be read in terms of how it challenges neoliberal urbanism where it ‘actually exists’. The performance of the Ethical Development Trust could potentially be socially useful for the residents of North Belfast. How effective they are at acquiring development sites for affordable housing use will certainly welcome more research in the future; particularly in terms of the political challenges they may face, the processes they have to follow to actually acquire sites, what compromises they will have to make to get them and how or if they will connect with activities located in the designated Cathedral Quarter area itself.

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