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## Public art and ritual transformation in Northern Ireland

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Arts and the Market



**Public Art and Ritual Transformation in Northern Ireland**

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## Abstract

### Purpose

The actual uses to which public art is put have been virtually ignored, leaving multifarious dynamics related to its aesthetic encounters unexplored. Both audience agency in place- and sense-making, and the agentic role of place as more than a mere platform or stage dressing for transformation are routinely neglected. Such transformative dynamics are analyzed and interpreted in this study of the Derry-Londonderry Temple, a transient mega-installation orchestrated by bricoleur artist David Best and co-created by sectarian communities in 2015.

### Methodology

A range of ethnographic methods and supplemental netnography were employed in the investigation.

### Findings

Participants inscribed expressions of their lived experience of trauma on the Temple's infrastructure, on wood scrap remnants, or on personal artifacts dedicated for interment. These inscriptions and artifacts became objects of contemplation for all participants to consider and appreciate during visitation, affording sectarian citizens opportunity for empathic response to the plight of opposite numbers. Thousands engaged with the installation over the course of a week, registering sorrow, humility and awe in their interactions, experiencing powerful catharsis, and creating temporary cross-community comity. The installation and the grief work animating it were introjected by co-creators as a virtual legacy of the engagement.

### Originality

The originality of the study lies in its theorizing of the successful delivery of social systems therapy in an aesthetic modality to communities traditionally hostile to one another. This sustained encounter is defined as traumaturgy. The sacrificial ritual of participatory public art becomes the medium through which temporary cross-community cohesion is achieved.

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3 Public art has long served as a foundation upon which transformations of space and  
4 place, as well as of individuals and communities, have been elaborated (Visconti et al., 2010).  
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6 Beyond the discipline of consumer research from which our investigation hales, inquiry into  
7 public art has focused largely on the intentions that direct its production, whether political,  
8 aesthetic or cultural, and the roles it fulfills in the ideology within which it is embedded (Stevens  
9 and Lossau, 2015, p. 2). The actual uses to which public art is put – its literal reception by the  
10 publics who comprise its intended audience – has been virtually ignored, leaving the “socio-  
11 spatial and socio-temporal complexities” related to its “in-situ engagements” woefully under-  
12 examined (Zebracki, 2015, pp. 167-69). Both audience agency in the “making of place and  
13 meaning,” and the agentic role of place as more than a mere “staging post for” or “backdrop to”  
14 activity are chief among these neglected reception dynamics (Saunders and Moles, 2015, pp. 99-  
15 100). We analyze and interpret a number of these complexities in our ethnographic investigation  
16 of the Derry-Londonderry Temple, a mega-installation directed by bricoleur artist David Best (of  
17 Burning Man fame) that was created in this Northern Irish city in early 2015.  
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36 In Derry-Londonderry (hereafter DL), Northern Ireland, a city beleaguered over many  
37 decades by sectarian strife, a secular miracle of sorts was performed in the spring of 2015, and  
38 captured in our field notes. Citizens of bitterly opposed ideological communities embraced  
39 sharing and working together in the true spirit of community, to erect an ethereal Temple out of  
40 dimensional lumber and plywood fretwork panels. Its height rivalled that of a seven-story  
41 building, and its open-air precinct, complete with monumental altar and pendulous chandelier,  
42 encouraged pilgrims to engage with the structure in a reverent manner. Some visitants returned  
43 time and again, deepening their meaning-making with each successive journey. Participants  
44 inscribed personal expressions of their lived experience of trauma, whether directly on the  
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3 Temple's infrastructure, on wood scrap reclaimed from building discards, or on personal artifacts  
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5 dedicated for interment within the site. Once interred, these inscriptions and artifacts became  
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7 objects of contemplation for all to consider and appreciate, giving sectarian participants an  
8  
9 opportunity (for many their first) for empathic response to the plight of their opposite numbers.  
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11 This sheer witnessing presence of throngs of participants swarming the structure transformed the  
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13 dehumanizing condition of "permanent exception," endured yet previously not shared out by the  
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15 DL citizenry as a legacy of the Troubles (Robinson, 2018, p. 11), into one of temporary  
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17 reciprocal recognition.  
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22  
23 Sixty thousand participants occupied the installation over the course of the public  
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25 opening (i.e. one week), expressing emotions of sorrow, humility and awe in the rounds of their  
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27 interactions, experiencing a powerful catharsis, and creating a temporary cross-community  
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29 comity. At the end of the week of public visitation, the Temple and its grief-laden artifacts were  
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31 intentionally burned to the ground by its co-creators, and the cremains plowed under the earth.  
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33 We call this sustained encounter traumaturgy, a healing ritual that sought to palliate some of the  
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35 misery resulting from trauma, through the lived experience of sacrifice, in which a spiritual gift  
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37 engendered a cleansing reciprocal gift of solace.  
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42 The installation site was allowed eventually to revert to its original prairie habitat, leaving  
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44 no indication that this immense and moving installation had ever physically existed. The  
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46 installation and the grief work animating it – that is, the traumatic space transformed to cathartic  
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48 place – were introjected by their co-producers as a virtual legacy of the engagement. This  
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50 moment of reconciliation, now spectacularly enshrined in memory, became a visceral  
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52 incremental counterbalance to the traumatic memories of the Troubles.  
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3 Just as it is with space, time is intimately interrelated with art. Art is understood to  
4 express permanence, reflect the contemporary moment, and capture the ‘ceaseless nature’ of  
5 time (Saunders and Moles, 2015, p. 107). And, as with space, the temporality of the lived  
6 experience of public art has garnered little attention from researchers. Our field site is especially  
7 attuned to temporal rhythms, as it is evanescent in character. Audiences had the opportunity to  
8 interact with the installation for a week (or, in the case of infrastructural builders, a month)  
9 before it was consumed in flames, reduced to ash, and erased from the site as if it had never  
10 materially existed. The ritual of traumaturgy created sacred time.  
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22 If researchers know more about public art’s making than its reception, how are we to  
23 theorize those installations – including, especially, their emplacement and embodiment - whose  
24 actual making is intimately bound up with reception? That is our research objective.  
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28 MacDowall (2015, p. 45) alludes to the “complex feedback loops between practitioners and  
29 audiences” that have escaped scholarly scrutiny. Our field study examines a public installation  
30 in which the audience figures prominently in the creation of the work.  
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35 Increasingly, artists and architects are creating installations that encourage public  
36 participation. Kaitavuori (2018) estimates “participatory art” to have become the most popular  
37 form of contemporary art over the last fifteen years. Of special relevance to our present study,  
38 much of this art invites inscription (Franck (2015). Such inscription shapes subsequent actions  
39 of agents in the environment (Parunak, 2005; MacDowall, 2015), which helps to generate active  
40 audiences. This co-creative effort drives an engagement engine that animates an installation,  
41 giving it a vital energy and rhythm perceived in reception.  
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51 A well-received installation can transform dwellers’ perceptions of an urban environment  
52 (Oakes and Warnaby, 2011). These changed perceptions depend upon the transformative  
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3 experience individuals themselves undergo in their collaboration with fellow co-creators. Our  
4 study is situated squarely in the “arts consumption” nexus of O’Reilly’s (2011, p. 33) ambitious  
5 cartography of arts marketing territories even as it spans a number of his other clusters, and lies  
6 at the intersection of many of his (p. 36) “fruitful opportunities for future inquiry,” including live  
7 arts consumption experiences, arts consumption communities, arts branding, new methods in arts  
8 research, and the theoretical link between consumers, fans and audiences.  
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17 Kozinets and Sherry (2013) have described analogous Burning Man Temples as  
18 projective vehicles, massive objects of contemplation collectively constructed through individual  
19 memorials and testimonials that serve therapeutic and transformational ends. Whereas these  
20 Burning Man Temples unfold in the context of an intentional, united community as one of a host  
21 of integral subrituals, the DL Temple was a singular ceremony enacted entirely in a context of a  
22 community so divided that its opposing factions rarely if ever engage in mutual support. We  
23 examine the transformative power of traumaturgy in our ethnographic analysis.  
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34 Of the engagement practices characteristic of public art reception, Stevens and Lossau  
35 (2015, p. 9) argue that symbolic use (the representational capacity of the work to mark meaning,  
36 identity, and difference) and performative use (the participatory character of the work that  
37 embraces and stimulates embodiment and sensuality beyond the mere visual) are among those  
38 overlooked dimensions most in need of thorough investigation. We examine each of these  
39 dimensions in the balance of this paper. We are also attentive to Vernet’s (2015) notion that the  
40 sites on which public art are installed are loci of identity construction and experiments in living  
41 together for participants. We have sought to respond to the call for increased attention to  
42 “consumer experience, cultural and creative value and cultural tourism” by bringing “new  
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3 approaches to understanding and expressing the experience of audiences and consumers” to bear  
4 upon a collaborative art installation in contested space (Walmsley and Meander, 2018, pp. 4; 2).  
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8 We elaborate upon Franck’s (2015) observation that public art can become a site of  
9 resistance. Hyde (2019, p. 251) summarizes queries arising from Volkan’s (2013) work on  
10 sectarian strife in terms applicable to the Temple installation: “How can symbols of chosen  
11 traumas be made dormant . . .? How can group members adaptively mourn . . .? How can a  
12 preoccupation with minor differences between neighbors become playful?” The co-creators of  
13 the Temple, sometimes implicitly and other times explicitly, asked and answered these very  
14 questions. Art provided participants the vehicle by which traumaturgy was enabled.  
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### 26 **A Traumaturgical Purpose for Public Art**

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28 We combine two concepts – the secular wonderworking of thaumaturgy and the  
29 psychophysical wounding of trauma – to speak of traumaturgy, which we envision as the ritual  
30 mitigating, if not exorcising, of the effects of suffering on the lives of our informants who  
31 participate in an act of sacrificial gift giving. Traumaturgy is a sacrificial form of social systems  
32 therapy (Pattison 1973) with undertones of dramaturgy in both theatrical and sociological senses,  
33 as participants perform sacrificial rites intended to repair, if not entirely reweave, the social  
34 fabric. This is the ultimate use to which the Temple as a public work of art was put. The effects  
35 of traumaturgy may be immediate and fleeting (as the alien presence of the Temple on the hill, a  
36 perhaps once-in-a-lifetime seeding or catalyst for personal and social transformation), or  
37 generative and enduring (as a possible first edition of spectacular secular rituals or mundane  
38 cross-community projects to come).  
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3 Traumaturgy unfolds within an aestheticized therapeutic servicescape, which, though  
4 strikingly evocative, is less characterized by the ideological homogeneity, market mediation and  
5 emotional scripts described by Higgins and Hamilton (2018) than by sectarian conflict, aesthetic  
6 mediation, and cultural improvisation. Scott et al. (2017) suggest that the ritualization of pain  
7 facilitates self-renewal through a regained consciousness of physicality and the opportunity for  
8 bodily expression that does not otherwise have an outlet. Our work provides a useful  
9 complement as we consider ritualized performances that compensate for embodied emotional  
10 restrictions. Although the pain of Tough Mudder catalyzes emotional suffering, this is  
11 accompanied by self-erasure as participants “forget everything” and escape the stresses and  
12 monotony of daily responsibilities (Scott et al. 2017). The traumaturgy performed by our  
13 Temple informants enables them to sacrifice the debilitating effects of suffering their gifts of  
14 thick inscription recount, and yet retain the memory of the wounding, in the service not only of  
15 personal healing, but also of cross-community cohesion.

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33 Several interview excerpts illustrate this transfiguration of pain, and prefigure our  
34 ensuing analysis. In the first, Lola, a young mother, observed:

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37 “We’ve had sick kids. We’d like them to be healthy and safe, so nothing more happens  
38 to them. This [inscribing and burning] is spiritual, different than a church, because it’s  
39 going to burn. The burning will take all our pain away” [as she gestures toward the sky].

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Lola likens traumaturgy to a sacrifice, a gift of the soul eliciting cauterizing counter-gifts of relief,  
consolation and well-being from a previously punitive universe. By first emplacing and then  
dematerializing her offering, she seeks to elicit a balm heretofore unavailable to her family.

The second excerpt addresses the nature of participation and the dialectics of doubt.

Ryan, a local teacher, confessed:

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3 “I was skeptical about the whole thing, but felt I should go along and see what all the talk  
4 was about. After my first visit, I felt I had to go back again for the burn. I didn’t leave  
5 any message in the Temple but I was impressed at the outpourings of the community.  
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7 When you see it all in a mass in the one place it did have an effect on me. . . . When I  
8 went back and told [my wife] about it, we decided to come back on the night of the burn.  
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10 It was only when we were leaving, I felt my feet were lighter. It’s hard to describe but  
11 that’s how it seemed to me. The lightness in my step coming down the hill that night was  
12 undeniable. A few days after that I felt a lightness in my heart too. So in terms of impact,  
13 the Temple has had a profound impact on me. . . . For us . . . it has been quite a journey.  
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15 The lightness has remained with us. We have to put it down to the Temple being here -  
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17 nothing else . . .”  
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29 Though as dubious of mysticism and its trappings as Lola appeared to be, Ryan cannot deny or  
30 explain the mysterious uplifting he and his wife experienced in their engagement with the  
31 Temple. Their gift of attentive presence elicited a return gift of embodied buoyancy. His  
32 account reads almost as a conversion experience, with all the references to light placing him  
33 squarely on his own road to Damascus. His conception of traumaturgy as a journey is apt in the  
34 Northern Irish context, and his description of the mechanics of traumaturgy as ineffable is a  
35 response common among our informants.  
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46 A final interview verbatim suggests that traumaturgy can be periodically refreshed in  
47 reverie, providing renewed catharsis in recollection. A young husband recalls a conversation he  
48 had with this wife long after the burn, reflecting back on their Temple visit:  
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3 “She told me what she wrote: ‘I forgive myself for all my bad decisions.’ She said if she  
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5 thinks of something, and it gives her a twinge of regret, she thinks back on watching the  
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7 temple burn, and realises that she already let that go. She is incredibly happy about that.”  
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10 This reflexive, flash-back return of the fiery Temple image purges remorse and induces joy. The  
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12 installation, while physically transient, lives on in reminiscence, reinforcing the experience and  
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14 perhaps mitigating the need for subsequent live performances. Introjection is a key feature of the  
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16 installation.  
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20 Within the shared space of the Temple, it was not unusual to see sectarian memorial  
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22 discourses sitting cheek by jowl. The housing of the two communities’ trauma, visible to all  
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24 visitors as they journeyed through the ‘altar’ space, was remarkable. In everyday city life, these  
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26 messages of loss and pain would only be shared within a particular community boundary and  
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28 only with those members reflective of that identified community’s ideologies and beliefs, in what  
29  
30 would be understood as ‘safe’ territory. Despite and because of the Temple being situated on a  
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32 contested site, the two nationalisms were drawn together to participate in each other’s loss. The  
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34 opening out of loss, expressed in the language of othering, has been instrumental in transforming  
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36 contested space to one of enabled place, beyond the competitive “Olympics of suffering”  
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38 perspective that normally holds sway in the region. This commiseration is at the heart of  
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40 traumaturgy. Godbout (1998, 183) understands the gift as “the transcendence of the experience  
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42 of loss.”  
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48 In the following section we sketch the context of our field setting. After that, we describe  
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50 the methods employed in the study. We then provide a processual view of the Temple ritual.  
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52 Next we provide an account of the sacrificial dynamic that underlies traumaturgy. Subsequently,  
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54 we assess the transformational prospect that public art may offer in promoting cross-community  
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3 collaboration in sectarian situations. We conclude with an assessment of the emplacing and  
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5 embodying dynamics that ephemeral, co-created, public art set in motion. While art objects  
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7 themselves are integral to traumaturgy, we find that the process of making and unmaking these  
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9 objects is paramount to participants, who co-create an experience that blends aesthetics,  
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11 therapeutics, and *communitas*.  
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### 17 **Research Context**

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19 The recent unsuccessful efforts of the Northern Irish government to mitigate the spread of  
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21 belligerent sectarian murals, regulate the destructive consequences of extremist bonfire  
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23 ceremonies and curb the incidence of partisan graffiti (Downey and Sherry, 2014; Simone-  
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25 Charteris, 2017) provide the context for our investigation of the Temple installation. The history  
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27 of DL is steeped in conflict between Protestant (Unionist) and Catholic (Republican)  
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29 communities, going back at least as far as the Plantation of Ulster (1606) which saw the eviction  
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31 of locals and their replacement with Scottish colonists loyal to the English king, and the Siege of  
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33 Derry (1688), a pivotal battle site in the religious struggle for the English monarchy. With the  
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35 Partition of Ireland (1920), the island was divided into two self-governing units, which then  
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37 became separate nations after the Anglo-Irish War (1922). These centuries of internecine  
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39 hostilities set the stage for the “Troubles” (roughly 1968-1998), which fanned the flames of  
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41 sectarian violence to new heights, until a truce was achieved that ended open warfare and  
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43 instituted a power-sharing “consociational” government.  
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49 While the level of physical violence has decelerated in the current “post-conflict” era,  
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51 levels of posttraumatic stress and associated sequelae have exacted a terrible toll on the citizens  
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53 of DL. The possibility of a hard Brexit with no backstop to avert the restoration of a tightly  
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55 controlled border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland re-escalated sectarian  
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3 tension in recent years. Temporary post-Brexit arrangements to avoid a hard border are a current  
4 source of stress. The collapse of the Northern Irish government in 2017 (its restoration occurred  
5 three years later, at the time of this writing) augurs further strain on sectarian relations in the  
6 foreseeable future. In view of ineffectual government efforts to promote reconciliation and  
7 cross-community concord, opportunities for extra-governmental intervention, particularly of an  
8 artistic and ritual nature, grow increasingly precious. The role of collaborative public art in the  
9 establishment and maintenance of a truly transformational kind of comity called “justpeace” –  
10 the removal of direct, structural and cultural types of violence – in conflict zones (Alvarez, 2019;  
11 Lederach, 1990) seems especially promising, no matter the incremental impact of any particular  
12 aesthetic effort.  
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## 28 **Methodology**

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31 There is a growing realization among arts scholars of the need to understand relational  
32 aesthetics (Bourriaud, 2002) through the use of ethnographic methods, given its  
33 “extemporaneous and participatory” nature (Kester, 2011, p. 10). This shift from object- to  
34 process-based art is relational insofar as the artist creates a space for human interaction in a given  
35 context through set activities (Sicart, 2014). Ethnography is particularly suited to the probing  
36 and tracing of these relations as they ramify throughout consumer experience.  
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45 We employed three principal modes of data collection throughout the field work. The  
46 project was flanked by interviews, initially in the pre-build phase with installation organizers and  
47 facilitators, and ultimately in the post-burn phase with other event participants. Ethnography  
48 was undertaken during the build phase and throughout the period of participants’ engagement  
49 with the installation, from object interment and appreciation of the edifice all the way through to  
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3 the aftermath of the burning of the entire installation. Researchers were often present onsite  
4 from well before official opening time to well after official closing time. Participant observation,  
5 photography and videography figured prominently in this phase of the work. The ethnographers  
6 worked both singly and as a dyad, collecting data, conferring on interpretations, and shaping the  
7 emergent design of the study. Each of us had previous familiarity with the cultural and artistic  
8 context of the event; one of us is native to Northern Ireland, the other is an American with  
9 extensive familiarity with Burning Man. During our nine days onsite, as well as at intervals after  
10 our field immersion, we followed social media such as Face Book, YouTube, organizational  
11 websites and relevant listservs, thereby adding an unobtrusive netnographic component to the  
12 study.  
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26 We employed a number of sampling approaches, including opportunistic, snowball,  
27 convenience, maximum variation, criterion, intensity, politically important case, critical case and  
28 typical case styles (Miles and Huberman, 1984). We interviewed several hundred participants,  
29 some briefly, others at length, across all categories of collaborating constituencies, including  
30 David Best, organizers, staggers, visitors, security workers, politicians, journalists, community  
31 stakeholders, and a variety of non-attendees in the city at large. Analysis was characterized by  
32 constant comparison in the field and by negotiation in the post-field period, during which time  
33 we met regularly on-line and face to face to interpret themes and nuances. We employed  
34 traditional coding practices (open/axial/selective) to identify themes (Strauss and Corbin, 1998),  
35 and subsequently sorted themes into prospective discrete, contiguous treatments with an eye  
36 eventually to providing a collective comprehensive account of our phenomenon (Sherry, 2006),  
37 distributed across a range of social scientific and humanistic venues. To avoid over-reliance on  
38 interview verbatims, we include much observational data drawn from our field notes as well as  
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3 several photographs in our narrative. We weave findings and interpretation together in our  
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5 account in traditional ethnographic fashion. We proceed with an overview of the ritual unfolding  
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7 in the Temple.  
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### 11 12 **A Processual View of Temple Ritual** 13

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15 While neither a festival (Falassi, 1987) nor a protestival (St. John, 2008) in the strictest  
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17 sense, the installation is very clearly a secular ritual – i.e., traumaturgy – comprising numerous  
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19 ceremonial acts. The Temple’s ritual process moved through three stages. The first stage was  
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21 the offering of an oblation which became a sacrificial gift that served as a vessel for the  
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23 participant’s self, and, in particular his or her traumatic burden or sanative aspiration. This might  
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25 be an artifact, an inscription, or both. For example, “Keep the troubles in the past, look to the  
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27 future” was a variation on a common theme etched around the Temple. Similarly “For sobriety  
28  
29 for my poor sister” was a permutation of a prayer for a traumatized relative or friend.  
30  
31

32  
33 Pharmaceutical packaging, personal journals, letters and treatises, photographs and other  
34  
35 personal effects, and hand-wrought tokens were interred in the nooks and crannies of the  
36  
37 structure. Further, the overarching Temple structure itself comprised a sacramental gift. An  
38  
39 immaterial return gift of immediacy and presence – of being authentically and empathically  
40  
41 attended to – in the close contemplation of the oblation was widely reported among informants.  
42  
43 An asymmetrical generalized return gift from providence, history, a kalogenic universe, or other  
44  
45 unspecified prime mover was awaited by many of our informants. This is a secular reward for a  
46  
47 secular prayer bestowed on participants by a suprahuman agent, an analogue of the medieval  
48  
49 European tradition of the pro anima gift (S.-Christen, 2003). This gift might manifest in the  
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3 form of personal, familial or civic transformation; some participants hoped for or expected all  
4  
5 three.  
6

7  
8 The second stage was the immolation, the destruction of the oblation, the sacrifice of the  
9  
10 gift through interment in the Temple and subsequent burning. Donors might make multiple  
11  
12 visits to the Temple, revisiting their gift and checking on occasion to see whether some comment  
13  
14 might have been elicited or some artifact meaningfully juxtaposed with their own, but we  
15  
16 recorded no example of gifts once given being removed or re-sited by their donors, as if perhaps  
17  
18 such summary retrieval or replacement might be inauspicious or sacrilegious. The principle of  
19  
20 keeping-while-giving (Weiner, 1992) was a vital component of this sacrificial gift giving.  
21  
22 Through visitation, photography or enshrinement in memory, a gift was retained even as it  
23  
24 circulated among many recipients.  
25  
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28  
29 The third stage is reconciliation, the momentary, and in some cases longer term  
30  
31 restoration of balance in the life of a grieving individual and comity between hostile  
32  
33 communities. The spirit of the gift circulating among participants during the week of the  
34  
35 engagement, its movement accelerated by the ignition of material collective sentiment, diffused a  
36  
37 kind of quotidian grace among participants as the sacrifice progressed, as if the myriad sparks  
38  
39 and embers drawn up into the night sky that reflected the transfiguration of artifacts to energy  
40  
41 were actually a visible if inconstant symbol of the forging of cross-community identity. Even for  
42  
43 spectators not actively partaking in the construction project, simply contemplating the notion that  
44  
45 truculence might be curbed and solidarity beyond mere consociational cooperation achieved was  
46  
47 a testament to the conciliative aura of the witness evoked in apprehension. In the words of the  
48  
49 late Martin McGuinness, a DL native and former “Sinn Féin politician and peace negotiator who  
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3 went from being an IRA commander to serving for a decade as deputy first minister of Northern  
4 Ireland” (McHardy, 2017), as posted in his tweet after visiting the Temple:  
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7  
8 Thanks to David Best – his wonderful Temple inspired remembrance, letting go and a  
9  
10 reconciled future. #Derry#Peace  
11

12 Sacrifice expresses not only economic and spiritual hopes, but political ones as well (Shipton,  
13 2014).  
14

15  
16  
17 Beyond the salutary cross-community collaboration and the opening of minds and hearts  
18 produced by a non-polarizing “bonfire,” some participants sought auguries of a successful  
19 sacrifice. A double rainbow above the Temple. The massive convocation of both communities.  
20  
21 The absence of violence surrounding the event. No divine interdiction or diabolical  
22  
23 manifestation. The relative solemnity attending the burn. The cathartic experience. All were  
24  
25 adduced as examples of a transcendent suprahuman agent receiving the communal sacrificial  
26  
27 gift. The Temple illustrated the transformative personal, social, political and spiritual  
28  
29 possibilities afforded by committed communion realized through an art installation. We take a  
30  
31 closer look at its engagement mechanism next.  
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37  
38 -INSERT FIGURES OF DL TEMPLE HERE-  
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## 42 **Central Sacrifice Dynamic**

43

44  
45 Sacrifice in an aesthetic key seems an especially appropriate vehicle of violence  
46 management in a postcolonial society such as Northern Ireland. For Girard (1987), violence is at  
47  
48 the heart of the sacred. He maintains that mimetic desire results in violence, which itself  
49  
50 becomes mimetic. Individuals learn to long through observation, coming to want what the other  
51  
52 possesses so intensely that they eventually take those possessions by force, which leads to an  
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3 escalating cycle of violence that threatens to rend the community. To halt this endemic brutality  
4 a victim is selected for sacrifice, and is replaced by a surrogate (a scapegoat) who is killed so that  
5 the community, being spared a similar inevitable fate, is able to be renewed. The violent impulse  
6 threatening the community is thus temporarily appeased. The scapegoat must be segregated  
7 from the community, and appear to be at once remotely foreign to but similar enough to the  
8 community so that its reintegration is ritually plausible. The scapegoat can neither protect itself  
9 nor provoke a violent reaction; its immolation can't create a fresh conflict (Girard, 1987, p. 24).  
10 Whether social dysfunction arises as a result of mimetic desire or of anxiety surrounding the  
11 outcomes of exchange, sacrifice serves to recalibrate relationships among its participants. The  
12 Temple, a more progressive transformation of sectarian bonfire traditions, seems to have served  
13 this purpose.

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Girard also offers two etymological observations germane to our analysis. First, he notes that the term “sacred” may also be translated as “accursed,” illustrating the intimate intertwining of beneficence and maleficence pertaining to the concept (1977, p. 257). Danger is embodied in the sacred. In a related vein, Bataille believes the purpose of sacrifice is to give destruction (whose “essence” is to consume profitlessly) its “due.” The sacrificial victim, a “surplus” withdrawn from “useful wealth,” solely for the purpose of profitless consumption, is described as the “accursed share,” whose consecration is achieved through destruction (1989, pp. 58-59). The resonance with Girard’s perspective is clear. The collaboration of habitually antagonistic communities to construct a wildly ornate installation on contested ground and then destroy the labor-intensive project in a blaze of communitas-inducing enthusiasm reflects this moral channeling of excess.

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2  
3           Second, Girard notes that “gift” is also translated in some languages as “poison,”  
4  
5 illustrating the use of gift giving to “get rid of anything that nourishes discord within oneself”  
6  
7 (2014, 130). This second insight has been elaborated by others (Raheja, 1988; Sherry et al.,  
8  
9 1993) who have explored the transfer of inauspiciousness via gift giving. The malign suffering  
10  
11 encoded in our informants’ sacrificial gifts and released in their destruction reflects these  
12  
13 ambivalent forces at work in the ritual. The exorcism at the heart of traumaturgy is central to the  
14  
15 achievement of cross-community cohesion, however momentary. We next consider the deeper  
16  
17 significance of the dematerialization of these material oblations.  
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### 24 **The Sacrificed Objects**

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26           The oblation is not the simple opposite of a souvenir, nor of a “souvenir to forget”  
27  
28 (Marcoux, 2017). The oblation is created by the donor, not purchased from a vendor or removed  
29  
30 from a venue as a physical trace memento. Like a dark tourism souvenir, it is invested with  
31  
32 personal meaning coupled with the trauma, but it is not retained by its owner as a keepsake of the  
33  
34 event. It is placed into circulation among participants with kindred offerings for communal  
35  
36 consumption. Whereas the souvenir is a possession, the oblation becomes a “dispossession” in  
37  
38 two senses. First of all, the object is transformed into a gift by the donor, in the service of cross-  
39  
40 community cohesion, and eventually is subjected to extreme divestiture. Second of all, the  
41  
42 sacrifice of the oblation results in something of an exorcism, the casting out of the unwanted  
43  
44 burden of trauma but the retention of its clinical sense. The donor – in this case, comprising the  
45  
46 donor community bridging the sectarian divide – seeks relief from the emotionally debilitating  
47  
48 effects of the trauma, but not at the expense of the memory of the trauma. The donor makes the  
49  
50 offering, and then the sacrifice, with the intention that personal and sectarian pain might be  
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3 transmuted into eventual cross-community reconciliation. These gifts are neither a denial nor a  
4 revising of history, but a good faith effort to change the course of history. Forgiving can be  
5  
6 achieved without forgetting  
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10 Derrida's (1981, as discussed in Royle, 2003, pp. 77; 135) identification of writing with  
11 the sacrificial scapegoat (*pharmakon*) may help clarify the process of bracketing that occurs  
12 when a participant enters an inscription or artifact. Writing both aids and effaces memory; being  
13 part remedy and part poison, it is simultaneously a help and a hindrance to forgetting. The deep  
14 inscriptions, and their subsequent immolations, encourage participants to dissociate and defuse  
15 the debilitating aspect of grief (the *animus*) without erasing the remembrance of the suffering  
16 itself, so that the experience of suffering is owned but contained. This is, to borrow a phrase  
17 from Claudius, the antagonist of Hamlet, the "poison of deep grief," the traumaturgical annealing  
18 by which sacrifice releases participants from the suffering they have visited on one another. The  
19 sacrifice of the scapegoat should incite no further violence. The Temple burn spawned none of  
20 the destructive behavior associated with bonfire aftermath in local tradition. In a similar vein,  
21 Hyde (2019, p. 204) observes that Koretz's (2013) "writing the Holocaust is its own  
22 *holocaustum*, a ritual burning of the thing that 'somehow' yields 'piece of mind,' temporary  
23 though it may be." Without equating the Troubles with the Shoah, we see this practice of  
24 inscription, and subsequent consignment of the inscribed to the literal flames, bringing similarly  
25 momentary respite to our Northern Irish informants.  
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46 Neither can these gifts be construed as heirlooms in a strict sense, even though the  
47 intergenerational transmission and remission of trauma encoded in the ritual suggest that the  
48 memory of the lived experience of the Temple, recounted in personal narratives, digital images,  
49 social media commentary, and perhaps, eventually, in future burns, will pass into the oral history  
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3 and family lore of “the Troubles,” to be reconsidered by posterity. The tangible gifts are gone,  
4  
5 but the spirit of these gifts can be circulated for generations to come. The lived experience of the  
6  
7 burn belongs to its participants, but the spiritual and cultural significance of its memory (its  
8  
9 intergenerational re-remembering) can be shared across time and space. Transformation can be  
10  
11 experienced vicariously whenever tales of the Temple are told. Sometimes ostensibly literally  
12  
13 so, as in the case of one of our informants, who, bedridden and unable to visit the Temple in  
14  
15 person, credited the remission of a life-threatening tumor to the intercession of friends who  
16  
17 inscribed the installation on her behalf.  
18  
19

20  
21 Finally, these gifts cannot be construed as memorials per se. They are as evanescent as a  
22  
23 toast or a prayer, impermanent in the way that a roadside commemorative is eroded by neglect or  
24  
25 razed by municipal edict, but, unlike such wayside memorials, they are intentionally consigned  
26  
27 to oblivion by their makers. The pacific potential of this consignment is explored in the  
28  
29 following section.  
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31

32  
33 -INSERT FIGURES OF INSCRIPTIONS & ARTIFACTS HERE-  
34

### 35 **Can Public Art Help Transform Precarious Peace to Perpetual Justpeace?**

36  
37 The DL Temple was a powerful evocation of the ability of public art to condition  
38  
39 reception upon cascading co-creation, to problematize space in a way that encourages  
40  
41 transformational place (and, in turn, polity) to emerge, and to harness the energies born of  
42  
43 sacrifice in the service of therapeutic experience. The Temple demonstrated the foundational  
44  
45 character of emplacement not just to the creation and reception of public art, but to its  
46  
47 persistence in collective memory. Finally, the Temple was a textbook illustration of the tight  
48  
49 coupling and primacy of process over product, or of experience over object, in the consumer’s  
50  
51 aesthetic reception. Participants told us that the sacrifice of something so beautiful was required  
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3 to help people achieve the kind of intellectual, emotional and visceral appreciation capable of  
4  
5 sparking personal and social transformation. The Temple embodied and enacted the very  
6  
7 transience of aesthetic experience it awakened in its appreciators. Hard physical and emotional  
8  
9 labor, vulnerability and sacrifice, and willingness to encounter others on an authentic level across  
10  
11 boundaries produces insight in an ephemeral moment, but can it catalyze sustained humane  
12  
13 engagement?  
14  
15

### 16 17 18 19 *Temple as Social Therapy* 20

21  
22 Many of our informants viewed the Temple project as an encouraging if embryonic  
23  
24 delivery of social systems therapy in an aesthetic key. For example, Barbara (40s) felt the  
25  
26 installation portended an uptick in wellbeing: “The Troubles repressed creativity for a long time,  
27  
28 but now creativity seems to be exploding. There are finally some outlets for it. The Temple is a  
29  
30 good thing.” For Barbara, the mimetic chain reaction of art making and appreciation seems an  
31  
32 implicit antidote to the violent context from which it has emerged. Dennis (40s) was also  
33  
34 optimistic, but a bit more cautionary: “It’s [the Temple] a nice idea. Whatever helps. But it will  
35  
36 take more than that.” The one-and-done intervention whose evanescence was so prized by some  
37  
38 induced a longing for repetition, no matter how periodic, among others, but most informants  
39  
40 seconded Dennis’s skepticism of a magic bullet solution to sectarian strife. Fits and starts are the  
41  
42 likely precursor to comity. Patrick (60s) expressed a darker, ambivalent view: “It [the Temple]  
43  
44 might appeal to the middle class. They raised a lot of money for it. The artist got a lot of money  
45  
46 for it. I think it’s just part of the tribal bullshit. It might be OK, though.” This ambivalence and  
47  
48 grudging admiration seem to signal recognition that personal transformation must precede  
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59  
60 political evolution.

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3 A young father, Brendan, visiting the Temple with his wife, son and daughter, was  
4 eloquent in his assessment of the transformational effect of the installation, having recently  
5 experienced a traumatic loss: “It’s better than going to some fuckin’ chapel, with a priest who  
6 didn’t know anything about you, your son, or your values. We’d rather come to something like  
7 this. Our [departed] son would have loved this.” This feeling of “being known” in a non-  
8 institutional channel conveys the therapeutic sense of authentic presence informants reported  
9 feeling as they rendered themselves vulnerable to one another in an unusually emotional rather  
10 than conventionally physical medium. Theirs was an open and available presence rather than a  
11 threatening or fearful one, making the engagement fundamentally humane.  
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24 Donnie (20s), commenting on the spatial transformation the project produced, observed,  
25 “It’s been good for me to let go of a lot of stuff that has happened over the last few years. I am  
26 hoping something good will come out of this. I will miss being part of the project, but I have met  
27 lots of people from other parts of the town [i.e. the other sectarian community for whom this site  
28 would ordinarily be a “no-go zone”]. I know this site, I played here growing up, but a lot of  
29 people in Derry wouldn’t know it.” His letting go of psycho-cultural baggage and openness to  
30 healthy encounters across ethno-national boundaries reflect the transformative energy that  
31 participating in the installation engendered. Joseph, a young male (20s) volunteer builder,  
32 unemployed and disillusioned before this project, was finally feeling upbeat: “I now know what I  
33 want to do with my life. I’m going to do carpentry. I have really enjoyed this experience so  
34 much, I needed to come back and do something else” [i.e. volunteer to be a Temple Guardian].  
35 Joseph had recently lost his father to suicide and felt that the Temple had offered him a direction  
36 in life. This vocational discernment enabled by his participation provided both a beacon and an  
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3 anchor to Joseph at an emotionally tumultuous time, and inspired him to keep the gift circulating  
4  
5 through additional volunteer work.  
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7  
8 *Temple as Peace Catalyst*  
9

10         There has been a shift in emphasis over time in the discipline and practice of peace  
11 building from tactically short-term conflict resolution to strategically longer term conflict  
12 transformation (Lederach, 1995; see also <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LwsThUncRxE>)  
13 focused on realizing a “justpeace,” that is, the reduction of all forms of violence and the pursuit  
14 of all varieties of justice (Lopez 2019). Strategic peace building mobilizes a multifaceted and  
15 mutually influential set of practices, among them arts-based approaches to social transformation,  
16 to accomplish its goals (Lederach and Mansfield, n.d.). Drawing from her work in post-conflict  
17 Colombia, Alvarez (2019) describes one such approach as “elicitive conflict transformation,” a  
18 practice by which plural experiences of peace can be articulated by antagonists in situ, through  
19 acts of collective resilience and creation of spaces for encounter realized by aesthetic and ritual  
20 means. These means, as they proliferate over time, become central to processes of healing and  
21 reconciliation (Alvarez 2019). The DL Temple is an example of such an incremental  
22 intervention, joined by such others as storytelling and re-imaged mural painting in the Northern  
23 Irish context (Downey and Sherry, 2014; Simone-Charteris, 2017).  
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42         Robinson (2018, pp. 12-13) has argued forcefully that the “rehumanizing” of sectarian  
43 victims and their places of commemoration – that is, addressing collective memories of trauma  
44 in public space that mobilizes identity politics in a humane and constructive way – is essential  
45 to any hope of reconciliation in transitional societies. He urges researchers to investigate “what  
46 Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer (2016) call ‘small acts of repair’ and resistance,” and to “attune  
47 [themselves] to alternate possibilities of remembering and reckoning with the past” (Robinson  
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3 (2018, p. 23). The collaborative public art project that we have presented in this paper is exactly  
4  
5 the kind of incremental local intervention capable of inspiring the transformation of sectarian  
6  
7 exceptionalism and promoting rehumanization of antagonists.  
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10  
11 Hocking (2015, p. 191) observes that “[a]t its best, public art can delight, inspire and on  
12  
13 occasion serve as a focal point for social criticism and shared identification.” The Temple  
14  
15 fulfilled each of these possibilities. In our concluding section, we emphasize the way in which  
16  
17 traumaturgy, when experienced in the context of a co-created public art project, can prime the  
18  
19 pump of cross-community comity in a divided society by levelling sectarian exceptionalism in a  
20  
21 moment of interpersonal immediatism on freshly minted common ground.  
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## 25 **Conclusion**

26  
27 The spatial goal of repurposing public art is to channel identity politics from tense  
28  
29 dialectical confrontation to more harmonious dialogical confrontation, in order to create a  
30  
31 consociational sense of shared place (Visconti et al., 2010). In our sectarian field setting, public  
32  
33 space is dominated by private agendas, essentially privatizing place such that one community is  
34  
35 emplaced and another displaced. Cross-community collaboration reclaims nominal public space  
36  
37 for a public agenda, fundamentally transforming de facto private place to public space and  
38  
39 emplacing both communities (Downey and Sherry, 2014; Simone-Charteris, 2017). Because  
40  
41 the Temple was ephemeral or evanescent, its emplacing potential must reverberate in memory  
42  
43 through mass media, social media and word-of-mouth. Since no physical trace remains beyond  
44  
45 photographs, despite the lamentation of many locals, the Temple is not a continuing critique or  
46  
47 reformation of the status quo, beyond the extent to which it has been introjected by locals as an  
48  
49 impetus to ethical action.  
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## 54 *Building through Pain*

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3 Despite its robust materiality, the Temple was primarily a metaphysical construction  
4 project. The poignant and beautiful corporeal artwork created, installed, appreciated and  
5 sacrificed in cross-community collaboration almost masks the fact that David Best orchestrated  
6 the aesthetic process with and through people, that human antagonists were the tesserae of an  
7 unlikely mosaic. People were at once producers, consumers, and the consumed. In fact, their  
8 aesthetic engagement was at once reactive and heteronomous as well as active and autonomous,  
9 touching all the bases of Kaitavuori's (2018, p.17) typology of participation. The making and  
10 reception of art were inextricably intertwined. Community is actually realized in its *making* – it  
11 needs to be *building* to be an entity. It is performed and enacted, emergent in its projects.  
12 Unlike the sedimented behavior (Richardson, 1987) of memorials, immaterial outcomes illustrate  
13 the ongoing effort essential to forging community. It is a fragile enterprise that requires constant  
14 nurturing.

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Robinson (2018, p. 54) observes that “sometimes pain can only be represented and  
communicated *affectively*, through art, touch, tears and placemaking. The duty of witnessing  
thus demands a new politics of inscription, both aesthetic and political.” He notes further (p. 56)  
that “continuous performance of public grief, in art, discourse and placemaking, can constitute  
acts of political resistance that demand recognition of traumas, past and ongoing.” Such  
sensuous, artful emplacement engenders

the essence of Dominick LaCapra's ‘empathic unsettlement’, described by Jill Bennett as  
“the aesthetic experience of simultaneously *feeling* for another and becoming aware of a  
distinction between one's own perceptions and the experience of the other” (Benett,  
2005, p. 8; LaCapra, 2001). . . . It is mourning that still allows for the necessary critical  
space for subjects to truly *encounter* one another, as Judith Butler [2006] so eloquently  
puts it (Robinson 2018, p. 108).

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3 The Temple project embodied exactly such humane processing of traumatic experience,  
4 temporarily transforming the incommensurable divisive grief of the two communities into a  
5  
6 unitive sharing, a *being-with-each-other-in-the-place* sense of cross-community solidarity.  
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9

### 10 Co-creating a Joint Narrative

11  
12 Hocking (2015, pp. 2-4) notes that the range of public art installations following the  
13  
14 Good Friday Agreement promoted by local officials as “transformative tools” in the post-conflict  
15  
16 repositioning of civic identity has predictably provoked contestation, given the variance in  
17  
18 available narratives of memory and heritage that artists and audiences draw upon to validate their  
19  
20 experience. Local residents may resist with various degrees of energy and success the obtrusion  
21  
22 of identity interventions by governmental or paramilitary authorities (Hocking, 2015; Viggiani,  
23  
24 2014). In her multi-year study of over 150 Belfast memorials, Viggiani (2014) explores the  
25  
26 interrelationship of subaltern counter-memories (Foucault, 1977) in the absence of an officially  
27  
28 sanctioned memory in the construction of contemporary Northern Irish identity politics and  
29  
30 collective memory of the Troubles. She wonders poignantly whether “the time and space for a  
31  
32 cross-community narrative of the conflict in the public arena [will] ever materialize” (2014, p.  
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39 200).

40 The DL Temple Burn of 2015 may be the first indication that such a joint narrative is  
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42 possible, and the strange ephemeral character of the installation was likely the key to its success.  
43  
44 The weird appearance of the Temple – exotic, delicate, ethereal – contrasted strikingly with the  
45  
46 formulaic iconography and structure of conventional sectarian public art installations. Initially,  
47  
48 participants resisted its impermanence. The Temple was widely proclaimed to be “too beautiful  
49  
50 to burn,” until the sacrificial essence of the project was gradually realized. Hyde (2019, p. 280)  
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52 notes that “counter-memorials that have arisen in postwar Germany enlist physical erasures as  
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3 aids to mental presence,” reminding citizens “to bear in mind what conventional memorials  
4 might lead them to forget.” The transient Temple serves a similar purpose in the context of  
5  
6 Northern Ireland.  
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9  
10 The “public” nature of public art is traditionally anchored in notions of unimpeded spatial  
11 access to and material permanence of the work itself (Hocking, 2015). Each of these  
12 constructions is challenged by the Temple. First, the siting of the installation required the  
13 relaxation of sectarian territorial rules and the encouragement of boundary transgression. The  
14 “shared spaces” created by public art impose a “common spatial frame” on “disparate  
15 experiences” (Young, 1993, p. 6), affording participants the opportunity to contemplate  
16 difference in an embodied fashion conducive to empathic response. Second, the “materiality” of  
17 art – the incremental proliferation of permanent forms of memorialization” in the post-GFA era  
18 (Viggani, 2014, p. 38), in particular – that invests the work with “agency” (Hocking, 2015, p.  
19 19), is challenged by the immaterial essence of the Temple, that evanescent quality realized in  
20 the transubstantiation of matter to energy. The transformation of communal process to product,  
21 and then of product back to communal process, highlights the agentic nature of sacrifice. The  
22 mandate for post-conflict public art to “forge new visual cultures” able to foster “inclusion . . .  
23 and bolster the legitimacy of new regimes and economies . . .” (Hocking, 2015, p. 175) should  
24 encompass as well those ephemeral installations whose transient or transactional physicality is  
25 the chrysalis for personal and civic transformation.  
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#### 46 *Toward a Re-membered Future*

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49 Drawing his inspiration from vernacular historiography, Beiner (2018, pp. 30; 32)  
50 contrasts Irish loquacity with Northern Irish taciturnity, the latter a result of a “culture of  
51 avoidance” that inhibits the addressing of controversial topics in “mixed company” resulting  
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3 from centuries of “ingrained sectarian tensions” supported by “bitter political and religious  
4 divides.” This reticence gives rise to a tradition of “social forgetting,” a “subtle form” of  
5 remembering which he designates, using the local term, “disremembering,” and which involves  
6 the creation of “ambivalent and multi-layered memories” (2018, pp. 30; 606). He recognizes the  
7 rhetorical value of silence as a “mnemonic device,” citing Heaney’s famous admonition,  
8 “Whatever you say, say nothing,” as an allusion of this pretending to forget, this disinclination to  
9 remember (Beiner, 2018, pp. 28; 32). All of these tendencies conspire to thwart consensus on  
10 “what to remember in public” in Northern Ireland (Beiner, 2018, p. 33). The powerful  
11 immediacy and mournful evanescence of the Temple installation transformed these cultural  
12 customs by dematerializing a concelebration of shared trauma, as if implicitly reminding  
13 participants of Lear’s declaration “Nothing will come of nothing. Speak again.” The catharsis  
14 afforded by this one-time-only traumaturgy was not merely purgative – it also offered the  
15 promise of priming the pump for future as-yet-specified cross-communal rituals of storytelling  
16 and storyhearing. The Temple afforded participants a bracketing of memory as a gradual  
17 transition to forgiveness.

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19 The engagement we have described transformed secular to sacred time and place,  
20 sectarian to ecumenical identity, mundane to extraordinary gifts, and despair to hope, in classic  
21 ritual fashion, and embodied these transformations in individual and collective memory. Like  
22 many experiences in Temporary Autonomous Zones (Bey, 2011), the momentary epiphanies  
23 realized by participants had variable shelf lives and differential mobilizing power. For some, the  
24 spirit of sacrifice ramified to new life changes and worldview reformations. For others, that  
25 same spirit testified to the possibility of change, and the belief that future collaborative aesthetic  
26 interventions could prime the pump of détente, if not reconciliation.

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