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The campaign for the demolition of Divis, Belfast: community-led planning amidst conflict

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The Campaign for the Demolition of Divis, Belfast: Community-led planning amidst conflict

23rd June 2022

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The Divis Story 1966-1986

- A conventional story of slum clearance and failed high rise living...
- But...
 - Backdrop of extreme social breakdown and political instability
 - Phases of community action
 - Support from national advocacy planners



Methods

- Archival research: TCPA, PRONI, press, documentaries, personal collections
- 11 Interviews (activists, councillors, social workers, residents. TCPA workers)
- Key source: Pat Webb PhD (2016) *The Battles for Divis Flats: A Study of community Power, University of Ulster*



Image: Community Action

From Pound Loney to the Divis Flats

- The 'Pound Loney' neighbourhood
- Mathew Plan 1963 and slum clearance
- 1965 with virtual no consultation (but the support of the Catholic church, City Council agree to redevelop Pound Loney
- Divis Flats constructed between 1966- 1972 with first residents moving in 1968.
- Environment a health issue emerged shortly after
- Decision to partially demolish in 1979, and complete demolition in 1986
- By 1994 only a single tower remained
- Army base on the roof removed in 2005.



Room at the top

- Northern Ireland Housing Trust
- Lower Falls Rd, adjacent to new M1 (Westlink) and next to Loyalist Shankhill Rd
- 12 interlinked eight story deck access blocks and one 19 storey tower, with 794 flats for 2700 people
- Classic Le Corbusier vision of streets in the sky

ROOM AT THE TOP
Sky-high homes will look down on a 'garden city'





Image: BBC

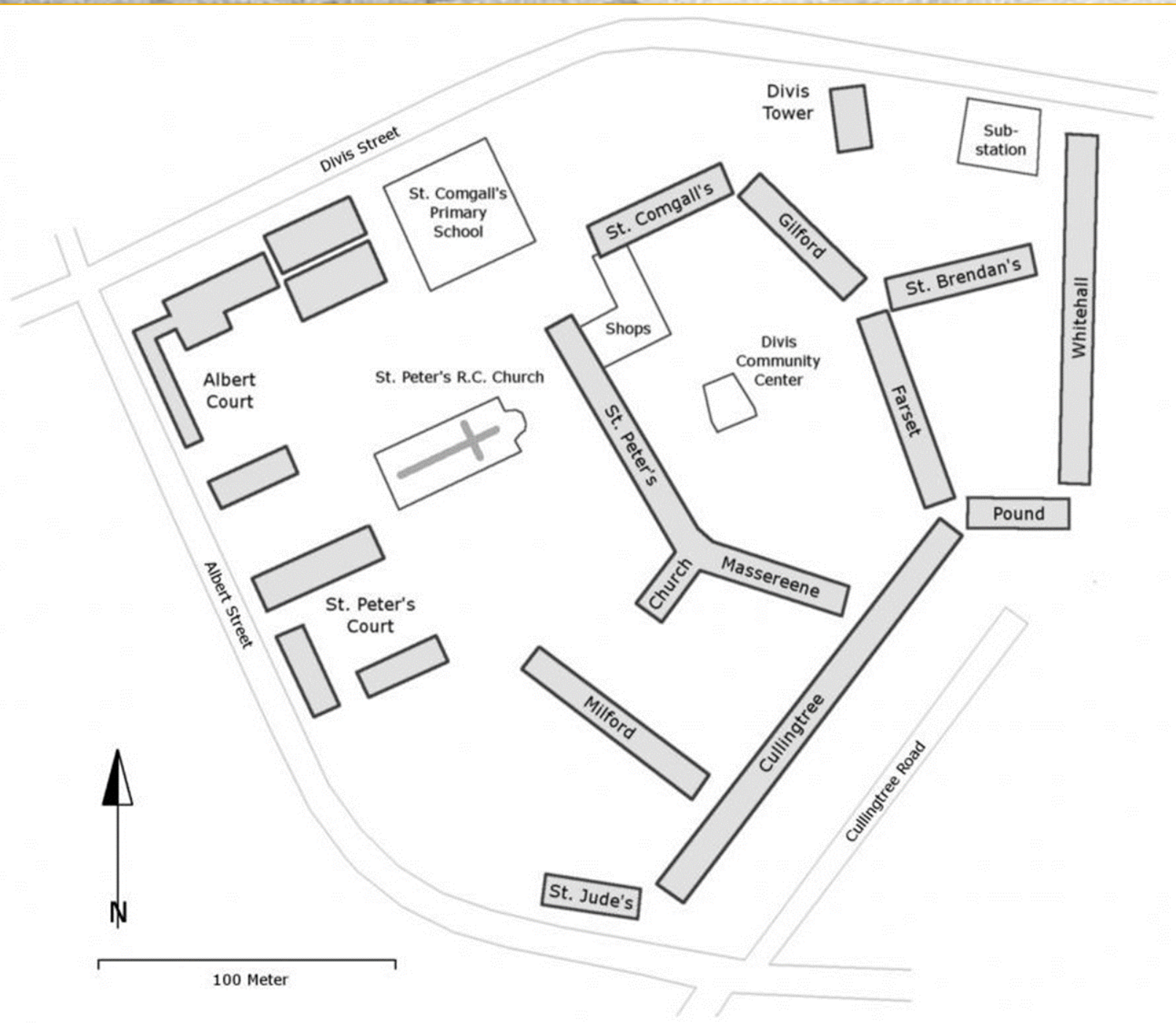


Image: Pat Webb/Archiseek



Image: Flickr- S[pong B_o_B

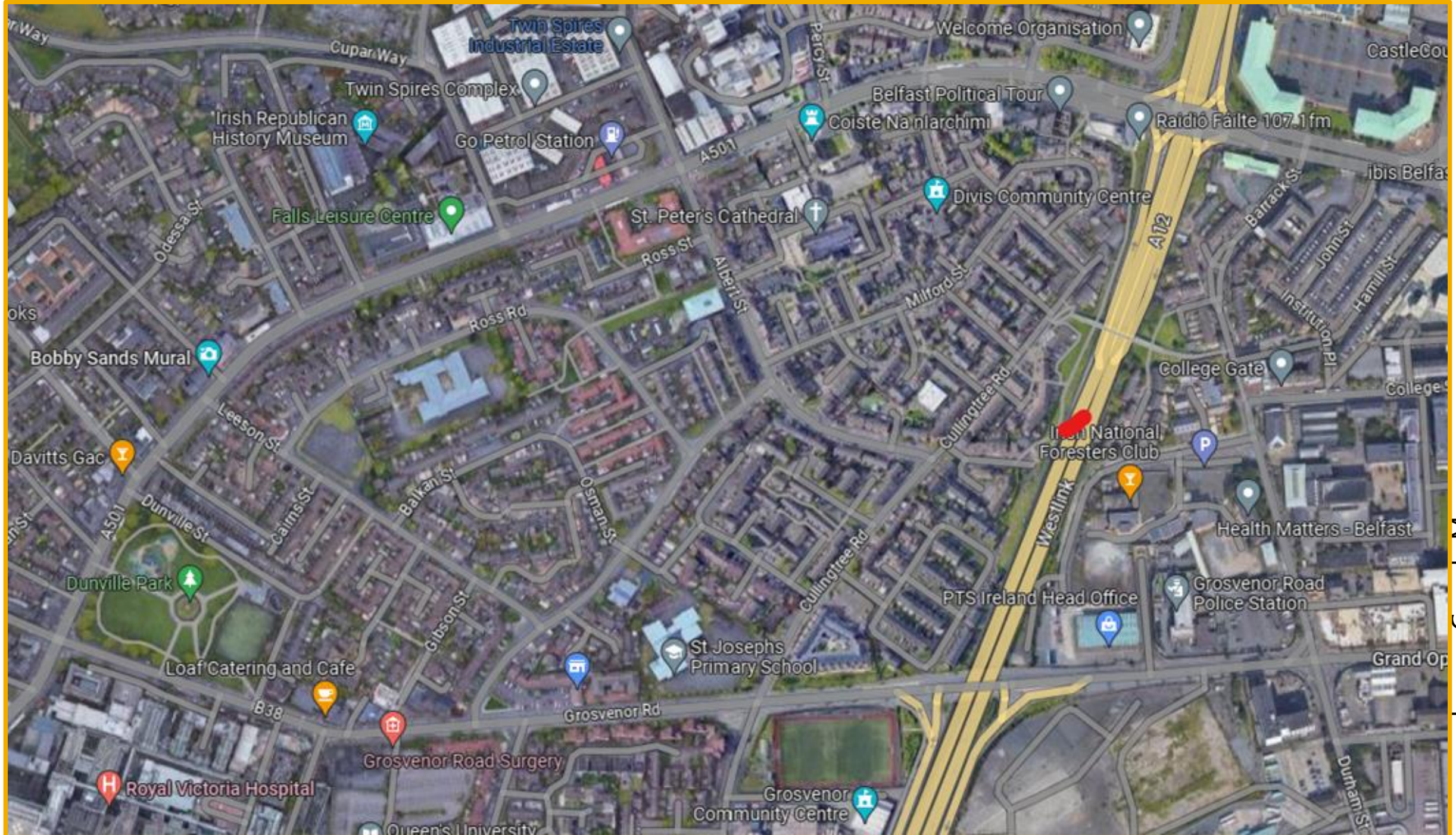


Image: Google Maps

The 'youngest slum in Europe'

With five years of completion Divis was facing major environmental and public health issues:

- Asbestos
- Broken lifts
- Blocked drains
- Waste system did not work
- Damp, condensation and mould
- Rat and cockroach infestation
- Social deprivation
- Antisocial activity

Resident's complaints not adequately recognized and met with professional elitism.



The 'youngest slum in Europe'

'If they would have used adequate heat, there would not have been a problem with condensation, but you can take a horse to water but you can't make it drink. It was very difficult. In retrospect, I realise that people weren't as sophisticated enough in their thinking to use the flats as they were designed to be used. It's a simple as that.'



Frank Robertson, Divis Project Architect from BBC *High Life* documentary, 2011

Divis Flats – a 'cockpit of The Troubles' (Bean 2008)

- Divis was located on the Lower Falls Rd, the largest Republican/Nationalist area in Belfast, and next to Loyalist Shankill Rd
- 'Planet of the IRPS'
- Became associated with many of the key events of 1969-1998
- Army base occupied top four floors of Divis Tower





The Campaign(s) to demolish Divis

- Lowr Falls Redidents association
- Church–led clean up campaign
- Divi Residns Asocation
- Divis Demolition Committee
- TCPA Mobile Planning Aid Unit



Lower Falls Residents Association

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Church-led clean up campaign

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- Church-led clean up campaign
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Image: Scope Magazine

'Oh Yes and get the Housing Executive and Divisional Planning Office, we have made some decisions they ought to participate in'

Divis Residents Association

- Health comparative studies with other areas
- Community reports



Divis Residents Association



Image: Divis Residents Association

Clean up campaign

- Health comparative studies with other areas
- Community reports



Image: Irish News 19/9/81

'Cleanliness is next to Godliness'

Divis Demolition Committee

- Residents wore down the authorities
- 'You'll never make planners out of them [the residents]
- Refused partial demolition
- By 194 only tower remains

TCPA

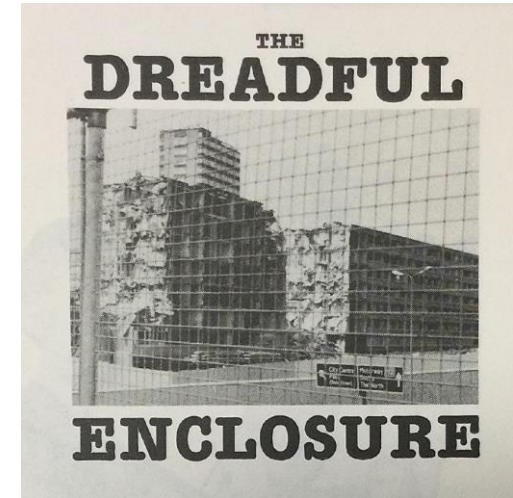


Image: TCPA



At Divis yesterday (left to right): Fra McCann (secretary DRA), Donal Graham, Brian Anson, Fiona Larbalestier and Lewis Walker, members of the Divis planning group.

Epilogue ...



Reflections

- Another example of planner hubris ...
- Overlooked yet critical piece of Belfast's post war social history – possibly due to the politics
- Housing and health as a
- Extreme context – used for and against listening to the community
- Community energy
- Advocacy power as a catalyst
- Claimed responsibility for demolition

Clean up campaign

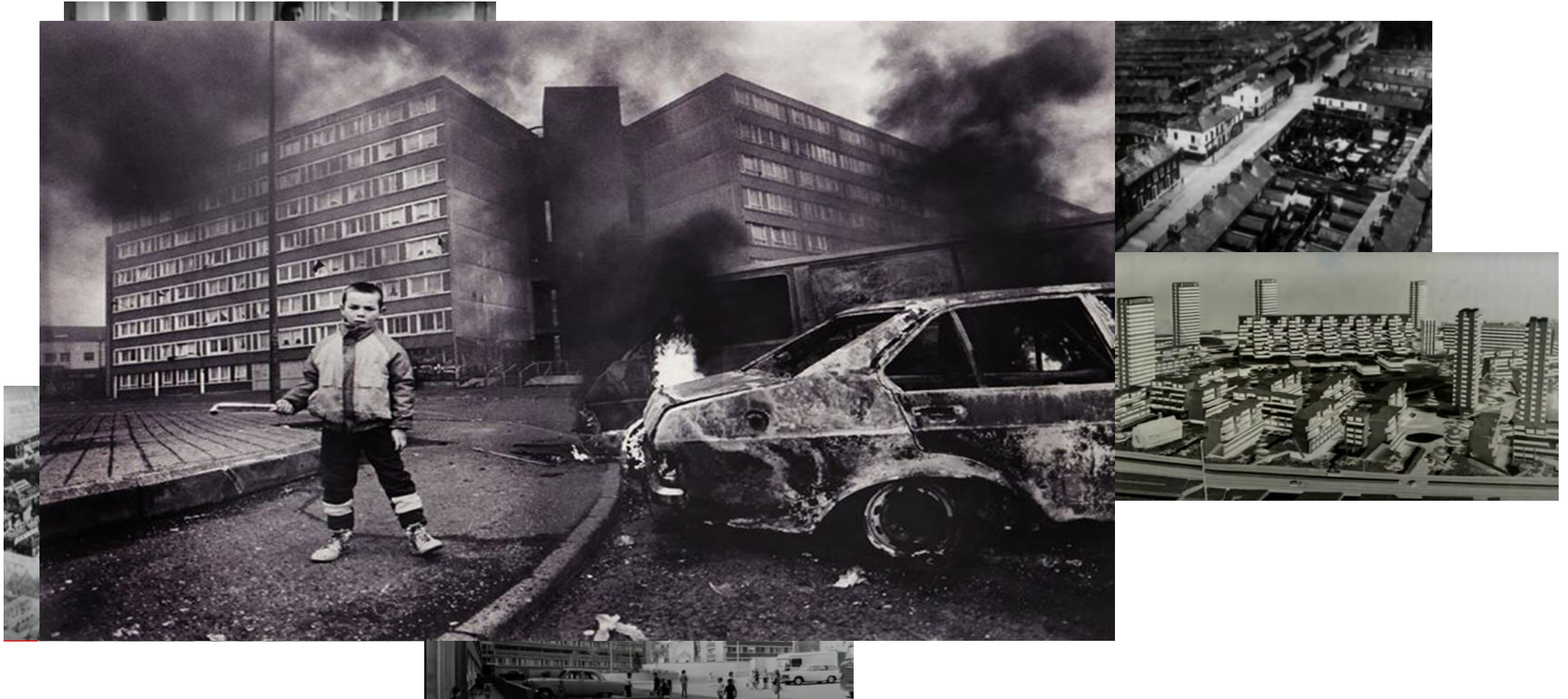


Image: BBC