

Mythical Mapping and Diffused Sacred Space: An Urban Study of West Belfast, North Ireland

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Historically, scholars have classified religious territory as a binary set of oppositions between the sacred and profane while neglecting more complex or ambiguous readings of spiritual space. Boundary conditions outside the confines of the ritualized sacred place, the church, contribute to new definitions and valuations of sacred space by diffusing and relocating the spiritual into the public realm, the setting where the sacred and profane are blurred. In Catholic and Protestant neighborhoods of West Belfast, North Ireland, political, social, economic and religious identities strongly interface. While dramatically decreased church attendance and twenty years of banal urban redevelopment appears to have systematically eliminated sacred memory, cultural changes continue to give rise to new forms of expression. The sacred is not disappearing, then, in West Belfast; it is continuously relocating into the streets. For this study a time series analysis of historical maps and present-day visual images of Belfast dating back to the 1400's are used to trace sacred spatial memories in West Belfast. Mythical mapping is used as a methodology to unveil these sacred memories or what Mercia Eliade calls "the structure and function of sacred space." Mythical mapping, a literary construct used in fictional texts to develop symbolic space, draws upon not only the spatial but also the experiential to weave together a mythical image of a place. In mythical mapping sacred memory evolves through an interdependence between: ORIENTATION, the association of spatial direction with sacred values; PASSAGE, the simultaneous movement within space to encounter and/or avoid these sacred values and; CENTER, the use of sacred space for contact with others.

PURPOSE AND VALUE OF PROJECT

Sacred space is a little studied aspect of urbanism that affects our everyday lives. Mapping sacred experience is viewed as a form of visual communication, expressing both individual and collective experience. Value results from mapping important moments in the city history that are becoming lost. How do you reconstruct a city, though, when so few artifacts lay claim to its existence and evolution? It is surprising how little value has been placed on recording change in West Belfast. This is especially troublesome in a place where small neighborhoods within communities have been fragmented due to thirty years of renewal' and where "religious/political lines have increased." As Storr asks, "How does one represent a 'somewhere' that can never be fully comprehended, or whose specific parts cannot be made into a whole?"

MYTHICAL MAPPING

Recent political events are causing a resurgence of interest in West Belfast. In the past fifteen years, though, few academics have actively explored this site; reconstructing memory is difficult under

the continual threats of terrorism. As the location the most active urban change in Europe, past studies focus on West Belfast as a violent, political territory. Little insight is offered on how the sacred operates within the urban realm. Ironically, the "memory cannot be found in literature, the place where 'the passions are beside the facts.'" Grahm-Yooll, a journalist who traveled to Belfast in 1993, found it difficult to find anyone who "keeps a record of living comfortably in the front-line of fear."⁵

While on-site experience is critical in uncovering sacred memory, historical maps of West Belfast are also used in this study as a primary "site of speculation."⁶ The mythical mapping of Belfast can not be charted in conventional ways because sacred memory through ORIENTATION, PASSAGE, and CENTER involves a simultaneous synthesis of the intellectual and mental. The *intellectual* refers to records fixed in time or *historical*. Authenticity is attached to intellectual mapping which draws on the need to rationalize and measure. The *mental* focuses on the transforming aspects of journey through the evolving nature of time. Authenticity is attached to mental mapping because it more closely resembles actual experience.

By exploiting the unique density of information in maps (the intellectual) with the kinetic aspects of perceptual experience (the mental), an opportunity to reveal the sacred territory of West Belfast is possible. Ironically, while the intellectual map is valued for its relationship to exacting or *real* terrain, the complexity of ideas to be communicated often demands that this reality be limited or abstracted to be legible. One familiar example of mythical mapping (the synthesis of the intellectual and mental) is the London Tube map where the representation of the train paths is greatly abstracted for travelers to comprehend what would otherwise be a complex transportation network. Common symbols like numbers, colors, and lines aid in the recollection of memories.

Mythical mapping is not only complex but controversial. As instruments of knowledge and authority, mapping of this kind can also be used to reveal how sacred territories are claimed and contested over time, how sacred spatial hierarchies are reinforced, or how access to the sacred is controlled.

ORIENTATION: THE ASSOCIATION OF SPATIAL DIRECTION WITH CERTAIN VALUES

The association of spatial direction with certain values connects physical and/ or mental boundaries (geography) with the body through movement. Mental boundaries relate to the knowledge of something present but hidden, part of an initiation into the mysteries of the unknown. Historically, sacred frescos, for example, in the crypts of medieval churches were known to their congregations but only made visible once a year to a select group of the initiated. Rilke

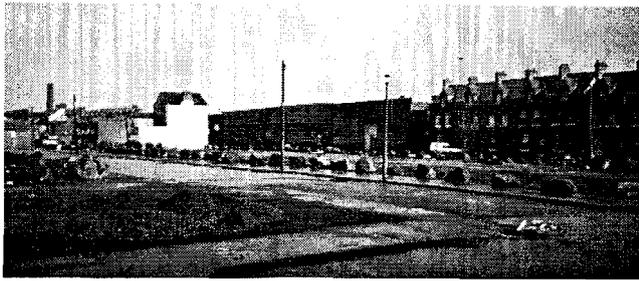


Fig. 1 Boulders line street



Fig. 2. Wall mural

refers to the example of the moon: even when hidden it remains present within the mind.' West Belfast is a confusing maze of "environmental walls, road enclosures, barriers and buffer zones"⁸⁸ where few to no outside travelers venture. According to one visitor. "The best guide to Belfast is the invisible map that all locals carry around in their heads."⁸⁹

Maps make good witnesses. As visual *rests* they provide access to rituals, legends, and accounts hidden or unknown. Limiting memory through limiting content is exemplified in West Belfast by the peace line walls, barriers of corrugated steel and coiled barbed wire built by occupying soldiers in the early 1970's. Even though peace line walls disconnect the gridded streets of West Belfast neighborhoods, maps never show them. Traditional gridded street patterns are cut off by the peace line walls, where continuation of the pattern remains suspended in the minds and memories of the inhabitants.

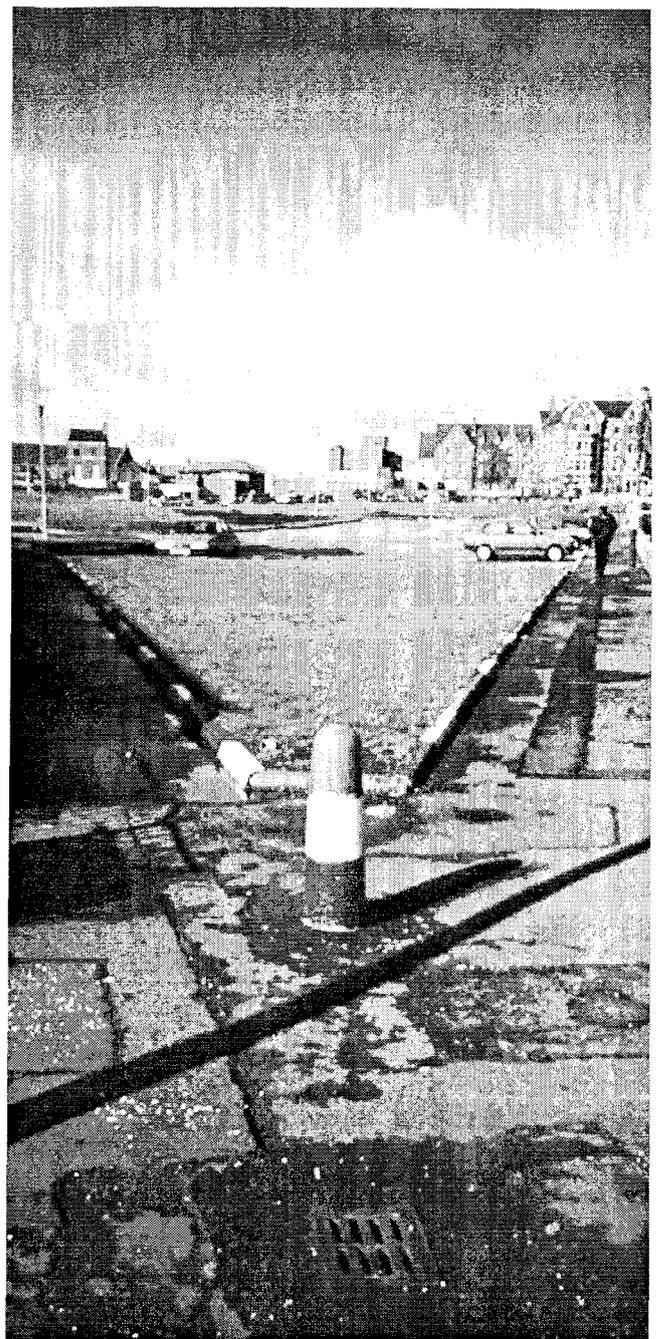


Fig. 3. Painted street curbs and murals

The relationship between religion, body, and geography also relates to the idea of *bearing witness*. This concept goes back to those who witnessed the resurrection of Christ and evolved up to the fourth century into the persecution of martyrs. Bearing witness has now come to mean *suffering with Christ*. In Belfast where national and religious identities strongly interface, many spiritual acts are described in this way. When suffering is equated with terrorist acts where ritualized events have their own particular spiritual markings, the notion becomes manifest in troubling ways. Knee Cap Alley, for example, a hidden place of power and suffering in West Belfast, could be equated with the rising and falling of a body during prayer or song. Images of the tomb and resurrection can be associated with accounts of prisoners in West Belfast locations where a sense of moral righteousness or transformation takes place. Long paths of enormous Stonehedge-like boulders appear where entire housing

blocks have been demolished signaling the site of ancient rituals and sacrifice.

The unfolding nature of the spiritual pilgrimage or the association of spatial direction with certain values could be understood in several ways in mapping through the use of a flexible scale, the inclusion of memory (time) with narrative (tracing of motions, actions, gestures) and the traveler's need to record their experiences through a mental reconstruction of the city. In the early work of Northern Irish poet, Seamus Heaney, recording involves a need to be concealed (bounded) from the presence of the city or removed from the disturbances of reality. Through a metaphorical structure of work, craft, and production, Heaney, an ex-patriate of Belfast, connects his mental conscious of Belfast with the tangible space of the rural Irish landscape through the turf-cutter, ploughman, thatcher, water-diviner, salmon-fisher, and blacksmith. Terry Eagleton, in an essay on *Field Work*, authored by Heaney, criticizes the limitation of the poet's focus on material language (experience) versus verbal language (the "voice" or realm of ideas). He criticizes Heaney for not putting forth ideological positions or for only staying within the intellectual.¹¹ Heaney seems to use the rural landscape itself, though, to set forth a unified proposition. In contrast to Belfast city, the rural for Heaney remains a sacred terrain where the boundary patterns of fields and hedgerows have remained unaltered for centuries. The rural, too, is a reminder of the memory of connections, or what J.B. Jackson calls the "collectiveness of society."¹²

PASSAGE: MOVEMENT WITHIN SPACE TO ENCOUNTER OR AVOID SACRED VALUES

Mythical mapping can describe simultaneous spiritual experience when movement within space is to encounter and/or avoid values. Dissident spiritual places where terrorist acts occur on a ritualistic basis are one form of evaded space. A blurring of the reading occurs, however, when highly charged militaristic text on giant wall murals create forcible visual encounters before entering the ordinary butcher shop, fruit vendor, or dairy. As a mnemonic device, the enormity of these symbolic images depicting bigger than life-size masked paramilitary gunmen or twenty foot high Mother Mary demands the constant attention of the outsider. Mercantile streets like the Shankhill Road co-exist in parallel position with twenty foot ramparted avenues (peace line walls) built by military forces to disconnect Catholic and Protestant religious territories. Painted street curbs and murals in West Belfast also signify religious entry into Catholic or Protestant terrain, reinforcing collective spiritual cohesion and marking territorial claims. Hidden labyrinth-like street shapes in new housing developments promote confused movement keeping non-residents (and terrorists) at the perimeter away from the collective sacred domestic settings.

Continuously moving toward the distant geography's of Belfast, the sacred mountains toward the west to the capitalistic city center toward the east, is one example of the many lines of movable demarcations in these neighborhoods. Liturgical movement is historically dictated by a west-east movement. Medieval maps and churches also orient to the east toward the rising of the sun (the site of resurrection).

The imposition of sacred spatial hierarchies is found, for example, on the Falls Road in Catholic West Belfast is exemplified by a statue of Mary at the high end of this long important crossroad, where the rising street also simultaneously provides a view toward the distant sacred mountains. As the only visible spiritual landmark in the entire neighborhood, it is a literal but important hierarchical site of sacred memory. Only three sacred monuments in the whole territory of West Belfast, the mythical sites of memory, were encountered, all within protected walls and guarded from direct public view.

As forms of historical consciousness peace line walls are memories of physical confinement for many. They are social public expressions of prison internment and extreme suffering and depriva-

tion for all. People evade them not only for their memories but also for their ugliness, emptiness and memories. For those living on religious boundaries peace line walls are a form of protection, a defensible boundary between the private yard and house. Peace line walls divide but do not completely cut off religious communities. While in some areas, discreet lockable doors are cut in them to ease navigation, simultaneously other more permanent walls are being extended and given permanent physical and, thereby, symbolic expression.

Maps reveal religious segregation through patterns of working and living. "It is understood that territorial division along sectarian lines goes back to the founding of the city, and the 'holy wars' of Belfast over two centuries have altered nothing of the sectarian geography."¹² Boal and Douglas also support their claim declaring that segregation of Roman Catholics and Protestants was "characteristic of the city from its inception."¹³

Ritualized parading is a kinetic form of boundary making where the streets become a sanctimonious space and where territories are simultaneously encountered and avoided. Every July 12th paraders symbolically march not only through their own religious territories but also those of enemies (spaces they would like to reclaim). The largest number of parades (over 75%) are organized by the Protestant community and in particular the "Loyal Orders" (the Orange Order, the Apprentice Boys, and the Royal Black Institution). Church services often accompany these parades.¹⁴ Further study might reveal if parading is part of a larger ritualized topography or a form of procession between holy site to holy site. Is parading also intimately connected with the song-making or reading of sacred text as in the pilgrim routes of Jerusalem?

People make few religious markings directly outside their houses. A window covered with newspaper clippings describing a recent militaristic killing was the only form of imprinted memory found on a recent trip by the author. Personal sacred relics are confined to the most private realm, the protected and defined boundaries of the home. Even though how people grieve and mark memories does not appear to be for public display, burials are moments where the private is displaced into the public realm. These occasions are marked by old black English-style cabs ceremoniously drawn together into a sacred circle.

CENTER: THE USE OF SACRED CENTERS FOR CONTACT WITH OTHERS

Spiritual experience is described through mythical mapping by the use of centers or sacred spaces for contact with others. Sacred centers are both psychological and physical, changing between neighborhoods, blocks, and streets. There is uniformity in the need to protect not only exterior sacred centers like gardens but also enclosed public/private places. Outside school buildings, for example, electric fences, security cameras, and caged entryways in view.

Mapping also illuminates temporal sacred centers by capturing select, framed views of intimate, spontaneous moments, associative experiences which often arise from drifting. Two women, for example, were heard blocks away on the Shankhill Road in Protestant West Belfast singing sacred songs. On closer view, a church manger gave spiritual cover for song-making while thick landscaping on a metal fence bounded them providing worldly defense.

Earthly gardens in Belfast are sacred centers where people navigate but where there is little evidence of collective gathering. Earthly gardens include parks, cemeteries, infill playgrounds, and large unplanned green spaces where terrace housing blocks have been demolished. Sacred centers can have contradictory meanings. At the point end of a large triangular park, a militaristic mural on the end wall of a community center rests near a religious boundary. The pastoral rolling sacred garden acts as a center with houses bounding it and looking into this earthly space. Tension is created by the park

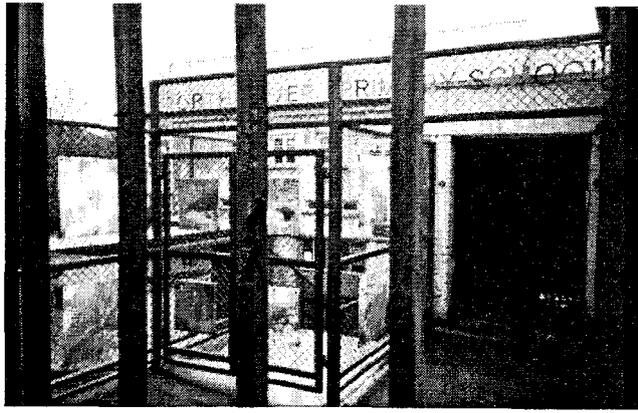


Fig. 4. Caged entry at primary school.



Fig. 5. Religious song-making

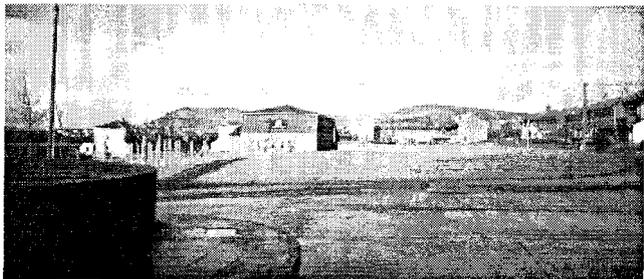


Fig. 6. Community garden.



Fig. 7. Community garden mural detail

shape because the heightened perspective of the funnel-like triangular form continuously directs one back to the mural. The uninterrupted gaze between the garden and the para-military figures on the wall also give a strange human scale to the place.

Cemeteries in West Belfast are destinations and homes for the righteous dead. The limited number of cemeteries experienced to date conceal the presence of the city by their high impenetrable stone walls. The topography within cemeteries is flattened in contrast to the outside environment where the landscape appears to rise or fall naturally. Headstones in these sacred spaces are symbolically taken out and remade into the form of over-scaled wall epitaphs (the painted wall murals discussed earlier). These walls not only memorialize actual violent acts but they also move the righteous dead back into the main public thoroughfares to be encountered on a daily basis. Further questions to be considered regarding cemeteries involve the control and structure of such sacred spaces. Are these contested spaces where religious strife continues to be played out? It is interesting, too, to consider the fact that the most sacred occupiers of cemeteries, the headstones of the martyrs of the terrorist war, are not shown during public tours of these hallowed grounds.

CONCLUSION

Through a timeseries analysis of historical maps and recent visual images, mythical mapping is used as a methodology to explore how mental and physical boundaries mark public spiritual territories between Catholic and Protestant communities in West Belfast, North Ireland. Although twenty years of anonymous redevelopment in West Belfast appears to have systematically eliminated communal spiritual memory, cultural changes continue to give rise to new forms of sacred expression. Boundary conditions outside the formal confines of the ritualized sacred place, the church, contribute to new definitions and valuations of sacred space by diffusing and relocating the spiritual to the public realm, the place where the opposition between the sacred and profane is blurred. In West Belfast neighborhoods where political, social and religious identities strongly interface, through ORIENTATION, PASSAGE, and CENTER, a new consciousness of the layers of sacred memory can be revealed. While it is sobering to consider that "Each group constructs its history from the chaos of bloody happenings," the call by poet John Hewitt's for "a new mythology of the city" gives validity to the reclaiming of sacred memory over a history where only violence is recorded.

NOTES

- ¹ Geraldine Boothman, "The Impact of Urban Renewal on Neighbourhoods" *Ekistics* 44:263 (Oct. 1977): 188-195.
- ² Kate Kelly, "The Future: Views of the Women of Belfast" *Index on Censorship*, 8-9 (Sept.-Oct. 1993): 18-22.
- Robert Storr, *Mapping* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1994).
- ⁴ Andrew Graham-Yooll, "Belfast, 20-23 October 1993" *The Antioch Review*: 287-296.
- ⁶ Robert Storr, *Mapping* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1994).
- ⁷ Roy Woods, "Against Mapping Invisible Worlds in Rilke's Duino Elegies." *Mapping Invisible Worlds*, Eds. Gavin Flood and Emily Lyle (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993).
- ⁸ Kate Kelly, "The Future: Views of the Women of Belfast" *Index on Censorship*, 8-9 (Sept.-Oct. 1993): 18-22.
- ⁹ "Dividends of Death." *The Economist*, 306 (26 March 1988).
- ¹⁰ Terry Eagleton, "Review of Field Work in New Casebooks-Seamus Heaney" Ed. Michael Allen (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997).
- ¹¹ John Brinckerhoff Jackson, *Landscape in Sight*, Ed. Helen Lefkowitz (New Haven: Yale University, 1997).

- ¹² Bill Morrison, "Making Belfast Work" *The Planner* 76: 49 (14 Dec. 1990): 32-35.
- ¹³ Frederick Boal and Neville Douglas, eds. *Integration and Division - Geographical Perspectives on the Northern Ireland Problem* (New York: Academic Press, 1982).
- ¹⁴ "Security, Crime and Policing in Northern Ireland: The Government Security Policy" Northern Ireland Office. (May 1996): web site location: http://www.nio.gov.uk/pol_intro.htm#comdiv
- ¹⁵ Chris Arthur. "An Image for Belfast" *The North American Review* 279: 6 (Nov./ Dec. 1994).
- ¹⁶ William Neill. "Reimagining Belfast" *The Planner* (Oct.1992): 8-10.

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