

Cities, Communities and Homes: Is the Urban Future Livable?

- **Paper / Proposal Title:**

Signs of a city: semiotic markers at odds with constructed narratives in Belfast

- **Format:**

Written paper / verbal presentation

- **Author(s) Name:**

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- **University or Company Affiliation:**

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- **Abstract (300 words):**

Belfast, perhaps despite or perhaps because of its 'troubled' past, is a city with culture, memory, history and myth at its core. Now architecturally and geographically permeated, the city has, since the 1960s, seen a prescribed solution of walls concentrated in the city's most socio-economically deprived and divided areas. The duality of the government-funded walls continues to ensure community isolation in social housing estates located on the city's arterial routes, while major roads initiatives further redefine city boundaries. Since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, in 1998, the city centre has undergone redevelopment to create a culturally neutral commercial and tourist hub, underpinned by a narrative of carefully selected stories, reinforced by appropriate 'visual and architectural representation'.¹ With new construction schemes currently underway #BelfastCraneCount, trending on twitter, reports 27

¹ Brett, D. (1996:1). *The construction of heritage*, Cork University Press, Cork.

cranes in the Belfast skyline. The city has become an architectural patchwork as postmodern structures fracture the traditional Victorian red brick and sandstone landscape, eradicating 'memories, history and identity attached to the architecture and place'.² Yet on the city's arterial routes, where town planning has been less in accordance with aesthetic considerations and more in line with security dictates,³ the defensible urban spaces of social housing estates are rich with visual messages that are largely cultural in origin and nature. The shared surface courts, unused and unusable urban spaces, home to the city's divided communities, communicate their meaning through signs and symbols. In interface areas, 'personal meaning retains the potential to undermine efforts to induce historical amnesia',⁴ murals, graffiti, flags and flagging of related messages reinforce the territorial nature of place. This paper, a result of ongoing research since 2010, examines how, on the city's Antrim, Falls, Newtownards and Ormeau Roads, buildings and signage combine to create a sense of place. Supported by a photographic archive, it demonstrates how multidisciplinary visual inquiry can provide a reliable barometer of socio-economic and societal undercurrents, despite 'smoke and mirrors' reimagining of the city's core.

• **Author(s) Biography (200 words each):**

Professor Ian Montgomery is Pro-Vice Chancellor (Global Engagement), at Ulster University. Ian previously held the post of Dean of Ulster University's Faculty of Art, Design and the Built Environment and prior to that was Head of the School of Art and Design and Director of the Research Institute for Art and Design at Ulster University. His main research interests are in the areas of design theory, knowledge transfer, and design perception. He has completed two terms on the Board of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland since 2007. He was a Management Board member of the Higher Education Academy's Art Design and Media Subject Centre and was a member of the Executive Committee of the Council for Higher Education in Art and Design (CHEAD). He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts, a member of the International Society of Typographic Designers and the Design Research Society. Ian has examined and chaired validation panels in the UK, Ireland and Europe and has established numerous international academic partnerships in the US, the Middle East, China, Hong Kong and Europe. He is on the Editorial Boards of ITERATIONS Design Journal (Ireland) and City Street Conference (Lebanon). He chaired the Academic Services Review Group

² Bevan, R. (2006:8). *The destruction of memory : architecture at war*, Reaktion, London.

³ Neill, W.J.V. & Schedler, H. (eds) (2001:113), *Urban Planning and Cultural Inclusion. Lessons from Belfast and Berlin*.

Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave. Neill is one of a number of contemporary voices at the time to describe how 'the agents of town planning...(were) not town planners, but security services, vetting all major applications'.

⁴ Switzer, C and McDowell, S (2009:348) *Redrawing cognitive maps of conflict: Lost spaces and forgetting in the centre of Belfast*. <http://mss.sagepub.com/content/2/3/337>. Accessed 24/10/15.

established this year to undertake a timely review of academic structures in support of the new strategic plan and the University's future ambitions.

Dr Ruth Brolly worked as a graphic designer in industry for 20 plus years before returning to academia. She holds a PhD, from Ulster University's Faculty of Art, Design and the Built Environment, the multidisciplinary thesis of which examined signage and the built environment of Belfast. Together with Professor Montgomery she has, over the past few years, generated several research papers at an international level, examining signage and other related issues pertaining to the built environment of Belfast. She is currently a Lecturer in Graphic Design and Illustration at Ulster University's Belfast School Of Art, while maintaining her research. She is a Fellow of the Royal Society Of Arts, member of the Northern Ireland Design Alliance, Associate of the Higher Education Academy and member of the Social Science Research Network.