

Car Park Parliament of

The Missing City

Belfast, Northern Ireland

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Spring 2023
Master Thesis Program

The Royal Danish Academy
School of Architecture
Political Architecture: Critical Sustainability
Tutor: Niels Grønbæk
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Thoughts on what missing is:

What is missing?

There is irony in the single author program trying to craft a poly vocal project. This project is an afterconstruction. A post construction of the urban. I love cities. It should take more than 3 months to draw a city. Our favourite teachers were female; our favourite architects male. The missing is a lense and a never-ending question. Think of who you reference; I said to myself.

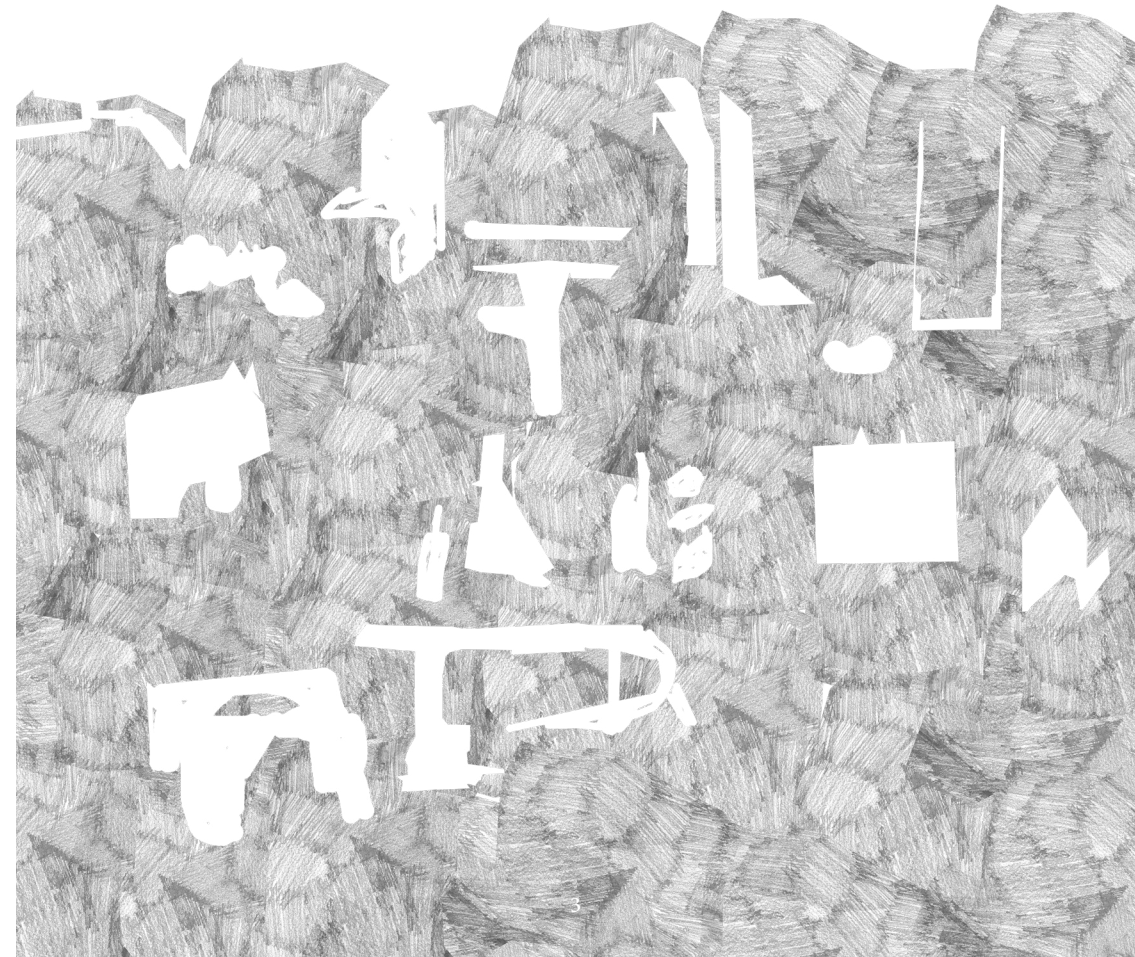
Who is missing?

Processes of urban development leave unplanned traces in our cities in the form of vacant land. These urban voids are an inevitable, recurring feature to our cityscapes.

In central Belfast, a city characterised by conflict and social segregation, urban voids are more than just an occurring feature in the urban fabric, they are dominating it. Surface car parks make up a majority of the vacant land, and the car has played a key role in the making of UK's most car dependent city.¹ Belfast is a city drawn from the comfort of a car seat.

At first glance, the car parks seem easily dismissable as nothing but car parks, a simple expression of supply to an everyday demand. Yet, embedded in the magnitude of their gaping emptiness lies a political dimension and an architectural potential that this project aims to explore. They are capable of telling stories of a past, a present, a future and *a Missing City*.

¹ Capener, *Belfast Is the Most Car-Dependent City in the UK*.



Missing City situates itself in the heart of Belfast, in its inner city surface car parks. Addressing the city's urban vacancy, its ties to car dominance and the single-narrative urban development schemes that continue to drive the social segregation in Belfast, this project addresses the missing by asking not only *what* but also *who* is missing; inviting them in to the driver seat of urban development.

The Missing City is rooted in and grows from the crack between scales.

It consists of the proposal of a public **parliament building** in a centrally located car park that conditions explorations of a new type of **poly-vocal urbanism** growing from the archipelago of car parks. The reciprocal relation between *car parks* and *car park*, *the urban* and *the parliament*, *city* and *citizen*, is fundamental in the *Missing City*.

The architectural intention is to counter the single-narrative of Belfast as a car city, allowing the city to grow from a multiple narrative perspective. By approaching Belfast's surface car parks through a poly-vocal lense, the project actively includes voices of the city that often are left excluded in processes of urban development. The conflicting narratives meet in the *Missing City Parliament*, an agonistic public space that creates the conditions for a new type of urbanism.

Fig. 2: Surface car parks in inner city Belfast.



Constructing Context I

The Troubles and The Cars



Fig. 3: Fire in shop on Dublin Road during the Troubles. Image courtesy of Belfast Archive Project.

"Roads can form the most effective urban barriers, as violent and divisive as physical walls"

(Hackett, Driving the Social Divide)



Fig. 4: "The Belfast Urban Motorway (BUM) as it was proposed in the 1960s, sweeping through the city in the name of progress. Apart from the section which became the Westlink, the BUM would never be realised in its entirety. Image courtesy of Department for Infrastructure Northern Ireland" *(Hackett, Driving the Social Divide)*

Inner city Belfast served as battlefield during the three decades long low-level war commonly known as *The Troubles* in Northern Ireland. Spanning from the late 1960s and supposedly ending with the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, the sectarian conflict was rooted in a divide between protestants and catholics. Today, however, it is no longer tied to religious motives but rather questions of politics, nationalism and identity; fueled by social segregation.¹ The conflict has physically shaped and continues to shape the urban fabric. Peace walls, inaccessible industrial areas and other bufferzones actively keep people apart and the conflict alive.

The city population is divided up in neighbourhoods that never mix. Two parallel societies require roads, supermarkets and schools to be built in duplicates. Throughout the processes of segregation, the car and its spatial infrastructure has played a vital role, and it continues to do so. The integration of the car into the everyday life of the city that began in the 1960's was part of a global trend, but the effects it has had are local and particular. Through a chain of intended and unintended causes and effects, the car came to push Belfast further into a state of social segregation and urban alienation.²

The Belfast Area Plan was published in 1964.¹ As a response to the already violent situation, the new transformation focused on suburban growth and car infrastructure. A new motorway, a general widening of streets into roads and the demolition of buildings to pave the way for car parks were ways to accommodate the car and create easy access to the peacefully growing suburbs away from the troublesome city centre. However, the car customisation did not resolve the conflict nor did it end segregation, it only changed the nature of it.²

Roads, car parks and cars physically divide not only protestant and catholic neighbourhoods, but also the city centre's working class communities with low car ownership from the suburban middle class with high car ownership. The car has caused a spatial manifestation of social segregation, dominating a dying city centre that caters to a suburban middleclass.³

1 Wallenfeldt, *The Troubles - Summary, Causes, & Facts*.

2 Hackett, *Driving the Social Divide*.

1 Matthew, *Belfast Regional Survey and Plan*.

2 Martire, *No More Motorways for Belfasts*, 47.

3 Hackett, *Driving the Social Divide*.



Fig. 5: Missing City Map in black and white, original image courtesy of Forum for Alternative Belfast.

In 2010, a group of local architects called Forum for Alternative Belfast published the Missing City map, unveiling the shocking amount of vacant, unused space within a 20 minute walk from the city centre. The space marked as *missing* sparked a local debate. Yet 12 years later the car still holds the city in a tight grip. With the exception of some buildings being demolished, others burnt to the ground and new ones being built, the cityscape remains fundamentally unchanged.

However, the empty car park-serving lots are not entirely off the radar. Just as Belfast rode the car wave in the 1960s as a response to the violent conflicts of the inner city, immense profit-driven regeneration projects are now receiving permits to build as a response to the empty lots, decades of low development and an inner city housing crisis.¹ As Belfast rides the simple solution of the neoliberal city development wave, the city is shifting from the single narrative of the car to the single narrative of the developer:

¹ Mark, *Without a Plan, Belfast Is "Nobody's Project"*.

Constructing Context II

The Missing City

"There's an opportunity to create something special in the area that is being missed"

(Save CQ, Voices of CQ; Eddie McGlinchey, Tivoli Barber Shop)



Fig. 6: Under the Westlink, 2023.

This is not to say that the development of the city proceeds uncriticised. Local architects, scholars, shopkeepers and residents have throughout history showed and continue to show resistance with whatever resources they have.

*"The planners rely for their information on the generalities of survey data which cut across and frequently ignore the particular needs of people."*¹

*"The whole process of deciding what is to be built, who is to go here, how many will get back into the area, what the new community will be like, is outside the control of any organisation or group in which the people can be said in any meaningful way to participate and share responsibility"*²

¹ Overy, *Redevelopment in Belfast*, 6.

² Overy, *Redevelopment in Belfast*, 7.

The 50 year old quotes address planning decisions of their time, but could easily be read as a critique of one of the many masterplans we see today. In a city where public space systematically has been overlooked, it is only natural for public opinion to suffer under the same oppression.

The 2010 Missing City map was a sophisticated tool used to criticise urban development and car dependency. Intentionally or not, it seems to speak the same simple language of developers through a generalisation of space. In the same language but with a different message, the map draws it out in black and white; something is *missing*.



Fig. 7: Traffic fabric in the 1960s. Courtesy of Mark Hackett.

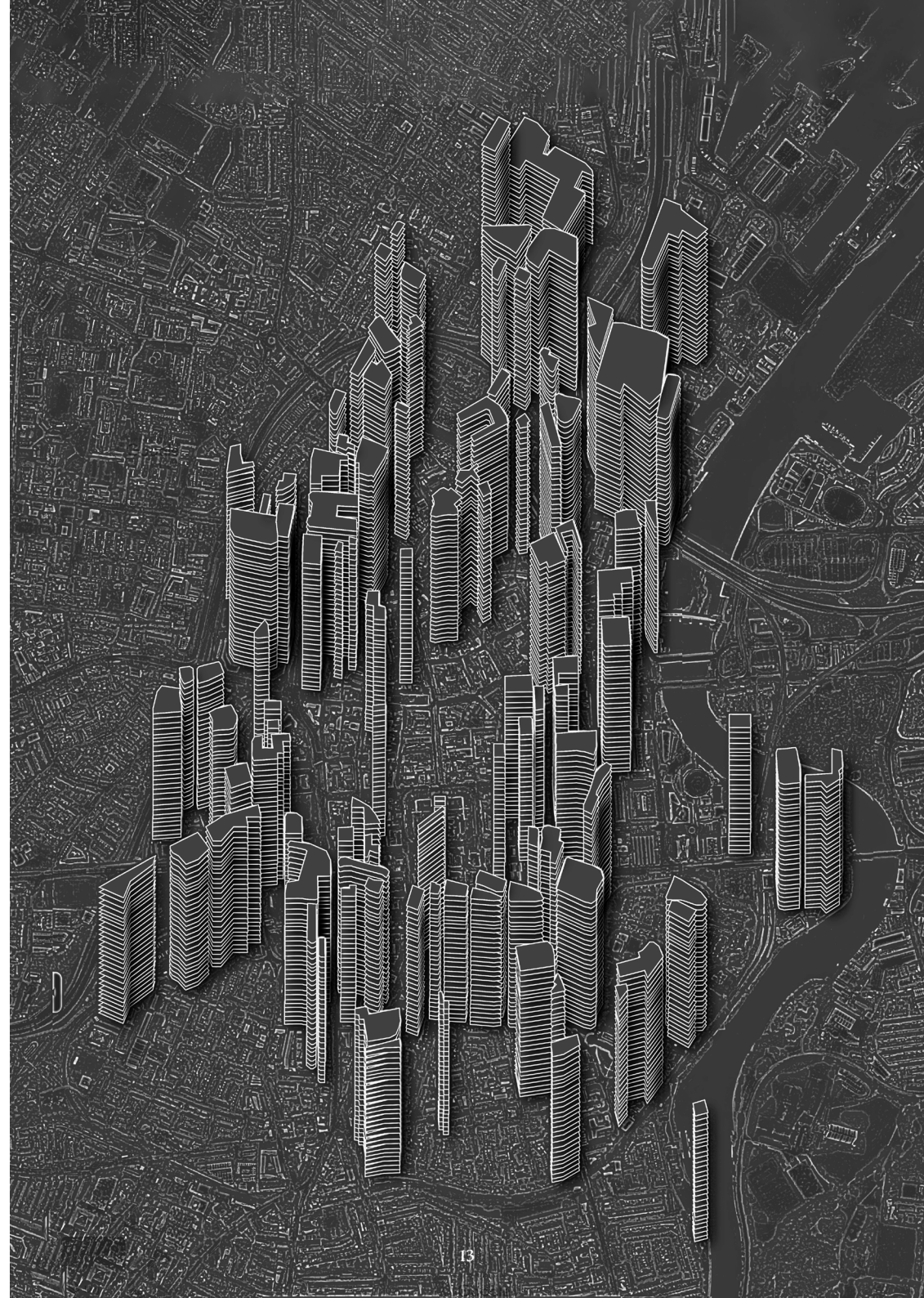


Fig. 8: Traffic fabric in 2019. Courtesy of Mark Hackett. "The cordon sanitaire of the Westlink [...] separates the outer city from the commercial and more salubrious core. A profusion of cul-de-sacs have appeared in its wake."¹

¹ Hackett, *Driving the Social Divide*.

Belfast is at a crucial tipping point, caught between a violent past of car dominance and a future of neoliberal urban development. A simple exercise of extruding the current surface car parks into concrete towers of slabs suffices to illustrate the political and architectural concern this project aims to address.

While the vacant land still lays vacant, *Missing City* becomes a critical counterweight to the homogeneous imposed-from-above city that awaits; a resistance to the scenario of an extruded car park tower skyline, proposing an alternative Belfast built through friction and negotiation, as real and fictional as any other future.



The development of the Missing City is an ongoing process of negotiation, anchored in the building of the Missing City Parliament and reflected in the poly-vocal urbanism it conditions.

The Parliament of the Missing City can be understood in two ways.

Firstly, as an actual proposal of a public building located in a surface car park in the heart of Belfast that offers citizens the possibility to meet, assemble and negotiate the development of the city they inhabit. The architecture of the building should both enable and reflect the ongoing conflict between the voices that shape it.

Secondly, as an instrumental tool in creating the agonistic urban fabric of the Missing City. Through its poly-vocal architecture, the new cityscape should be defined by a parliamentary urbanism.

A traditional definition of a Parliament building points towards its programmatic functions as capable to *perpetuate the past, manifest the present and condition the future.*¹ These functions are instrumental through the *preservation, articulation and formation* of a certain political culture.² In the specific case of the Missing City; this political culture is *agonistic*.

1 Goodsell, *The Architecture of Parliaments*, 288.

2 Goodsell, *The Architecture of Parliaments*, 288.

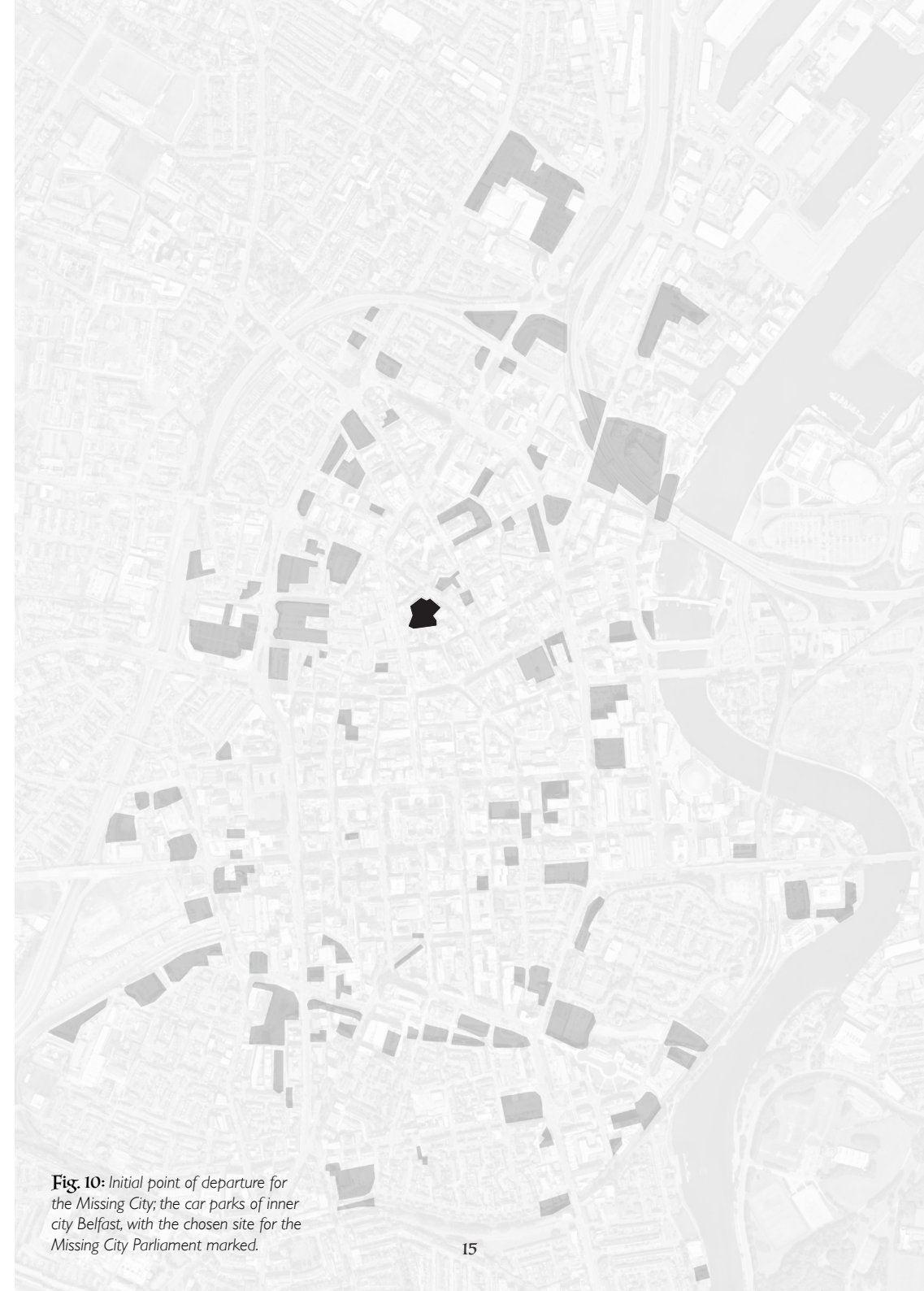


Fig. 10: Initial point of departure for the Missing City; the car parks of inner city Belfast, with the chosen site for the Missing City Parliament marked.

Site

The Car Park on North Street

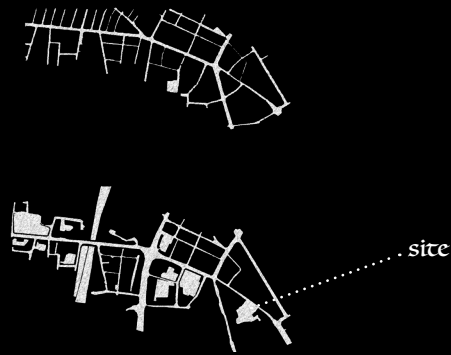


Fig. 11: Traffic fabric around the site, showcasing the emergence of the car park. Top: 1969. Bottom: 2016. Courtesy of Agustina Martire.

The Parliament building is located in a multisided surface car park carefully chosen to accommodate and activate the instrumental functions of the *Missing City Parliament*. Following is a selection of the considerations made behind the choice of the car park on North Street.

Location - Its centrality allows the Parliament building to emphasise its political power, while simultaneously entering directly into conversation with the car monoculture that it wishes to challenge.

History - It makes explicit the scars that car infrastructure has left in the urban fabric. Wide streets and demolished buildings paved the way for the car to access a site that once catered to a wide range of shops, services and homes.¹ Stories of what is *missing* might lay embedded within the car park.

Present - It shows signs of being more than just a car park. On a daily basis, pedestrians cross the unpaved ground surrounded by a patchwork of empty buildings, with the only street light coming from the parking ticket machine.

Future - It is a physical trace of the tipping point that this project wishes to intervene in. The unpaved ground and the abandoned buildings that are surrounding it are hinting towards a future of developer dominance in which the car park will turn into a construction site as part of a 50,000 m² masterplan for mainly business and retail.²

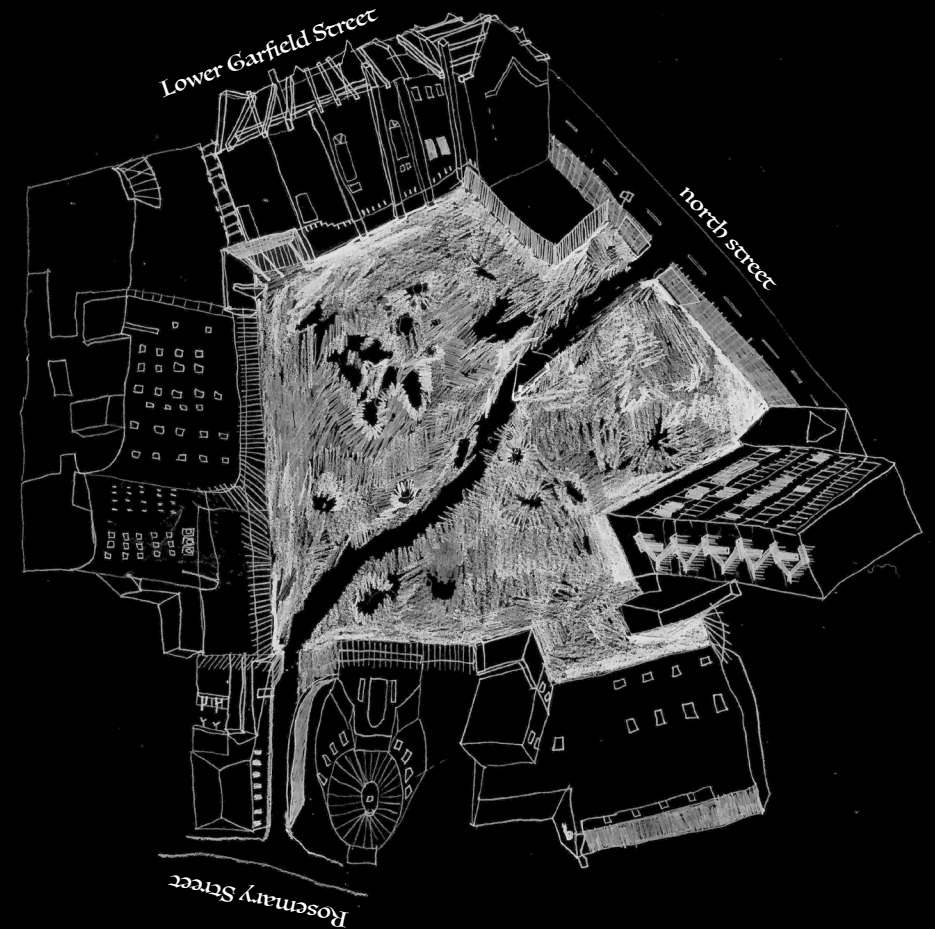


Fig. 12: Historical development showing how car infrastructure has carved out the site.

¹ Martire, *No More Motorways for Belfast*, 41.

² Corr; *Where We Are Now on Cathedral Quarter's Controversial Tribeca Plans*.





a.



b.



c.

- a. the gravel and the abandoned office building
- b. the fire escape staircase
- c. the building with the missing roof
- d. the oldest church in Belfast
- e. the crossing pedestrian
- f. the christian bobwire

d.



e.



f.



Fig. 13: Initial explorations of situated car park patterns on North Street, testing out scenarios by adding unknown spatial actors (black) that change the positions of the cars (white); linking the seat of car to the seat of a parliament.

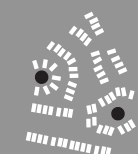
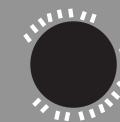
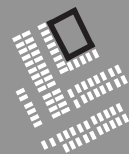
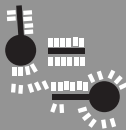
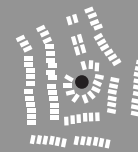
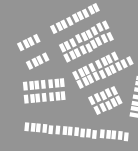
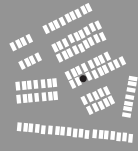
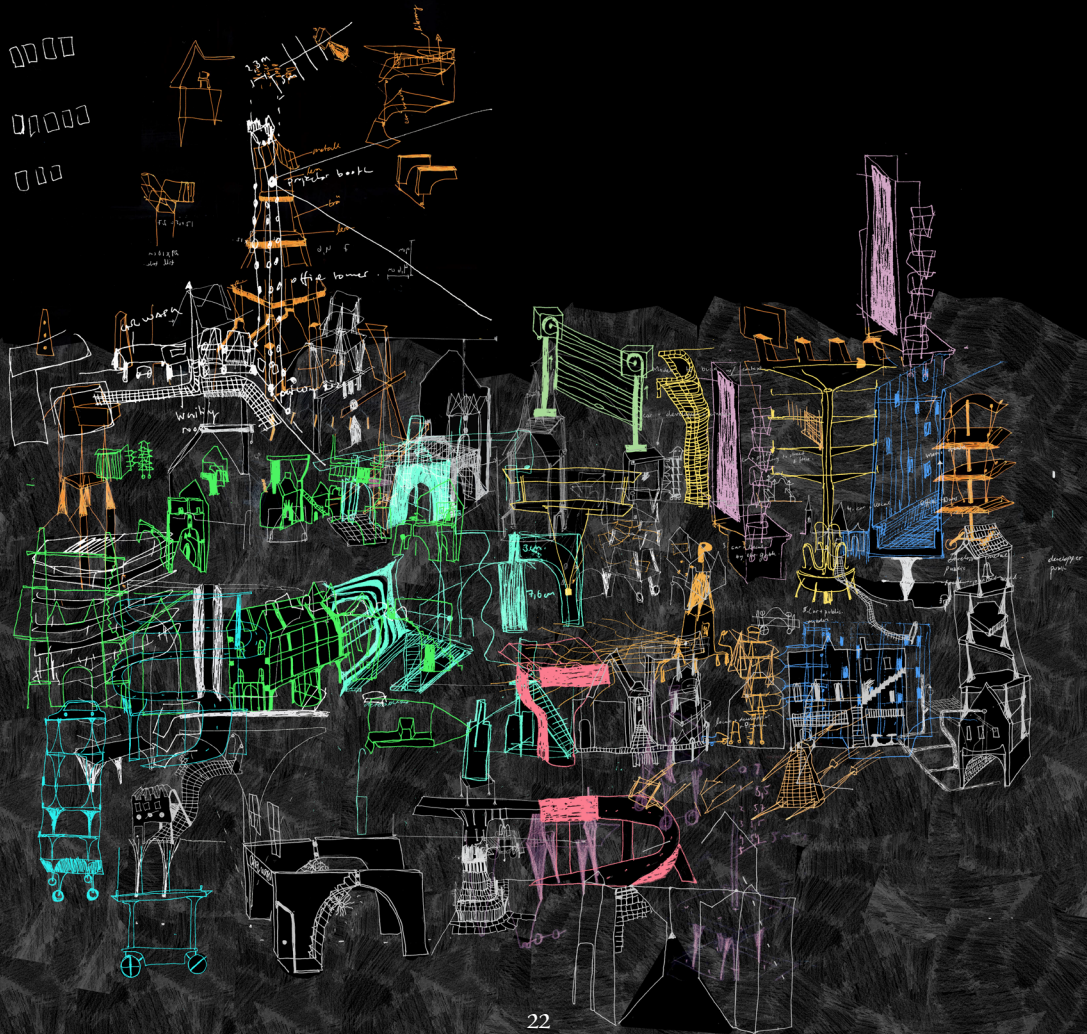


Fig 14: Field of negotiation between research semester sketches.



- The car
- The developer
- The barber
- The bonfire-builder
- The janitor
- The street sign collector
- The priest
- The child
- The book collector
- The construction worker
- The artist
- The bike
- The runner
- The taxi driver
- The stroller
- The dogwalker
- The retired boxer
- The homeless
- The arsonist
- The firefighter
- The feminist
- The mural-painter
- The pubkeep
- The set dancer
- The regular
- The teacher
- The birdwatcher
- The bird
- The mother
- The atheist
- The gambler
- The neighbour
- The tourist

...

These are some of the voices that will shape both the Parliament and the city it governs. The list is based on actors I encountered during my physical three week fieldwork in Belfast and research post-fieldwork. The list is organised in no particular order; has no cap and should be revised and expanded as the project unfolds.

The listed and unlisted voices should be worked with through architectural translation, shaping both the physical parliament building and the urbanism of parliamentary architecture.

Some of them I have talked to, others I have read about, I have listened to a few, seen a bunch, shared a bus with a handful and noticed the others. The car came first and the rest unfolded from the comfort of its seats.

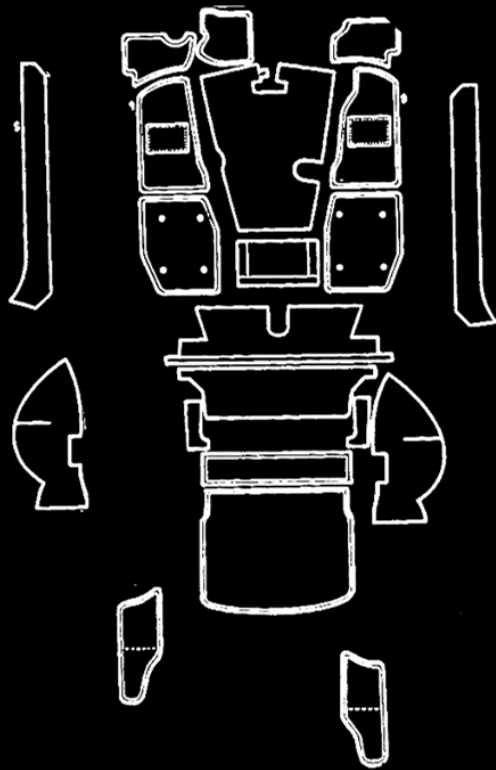


Fig 15: Illustration of a car unfolded from the Project. "A car-free london?" Courtesy of *muf architecture/art*.

I aim to develop this project using a method based on the shifting relationship between detail and strategy, inspired by the studio *muf architecture/art*. In their book *muf manual: this is what we do* they unfold their approach in this brief abstraction:

- 1_The close interrogation of the up close and personal (detail)
- 2_The extraction of what the personal can tell you about the general (strategy)
- 3_The reformulation of the strategy in the here and now: a small-scale construction of a future 'what if ...' (DETAIL)."¹

This approach will allow me to interact with the narratives up close, let the interaction inform the city at a larger scale, to later revisit the seams of the urban fabric. By using this method, emphasis is put on the agency of each individual citizen, and promotes an urban development rooted in personal narratives from the city as lived, rather than a profit-driven system imposed from above. It shifts the discourse, allowing one to imagine a process of development that operates from the particular to the general, instead of the other way around.

In the *Missing City*, the relationship between detail and strategy will be reflected in the link between the situated particular architecture of the parliament and the agonistic urban strategy that will grow from it, redrawing the map of Belfast.

What if things were otherwise?

¹ Shonfield, *This is What We Do - a muf manual*, introduction.

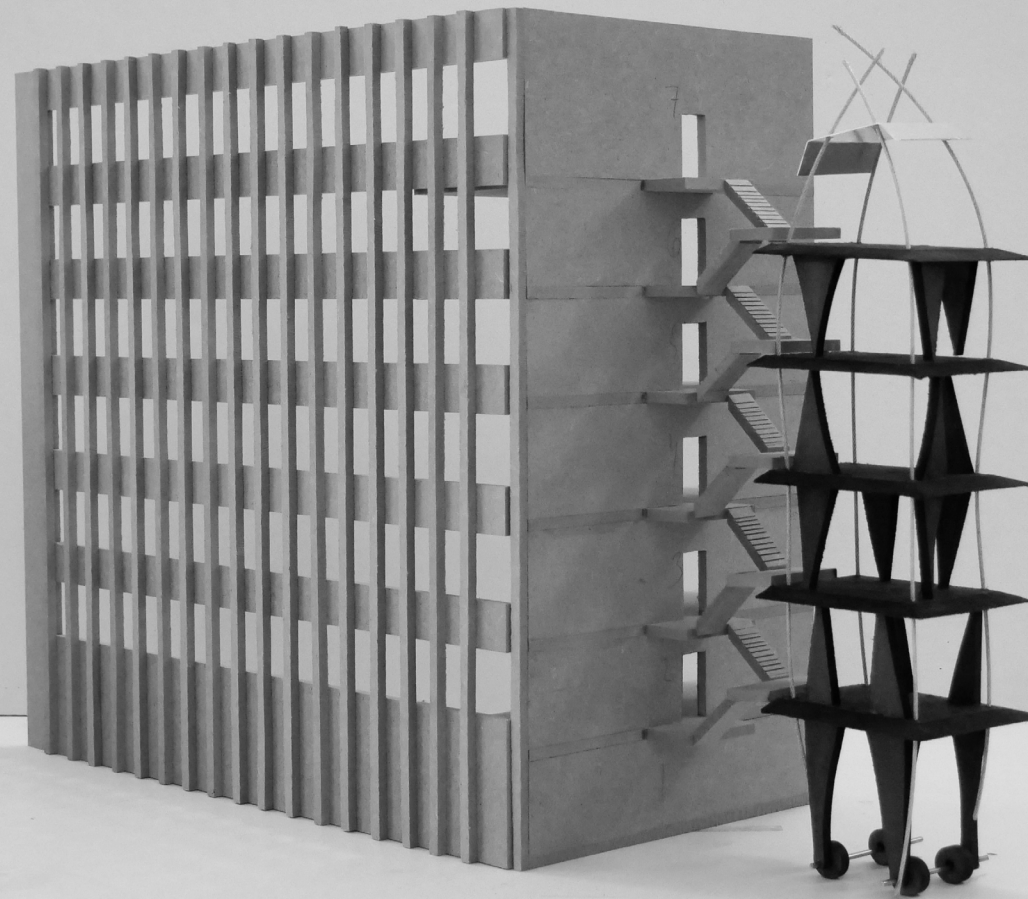


Fig 16: Model from research semester, introducing an agonistic city fragment exploring the struggle between a new tower, an old building and a car park.

What if things were otherwise?

“Things could always be otherwise [...]”¹

So argues Belgian political philosopher Chantal Mouffe, who developed a theoretical approach based on agonism that allows us to imagine the world differently, through thinking politically. Following is a summary of her thinking, linking it to the making of the Missing City as an agonistic city.

The inability to think the world politically is a key issue of the liberal society. Although liberalisms vary in kind, a common denominator remains a rational and individualistic approach that fails to capture the “pluralistic nature of the social world”.

The essence of political questions involves the act of choosing an alternative over other alternatives. The plural reality of conflicting alternatives cannot be solved rationally, it is ongoing and signifies the antagonistic dimension of society. The conflicting alternatives can be described as hegemonic projects, trying to create order through a set of hegemonic practices.

To replace the liberal hegemony that has shaped the modern world, Mouffe argues for an “agonistic conception of democracy”² one that acknowledges the hegemonic nature of society and the endless possibility of antagonism, one that turns public space into a battle ground for the agonistic struggle.³

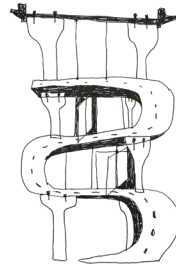
1 Mouffe, *Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces*, 2.
 2 Mouffe, *Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces*, 2.
 3 Mouffe, *Agonistics - Thinking the World Politically*, 130-134.



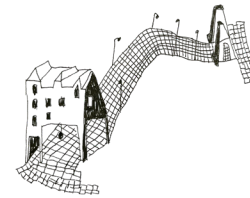
Exterior Shop



Office Castle



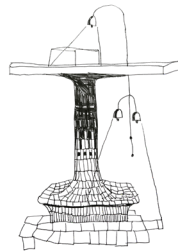
Motorway Department Store



Interior Street



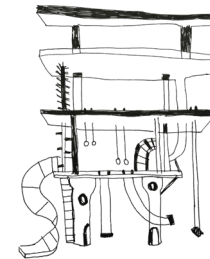
Bench Car



High-Rise Column-Bench



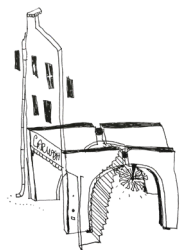
Car Tower



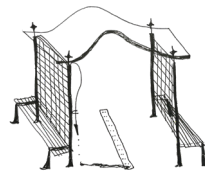
Concrete Slab Playground



Ticket Machine Vestibule



Car Wash Townhouse



Gas Station Park Bench Fence



Townhouse High-Rise

What if things were otherwise?

“Things could always be otherwise [...]”¹

Belfast’s car dominance is the result of a liberal hegemony that has prioritised the individual’s right to frictionless transport at the cost of excluding vital voices of society. Under hegemonic protection the car has violently reshaped the city. The same hegemonic protection is now allowing neoliberal regeneration projects to prioritise profit over people.

The agonistic dimension of the Missing City lies in the inclusion of the excluded. By acknowledging the agency of the missing narratives and the struggle that the plurality of them bring, the Missing City becomes an Agonistic city, and the car parks its battle grounds.

Fig 17-29: Drawings from research semester, exploring siteless agonistic city fragments, mixing local, public, car and developer concerns.

¹ Mouffe, *Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces*, 2.

Fig 30: Drawing from research semester, merging of siteless agonistic city fragments.



"What is at stake in what I call the 'agonistic' struggle, which I see as the core of a vibrant democracy, is the very configuration of power relations around which a given society is structured. It is a struggle between opposing hegemonic projects which can never be reconciled rationally."¹

¹ Mouffe, *Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces*, 3.

I will end this program where my research started; in the details of the particular; in the situated experience of Belfast's inner city surface car parks. In Belfast, they are more than just car parks; they are complex political spaces that operate in the urban machinery with an agency that often is neglected. As part of my field work, I visited many of them, with the intent of witnessing if and how they are appropriated by anything else but the car. My four drawings depict four of the visited car parks, and operate as testimony to my observations; glimpses of alternative uses that independently already begin to challenge the current monoculture of the car. Signs of unintended resistance pointing in more than one direction.

"Stubbornly convinced that car parks are more than just car parks, I set out to look for, observe and collect the second, third or even fourth functions of inner city car parks in Belfast."¹

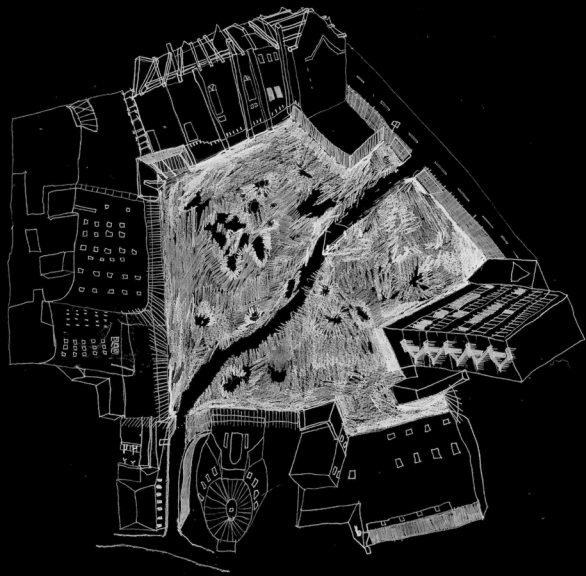


Fig 31: "A missing roof, blocked windows and a really old church are witnesses to the everyday life of this abandoned lot. (...) A flow of pedestrians regularly traverse the landscape of micro-lakes as the space happens to connect two very central streets in the city."¹

¹ Pihl, *Four Car Park Stories from Belfast, NI*, 11.

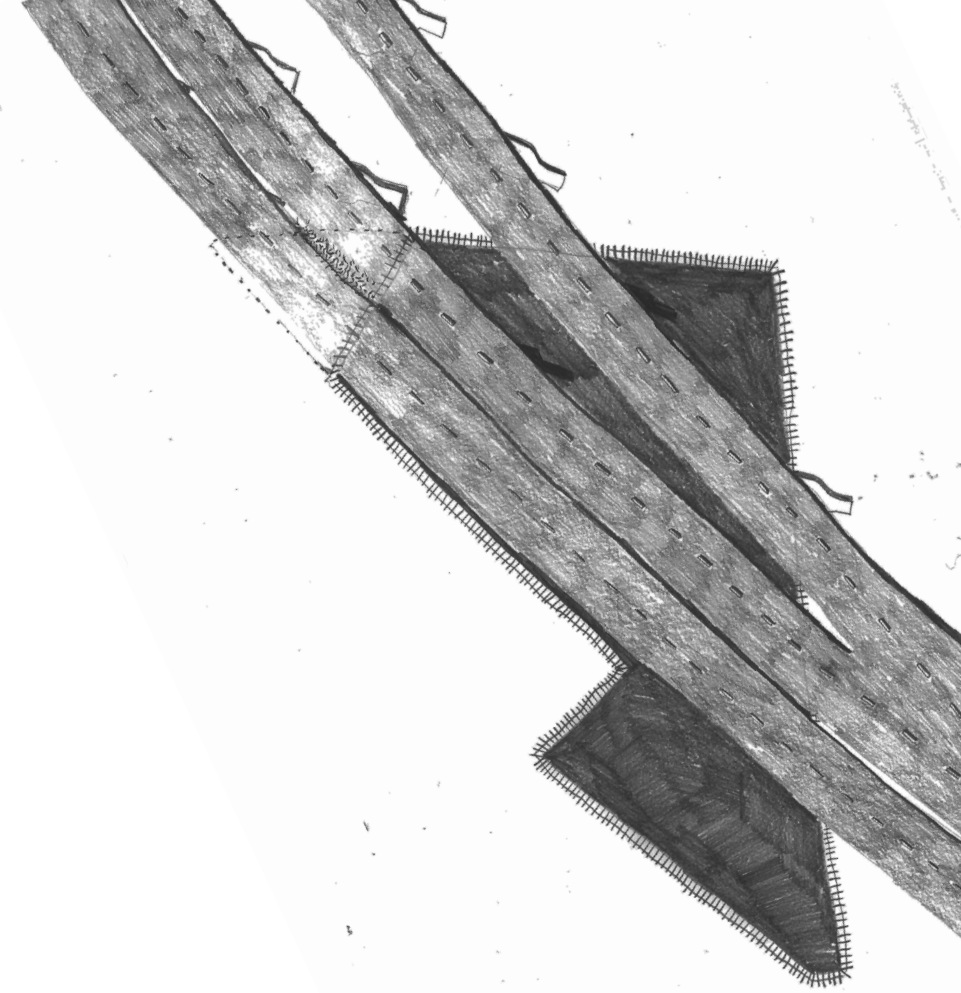


Fig 32: "(...)I noticed a gap between the two highway lanes, perfectly mirroring the strip of grass in the ground. The gap is probably there for structural reasons, leaving space to prevent cracks in the concrete, unintentionally also leaving space for rain water to sip through, watering and shaping a garden in the leftovers of this car park."¹

¹ Pihl, *Four Car Park Stories from Belfast, NI*, 15.

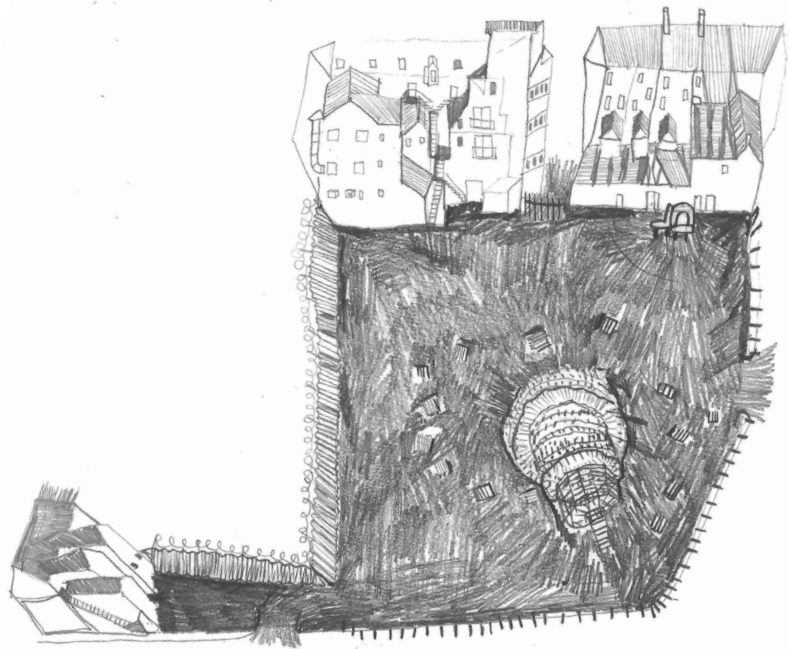


Fig 33: "A huge bonfire tied to one of the sides of the political conflict gets built here and burns. (...) it's not a daily recurring element to the space, it's a recurring element in the stories told about it."¹

¹ Pihl, *Four Car Park Stories from Belfast, NI*, 7.

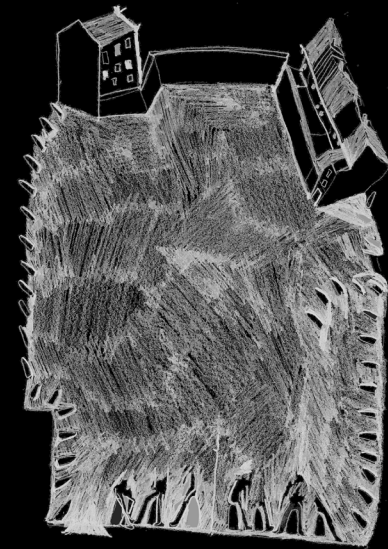


Fig 34: "The white bollards, the gatekeepers of the car park, act as stools. Those who are tall enough sit on them, others lean up against them. (...) They sit there, actively passively waiting in silence, in the margins of the urban landscape."¹

¹ Pihl, *Four Car Park Stories from Belfast, NI*, 19.

Fig 35: Fieldwork drawing in one of Belfast's inner city car parks, October 2022.



The Missing City is as real as it is fictional, rooted in a critique of the homogeneous development that has been damaging Belfast's urban fabric causing social segregation and urban alienation.

Missing City intervenes in the tipping point between two clearly defined single-narrated realities; one dominated by the car; the other one by the neoliberal developer. Inbetween the two, *Missing City* introduces a third, poly-vocal reality in which a public parliament building conditions the development of the city.

Through the struggle of agonistic conflict and the lense of the voices currently missing from the process of urban development; the *Missing City* grows.

By shifting between the particular and the general, the project is anchored in the reciprocal relationship between *a city and its parliament*.

As the architect and author of this project, my role becomes both compositional and diplomatic, navigating in the friction between scale, materiality, function and form.

Catalogue with the voices of the *Missing City*

Map of the *Missing City* drawn throughout 100 days

Models of the *Missing City*

Drawings of the *Missing city*

Visualisations from the *Missing City*



*The list of deliverables is instructional,
and will be negotiated as the project unfolds.*



Fig 36: Four men in suits and a countless amount of missing voices signing the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. Courtesy of Reuters.

Preliminary Reading List:

muf Manual - This is What We Do
muf architecture/art

Agonistics - Thinking the World Politically
Chantal Mouffe

The City as a Project
Pier Vittorio Aureli

Making space: Women and the Manmade Environment
 MATRIX

SDGs - This project strives to comply with Goal 11: Sustainable Cities & Communities.

“(…)poetry is where the problem of form is addressed in most radical terms. All poets are dealing with one fundamental problem: the transition from voice to language. From voice as a faculty of speech - an indeterminate potential - to language, where this inborn capacity in every human being has been captured and transformed into a form of communication, into language, one of the most fundamental power structures of society. (...) it is about trying to modulate the voice in a way that its potential is still there. (...) architecture has a similar task like poetry - which again is a problem of form - since it formalizes the moment in which the inborn characteristics of the human animal are somehow contained into a structure. So I would say it is not so much about the drama of the site, but really about the problem of how we can within something that inevitably constrains human beings still have the power to create this surplus of something, which I do not even want to name as it would spoil in some kind of banal way its identity. There, I really think architecture and poetry come together.”¹

¹ Vittorio Aureli, *Interview: Project + Text*.

Capener, David. "Belfast Is the Most Car-Dependent City in the UK, Here's Why It Matters." Northern Slant, 16 May 2019. Accessed 17 February 2023. <https://www.northernslant.com/belfast-is-the-most-car-dependent-city-in-the-uk/>.

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Fig. 3: Fire in shop on Dublin Road during the Troubles. Photograph by Belfast Archive Project. Contributed by John Gilbert. Accessed 16 February 2023. <http://www.belfastarchiveproject.com/contributor-johngilbert-troubles/avpg8lpyv06czly2k7mgn8vmyla22b>

Fig. 4: "The Belfast Urban Motorway (BUM) as it was proposed in the 1960s[...]" Courtesy of Department for Infrastructure Northern Ireland. Accessed 16 February 2023. <https://www.architectural-review.com/essays/driving-the-social-divide-planning-in-belfast-reinforces-the-citys-segregation>.

Fig. 5: Missing City. Map by Forum for Alternative Belfast, 2010.

Fig. 7: Traffic fabric in the 1960s. Map by Mark Hackett. "Driving the Social Divide: Planning in Belfast Reinforces the City's Segregation". Architectural Review, 20 June 2019. Accessed 13 February 2023. <https://www.architectural-review.com/essays/driving-the-social-divide-planning-in-belfast-reinforces-the-citys-segregation>.

Fig. 8: Traffic fabric in 2019. Map by Mark Hackett. "Driving the Social Divide: Planning in Belfast Reinforces the City's Segregation". Architectural Review, 20 June 2019. Accessed 13 February 2023. <https://www.architectural-review.com/essays/driving-the-social-divide-planning-in-belfast-reinforces-the-citys-segregation>.

Fig. 11: Traffic fabric around the site, showcasing the emergence of the car park. Top: 1969. Bottom: 2016. Maps by Agustina Martire. "Walking the Streets: No More Motorways for Belfast". Spaces and Flows: An International Journal of Urban and ExtraUrban Studies 8, no. 3 (2017): 35–61. <https://doi.org/10.18848/2154-8676/CGP/v08i03/35-61>.

Fig 15: Illustration of a car unfolded. Drawing by muf architecture/art. From "A car-free london?" in This Is What We Do: A Muf Manual. London: Ellipsis, 2001: 76-77.

Fig 36: Four men in suits and a countless amount of missing voices signing the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. Courtesy of Reuters. Accessed 16 February 2023. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-61968177>

The remaining figures are drawings, photographs and illustrations produced by the author.