

# Constructing Hegemony

Places for contestation in East Belfast

Victor Riano

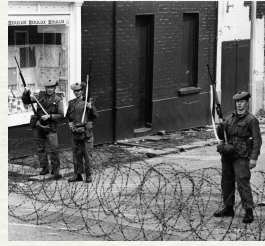


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Twenty-five years after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, or Belfast Agreement, Loyalist paramilitary groups pursue to keep alive a lethal narrative and purpose concerning the sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland.

Political murals are one of many spatial strategies by which these violent organizations appropriate public space in segregated neighbourhoods following a logic of territorialization, display of control and power and the use of semiotics that threatens a long peace process and negatively impacts the economic, social, and cultural life over time.

By first deconstructing the concept of hegemony and relating its situated example in East Belfast, this thesis project seeks to defy and disrupt paramilitary hegemony through multiple strategies. As a physical intervention to the site, the project deals with the question of architectural affordance and engages with the possibility of architecture going against hegemony.

Can architecture disrupt Hegemony? What happens in front of violent murals? How to create a dialogue with their semiotic messages and find a place of constructive friction towards a less violent neighbourhood? How to re-neighbour Belfast with its violent past and traumatized present?

Collage: Entry points to the Northern Irish Conflict: Tokens of territorializations, which are manifestations of the hegemonic power to territorialize the city.

Program Cover Image: Map of murals in East Belfast in relation to Schools, Churches and Bars, as part of hegemonic tools of consent.

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**(de)-constructing hegemony**

(De)-constructing hegemony studies the meanings by which a dominant social group gain and control power over subordinate groups, and how, through the use and threat of physical force, the dominant group's values, beliefs, and interests become the common sense of society.

From the territory of political architecture the project pretends also to engage speculatively with strategies that could go against components of hegemonic structures like sectarianism and it will challenge some of the ideological and procedural principles on which the Northern Irish conflict is based to find opportunities for its replacement by a process of reconciliation throughout society.<sup>1</sup>

The concepts of Hegemony, Consent and Coercion should be understood in this thesis from its Gramscian context.<sup>2</sup> Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony will inform the way that some paramilitary groups maintain power in this specific territory not only through coercion - which relies on the use of brutal force and physical violence like confrontations, attacks, bombings - , but most importantly through consent, referring to the construction of a dominant cultural and ideological system that is accepted and reinforced by residents of segregated neighbourhoods, who unknowingly are compliances with the conflict.

1 Morrow, Duncan. 'Sectarianism-A Review' Ulster University, 2019.

2 Gramsci, Antonio. Prison Notebooks. Vol. 1. Paperback ed. European Perspectives. New York, NY: Columbia Univ. Press, 2011.

Image: Paramilitary Mural in East Belfast. Source: Jonathan Porter. 2022

Image previous page: Loyalist flag in Belfast as an example of a physical manifestation of territorialization strategies by the paramilitary hegemony



It is worth examining the impact of violent expressions on public spaces, as this can help us better understand the situation and develop re-neighbouring strategies addressing conflicting regions. Sectarianism and segregation are widespread issues affecting millions of people around the world. In the contemporary European context and given recent developments in the Brexit era.<sup>3</sup>

The project is developed within the framework of the Political Architecture: Critical Sustainability program at the Royal Danish Academy, School of Architecture. I will use this platform to critically engage with an understanding of architecture as a political agent. In practice, that means a study of the multiple forms of possibilities that architecture can have, through assembling, positioning, and framing the political body, while simultaneously displaying multiple actors and hegemonic powers at play.<sup>4</sup>

The title of the project can also be replaced and understood as “De-constructing hegemony”, following Derrida’s idea of fluidity in knowledge that allows for new kinds of understandings of concepts emanating from cracks that all knowledges and theories have. If “deconstructing” is about examining internal logics in search for hidden and alternative meanings, then De-constructing hegemony examines the power struggle in Belfast in order to propose alternatives to the actual state of segregation and sectarianism affecting many neighbourhoods in Belfast.

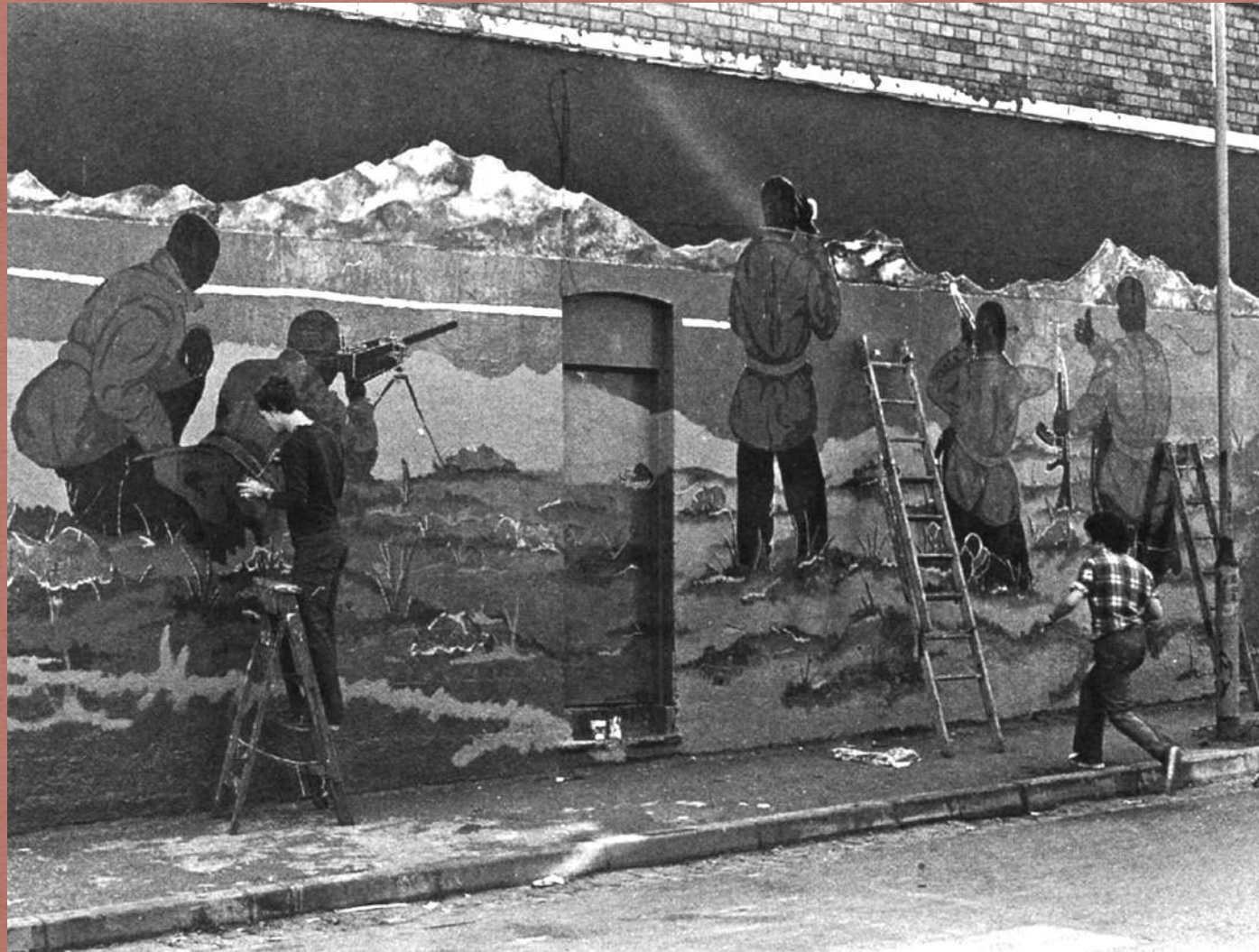
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<sup>3</sup> I claim that we still live in Brexit times because, until today, the conflict is an ongoing process of negotiation.

<sup>4</sup> As part of this project, I wrote an academic paper where I elaborate on the topic and focus specifically on political murals as entry points to the study of Hegemony through spatial manifestations of the Northern Irish conflict. It is called Constructing Hegemony: Political murals in Northern Ireland. It was the final assignment of the course “Writing Architecture” at the Royal Danish Academy held by Prof. Dag Petersson, Ph.D.

The starting point of the project was Belfast, with a three-week field trip that focused on collecting impressions around the topic and developing an archive of material which was further analysed in Copenhagen. During the course of the project, the underlying methodological structure of this project is based on the Coevolutionary method. Under its premise, the design process happens simultaneously following the primary problem and on a higher level - constantly reshaping the tools of inquiry. Thus, the aim is to be equally conscious about the development of the method of work as about its subject and its project outcome.

As of the date of publishing this program, One of many speculations refers to certain venues like taverns and pubs, where the political struggle meets the domesticity and the intimacy of enclosed parties. I will claim that there are places of contestation between two or more hegemonic powers.



## Spatial manifestations of The Troubles



Kids playing next to a violent mural in Ormeau Rd., Belfast during the Troubles in the 1980s.

Image previous page: Painting of a political mural in Rockville St., Falls. Belfast. 1981

The Northern Irish conflict is rooted in deep-seated political, economic, and religious divisions between two main communities, which have long been at odds over the status of Northern Ireland as part of the United Kingdom. These divisions are a result of religious wars that are centuries old in which the Catholic and Protestant traditions have repeatedly clashed since the seventeenth century.<sup>1</sup>

The violence escalated to a violent episode starting in the late 1960s, as tensions between the two communities reached a critical point. The Troubles were characterized by bombings, assassinations, and street violence, with both sides committing acts of terrorism. The violence reached its peak in the 1970s, with hundreds of people killed and thousands injured.

The actors in the conflict are varied and complex. At the heart of the conflict are two main communities with distinctive histories and traditions: Unionists, who are primarily Protestant and protect the identity of Northern Ireland as purely part of the United Kingdom; and Nationalists, who are primarily Catholic seeking a closer relation to the Republic of Ireland. The British government has had its own agency maintaining its hegemonic power by law and order in Northern Ireland, but its actions and policies have often been controversial and have contributed to the escalation of violence. The British military was deployed to Northern Ireland in 1969, and during the Troubles, their presence and actions were a major source of tension.

<sup>1</sup> Goalwin, Gregory. 'The Art of War: Instability, Insecurity, and Ideological Imagery in Northern Ireland's Political Murals, 1979-1998'. *International Journal of Politics, Culture & Society*, Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost, 26, no. 3 (September 2003): 190.





Paramilitary mural. Ulster Volunteer Force. East Belfast. 2022

Paramilitary organizations are powerful agents that have only radicalised the conflict: Loyalist paramilitaries, such as the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) and the Ulster Defence Association (UDA), use violence to resist Irish nationalist aspirations and maintain the Union with Britain.

On the other hand, republican paramilitaries, such as the Irish Republican Army (IRA), used violence to pursue their goal of a united Ireland. These paramilitaries were responsible for many of the deadliest attacks during the Troubles and contributed significantly to the escalation of violence.<sup>2</sup>

The violence also had a profound impact on the economy of Belfast and Northern Ireland as a whole. The city's infrastructure was also damaged by the violence, with buildings and roads damaged by bombs and gunfire. Despite the difficulties, efforts were made through politics to bring an end to sectarian violence in Belfast. The agreement signed in 1998, was a landmark moment in the peace process and marked the first stage of de-escalation of The Troubles.<sup>3</sup> It took many years for the region to recover from the economic damage caused by the violence, and the scars of the conflict are still visible in most parts of the city.<sup>4</sup>

But, how alive is the conflict today? Today, most people would think that Northern Ireland is at peace. Violence has dropped, at least according to the Police Service of

<sup>2</sup> Edwards, Aaron, and Martin Dillon. *UVF: Behind the Mask*. Newbridge, Co. Kildare, Ireland: Merrion Press, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> The Belfast Agreement, also known as the Good Friday Agreement was signed on 10 April 1998, it created a new power-sharing arrangement, including an Executive and Assembly, and was based on a series of commitments on de-escalating violence through weapon decommissioning, policing and prisoner status negotiations.

<sup>4</sup> Lawther, Cheryl. *Truth, Denial and Transition: Northern Ireland and the Contested Past*. Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon: New York, NY, 2017.

Northern Ireland Statistics Branch which reports that homicides have been only decreasing in the past 20 years. Nonetheless, the conflict unofficially remains alive.

**Today, loyalist and republican terrorist groups are still in existence, unwilling to transition to a peaceful negotiation of the conflict.**

Furthermore, they also portray the narrative of being prepared for any violence that could arise because of political decisions. Since the de-escalation of violent confrontations, paramilitary groups have shifted their activities from bombings and killings into more invisible practices of controlling territories. The contemporary UVF has transitioned into a criminal organization based on a capitalistic business model responsible for the drug market of vast areas of Northern Ireland.<sup>5</sup> They are also involved in multiple cases of money laundering, racketeering, extortion, and smuggling.<sup>6</sup>

The State has been occupied with policies towards the reduction of criminal activities, the Tackling Paramilitarism, Criminality and Organised Crime Programme claim to support people and communities in Northern Ireland that are vulnerable to paramilitary influence. It focuses on dealing with harm in the “here and now” as well as setting early interventions to ensure that future generations are not exploited or traumatised through paramilitary violence.

5 Edwards, Aaron. ‘The Praetorian Guard’. In *UVF: Behind the Mask*, 321–35. Newbridge, Co. Kildare, Ireland: Merrion Press, 2017.

6 Gallaher, Carolyn. *After the Peace: Loyalist Paramilitaries in Post-Accord Northern Ireland*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007. P. 205.

Image: UVF Organization Diagram in relation to other paramilitaries and the State in Northern Ireland



ἡγεμονία *hēgemonía*, “supremacy or leadership, chief command”

from ἡγεμών *hēgemōn*, “a leader, guide, commander, chief”

from ἡγέομαι *hēgéomai*, “to lead”

Dominance of one social group over another, such that the ruling group or hegemon acquires some degree of consent from the subordinate, as opposed to dominance purely by force.



## Analytics of Hegemony

The paramilitary groups' control over East Belfast involves a complex power dynamic, which can be understood by studying the concept of hegemony. According to Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci, hegemony refers to the cultural, ideological, and moral leadership of a dominant group over subordinate groups, in which the dominant group's values, beliefs, and interests become the common sense of society.<sup>1</sup>

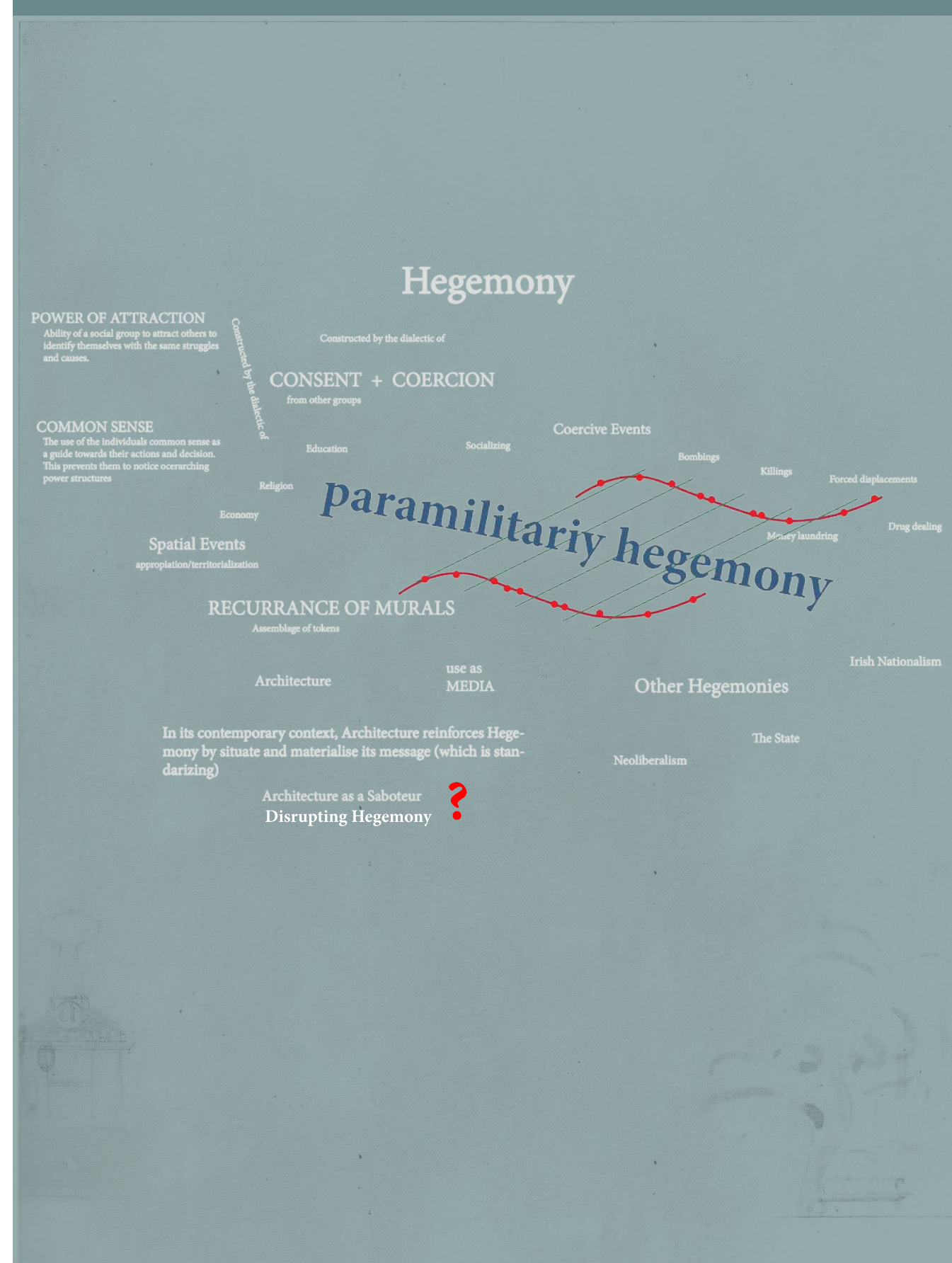
Hegemony operates through a combination of coercion and consent. Coercion refers to the use of force or the threat of force to maintain social order and control. In the case of Northern Ireland, this can take the form of physical violence, forced displacement of families and attacks carried out by paramilitary groups.<sup>2</sup>

Consent, on the other hand, refers to the voluntary acceptance of the paramilitary group's values, beliefs, and interests by subordinate groups like neighbours of protestant districts. Consent can be achieved through a range of means, such as education, mass media, cultural institutions, and religion which help to shape people's ideas, perceptions, and identities. This ensures that the existing social order is seen as natural and legitimate by the majority of the population. For example, through the use of symbols and images in political murals, the UVF achieve consent from the people through cultural meanings to justify their coercive acts of violence.

1 Gramsci, Antonio. Prison Notebooks. Vol. 1. Paperback ed. European Perspectives. New York, NY: Columbia Univ. Press, 2011.

2 Hoare, George, and Nathan Sperber. 'Hegemony.' In An Introduction to Antonio Gramsci: His Life, Thought and Legacy. London ; New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016.

Image: Diagram of hegemonic tools and its relation to architecture.  
Image previous page: Edited illustration of Belfast Townhall





Collage: Tokens of Territorialization

Hegemony, then, is not just about the use of force itself, but about creating a shared understanding of what is acceptable and what is not. It involves the creation and dissemination of ideas and values that make the existing power structure seem natural and inevitable. As a result, they are less likely to challenge the status quo and more likely to comply with the dominant group's wishes.

But, to what degree architecture plays a role in its preservation? According to what one can see and sense on the gables of houses in troubled neighbourhoods like The Shankill, Falls or East Belfast, the Troubles are very alive, there is a permanent state of alertness and preparedness for confrontation.

What I claim is that Architecture and art can play an instrumental role in maintaining hegemony. This is by shaping the built environment and creating symbolic representations of power and control murals, flags, walls, painted street kerbs, and memorials. These are what I call Tokens of Territorialization. This is because - ultimately - these manifestations are about territory, about controlling it and displaying that control.



# Tokens of Territorialization

*Entry points to the architectural project*

Throughout the city, one can identify manifestations of the conflict that are not only a reminder of the past but are also active pieces that are used to further construct hegemonic narratives pulling towards more segregation between communities and maintaining a state of vigilance and threat of violence alive.

**This possibility of violence is one of the main characteristics of the political atmosphere in Belfast, most of the messages portrayed in public spaces are messages of threat, and the willingness to combat any opposing narrative.**



Paramilitary mural. Belfast. 2022

Image previous page: A typical loyalist bonfire during the celebration of the "Eleven Night" on July, the 11th 2021.

Political murals are one of the most perceptible expressions of the conflict, mostly due to the violence that they project into public space. The murals often depict dramatic scenes from the conflict, as well as images of cultural and historical significance to each community.<sup>1</sup> They are both a symbol of pride and a reminder of the difficult history of the city. Many people visiting Belfast, or locals living outside of the working-class areas in which the murals are painted think these murals are unsympathetic, offensive, and gross, and they are seen, on a par with graffiti, as acts of vandalism.<sup>2</sup>



A very striking illusion is experienced when passing by this mural located on Castlereagh Road, when, the gunmen's steely gaze seems to track the viewers and the aim of the rifle always points to whoever dares to look as one walks past the wall.

1 Riano, Victor. Constructing Hegemony: Political murals in Northern Ireland. Written assignment from last semester.

2 Concerning this project, a field trip to Northern Ireland took place between October the 2nd and the 23rd. During this trip, I had personal communications with local people in East Belfast and informal interviews with students of Queens University, Belfast.

It might be the case, that the act of painting a mural that depicts two masked men holding rifles is an act of vandalism since it is a negative impact on the urban public space, it is in fact an intrusion of violence into the collective perception of streets and squares. But what I have discovered during my field trip in Belfast is that murals are more than simple acts of vandalism, they are articulators of narratives, tokens of territorialization and pieces of a bigger assemblage of cultural meanings by which powerful organizations maintain their influence over neighbourhoods across Northern Ireland. In a sense, political murals are preservations of this conflict that in many ways has died, and in other ways is very alive.



Political murals in Belfast are not the only visible manifestation of the city's sectarian conflict. The city is still physically divided along sectarian lines, with nationalist areas on one side and unionist areas on the other. High walls, known as "Peace Walls," were erected to separate the two communities and prevent violence from spilling over from one side to the other. These physical divisions serve as a stark reminder of the deep-seated sectarian tensions that still exist in the city.

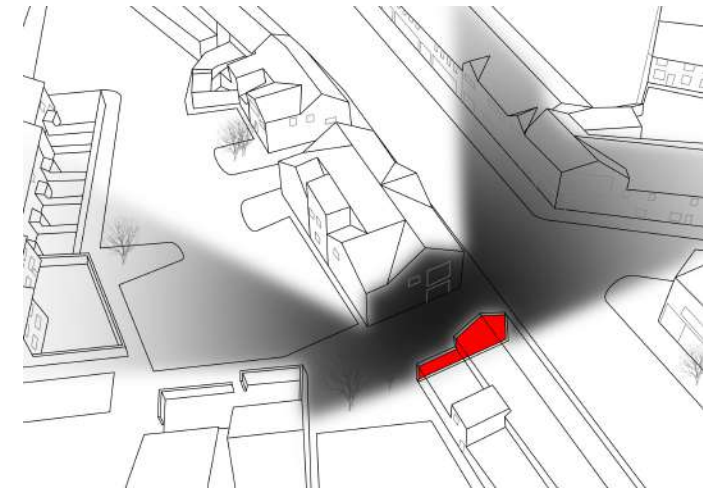
Flags along streets are another visible physical manifestation of the conflict. Both nationalist and unionist areas have their own flags, which are flown proudly and serve as a symbol of each community's political identity. The flying of flags is often a source of tension, and disputes over the display of flags have led to violence in the past. Painted kerbs are a distinctive feature of many of the streets in Belfast. The kerbs in nationalist areas are painted blue, white, and green, while those in unionist areas are painted red, white, and blue. This serves as a physical division between the two communities and is a reminder of the ongoing sectarian tensions in the city.

Memorials are another type of token in Belfast that reflect the ongoing conflict and territorialization. These memorials take various forms, such as plaques, statues, and murals, and serve to commemorate individuals or events that are significant to the communities. The memorials often reflect the history of the conflict and are located in areas that are associated with one community or the other. They act as physical markers of territory and serve as a way of reinforcing the narratives and identities of each community. While some memorials are contentious and have been the subject of debate and controversy, others are accepted as part of the landscape of the city and serve as a reminder of the past and the ongoing struggle for identity and recognition.



These manifestations are tokens, in the sense that they represent something larger than themselves. They serve as symbols and markers of identity, belonging, and power. For example, political murals are not just images on a wall, but they also convey a message of political ideology and control.

They serve as a means of communication and solidarity within the community, but also as a way of communicating a message of power and control to outsiders. Flags are not just pieces of cloth, but they represent the identity and allegiance of a community. Painted kerbs are not just lines on the road, but they serve as physical markers of territorial boundaries between different communities. The continued presence of the Peace Walls, for example, serves to reinforce the idea of sectarianism and division. What happens in front of them is an experience that affects the intellectual level of individuals and affects the communal behaviour of the vicinity.



Drawing: "Semiotic area" in front of a mural which are areas of distress where violent murals are visible.

Photo: "Peace wall" on Coupar Way, Belfast 2022

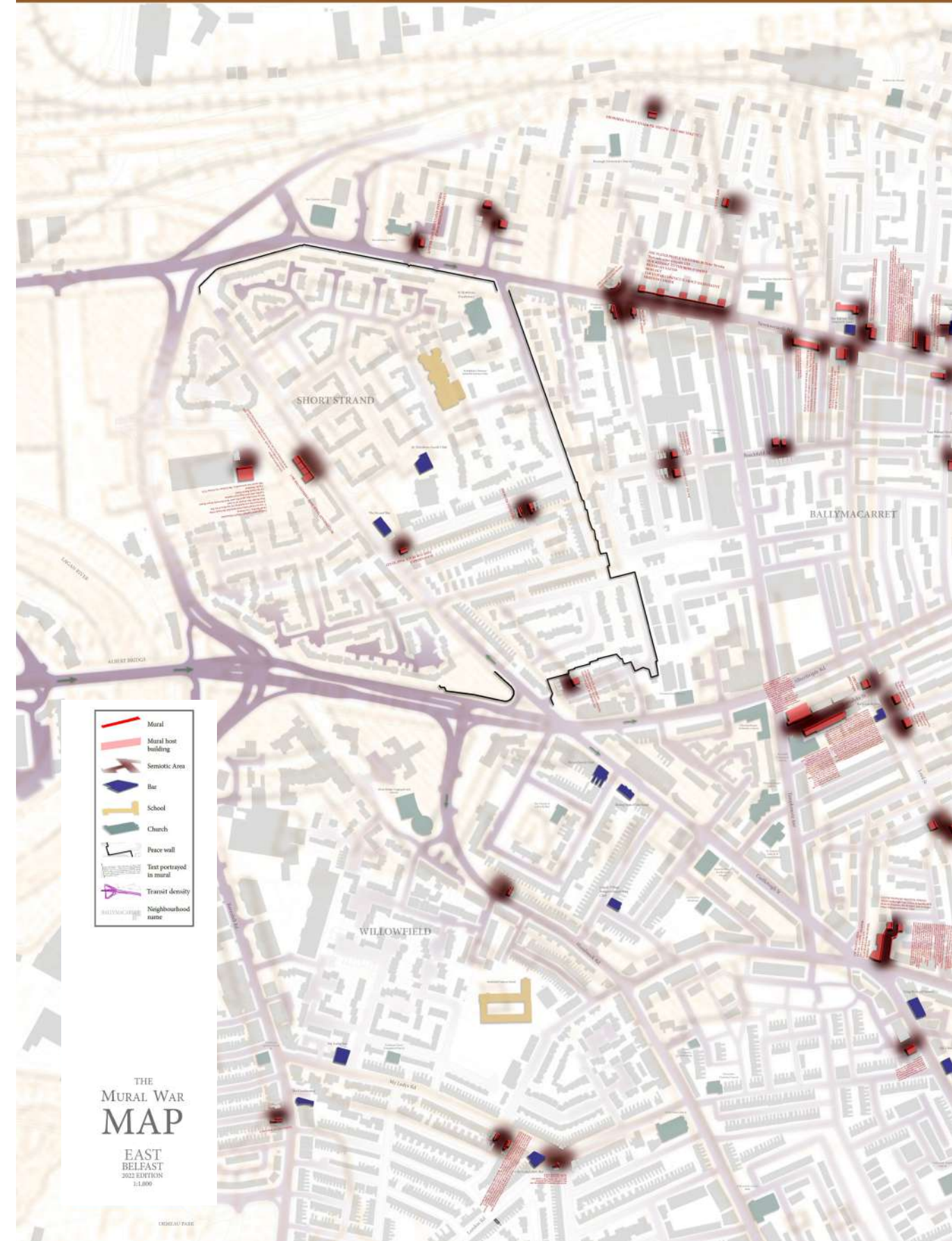


It is in the public space surrounding these tokens where the violence is projected, and sensibilities are affected. These are what I call Semiotic Areas, which are areas of distress where violent murals are visible.<sup>3</sup>

In my analysis, I argue that these tokens are not simply static objects but are part of a larger assemblage of cultural meanings by which powerful organizations maintain their influence over neighbourhoods across Northern Ireland. I draw from Manuel DeLanda's assemblage theory to describe these spatial manifestations as a complex system composed of a variety of interconnected entities that are constantly interacting and evolving. These entities are social – media, communication, cultural events, traditions-, conceptual and range from individuals to institutions – schools, churches, government- and physical objects – murals, kerbs, flags, and memorials -.

An assemblage is characterized by its ability to create new emergent properties that arise from the interactions between its parts. Part of this project is to investigate to what extent these interactions could hint towards possible interactions that do not necessarily contribute to the status quo but disrupts the whole meshwork of elements and relations.

<sup>3</sup> Image: Map of murals in East Belfast in relation to Schools, Churches and Bars, as part of hegemonic tools of consent.



# Places of Contestation

*Functional project for a re-neighbouring practice*



The functional program of this project uses a specific spatial configuration to investigate the possibility of contestation to lethal hegemonic powers in East Belfast. Places of contestation are spaces that provide opportunities for resistance, they do so by serving as places for social interaction, community formation, and political debate.

Such a re-neighbouring practice could serve as a space for contestation against the hegemonic structures of sectarianism in Belfast, by promoting alternative forms of territorialization based on consent rather than coercion. By creating spaces that encourage cross-community engagement and interaction, it could help break down the barriers that have historically kept communities separated and facilitate the formation of new, more inclusive identities.

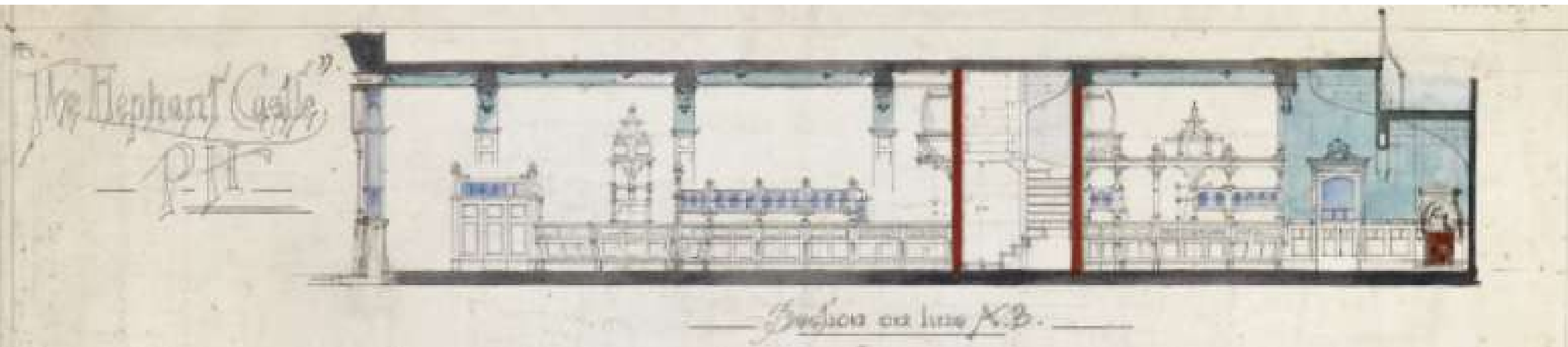
Bars and pubs serve as strategic places of territorialization considering that it is in these places where specific cultural, social, and political identities are constructed,

reinforced, and maintained. These spaces are often perceived as belonging to one particular community, thereby creating a sense of territorial ownership.

They are a combination of physical violence to public space, and they are tools for preserving a moral narrative. Most importantly, they function as a threat of imminent violence, which acts as the only way of keeping hegemonic order.

At the same time, however, some of these pubs have also been associated with coercion and the exertion of power over marginalized communities, raising difficult questions about consent and the limits of individual agency in the face of wider societal pressures.

Some of these establishments have been at the centre of political and social movements, serving as gathering places for those who sought to resist hegemonic forces and fight for their right to self-determination.



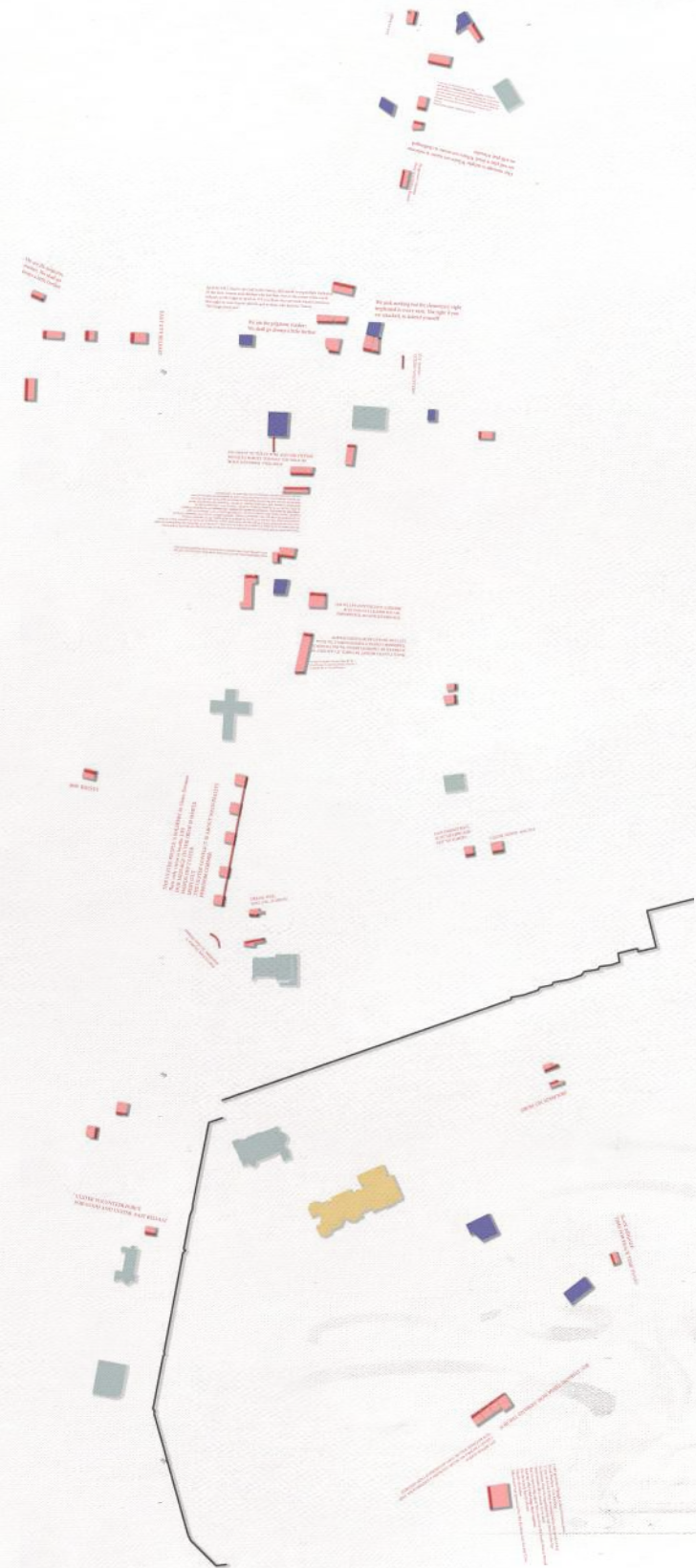
Historically, pubs in Belfast have also functioned as tokens for territorialization. The ownership of pubs has often been tied to specific neighbourhoods, and pubs have been used to signify who belongs to which community. During the Troubles, this practice became even more significant as neighbourhoods became increasingly polarized. Many pubs became targets for attack, by being bombed or set on fire, causing significant damage and loss of life. For example, the loyalist bombing of the McGurk's Bar in 1971 resulted in the deaths of 15 people, and the IRA bombing of the Bayardo Bar in 1975 resulted in the deaths of five people. These attacks were not just aimed at causing destruction and death, but also at sending a message to the opposing community. The city centre was also enclosed during this time, making it impossible for communities to gather in these areas due to strategies of segregation implemented by the government.

Despite the risks, pubs in Belfast continued to serve as places for socialization during the Troubles. Pubs were often the only places where people could gather and socialize without fear of violence or discrimination. In some cases, pubs even served as unofficial community centres, providing a place for people to meet and organize because many people found it difficult to gather in public spaces without fear of violence or persecution.

At the time of publishing this program, this thesis project enters a phase of experimentation that will lead to an iterative process of synthesis and analysis of various proposal ideas relating to the topics mentioned before.

The investigation leading to this thesis program is only the starting point towards awareness of more precise elements of the current conflict and a tool to catalyse proposals towards a hegemonic shift which could benefit neighbourhoods affected by segregation and sectarian violence in Northern Ireland.

Image: Map of murals in East Belfast in relation to Schools, Churches and Bars, as part of hegemonic tools of consent.



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