visual ethnography

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Portraying the divided city. Photographing the Belfast peacelines

Abstract
In my research on the Belfast peacelines, which sought to understand the process behind their construction, photography was used as an investigative tool to locate devices, analyse the transformation of the urban environment and describe the materiality of place. In this article, I question the links between photography and other types of data and whether it is possible to achieve a descriptive neutrality in "research" pictures, in contrast to an aesthetic that is supposedly specific to art photography.

Keywords
Belfast, photography, peacelines, conflict, planning

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In Belfast, urban space is segregated not only according to social class but also according to the city's two political and religious communities: Catholic nationalists/republicans on the one hand, and Protestant unionists/loyalists on the other.[1] Walls known as *peacelines* or *peace walls* were built in the city from the beginning of the civil unrest (the "Troubles") until quite recently (Figure 1). The first peaceline was erected in 1969 by the British army following a series of major riots. Such devices were used as policing and conflict management tools by the security forces. Paradoxically, since the Peace Agreement was signed in 1998, these structures have proliferated, often at the request of the local population, owing to remaining violence and tensions on the ground.

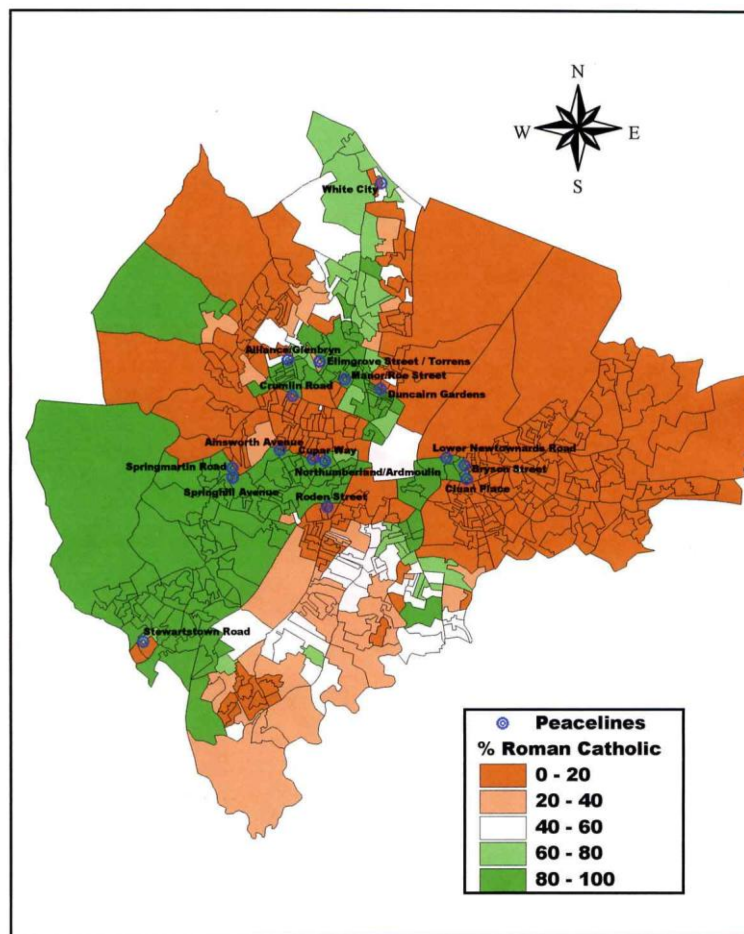

Fig. 1. Distribution of Roman Catholics in Belfast according to the 1991 census and peacelines built as of 1998 (Source: NIHE, *Geographic Information System*, 1999)[2].

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[1] This division is social, political and religious: regardless of actual religious beliefs and practices, groups and individuals will typically identify with and refer to one of two religious denominations, i.e. Catholic or Protestant. The latter encompasses many different churches, in fact, the most common being the Methodist, Presbyterian and Anglican (Church of Ireland) churches.

[2] Data available at the time of the survey.

The walls are situated on the boundaries of segregated neighbourhoods in the inner city of Belfast – critical locations where violence was at its apex.[3] They partially enclose the areas in question. But the walls are not only a materialization of division, nor a paroxysmal symptom of the conflict. They result from a particular social process, in part autonomous, involving a number of specific stakeholders. My research (Ballif 2006) documented the genesis and the continued (and reinforced) existence of the walls in the urban space and the strategies implemented by the public agencies. They were installed by the army initially, then by the police from the mid-1970s under the aegis of the Northern Ireland Office (NIO), and finally have been within the remit of the Department of Justice since 2010. The Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE), responsible of the provision of social housing in the province, took care of their maintenance[4] from the 1980s and 1990s onwards. Their appearance was "softened" and to some extent normalized, and they became a permanent element of the townscape in the inner city. They thus represented a security tool but were also elements of urban space. Rather than attempting to write a history of the peacelines, built in a situation of emergency according to a very poorly documented decision-making process, I tried to understand the logics of action of the security forces in urban space. I tried to understand the planning processes and the way they evolved over the years, describing the different rationales of the various stakeholders, especially in the contested spaces. The phenomenon of the building of peacelines is not very well circumscribed, even for the authorities. The chronology of the events is not clearly documented in the archives and is difficult to trace back over time. The first peacelines date from 1969 and the early 1970s. Although the process of building peacelines was a continuous one over time, it is possible to identify a second round of construction in the mid-1980s, followed by a third and final phase from the mid-1990s. The exact number of peacelines depends on the methodology used to count them.[5] The NIHE estimates that about a hundred exist today, whereas the NIO counted approximately fifty walls.

Few studies existed at the time on the subject of the peacelines. In most research on Belfast and Northern Ireland, peacelines were mentioned merely as a backdrop of the conflict. However, certain geographers developed some very interesting work on the peacelines and on their impact on segregation and urban policies. Fred Boal was the first to investigate them: he studied the social interactions in sectarian neighbourhoods in West Belfast and showed that the first peaceline built in 1969 follows pre-existing social borders. Brendan Murtagh (1994, 1995; Shirlow and Murtagh 2006) studied their socio-economic impacts and showed that the presence of peacelines exacerbates urban poverty. Scott Bollens (1998, 2000) considered the peacelines as an aspect of territorial division and assessed their impact on urban policies, in particular in terms of the duplication of services and facilities. Research on the spatial dimensions of the peacelines is scarcer still (Dawson 1984a, 1984b).

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[3] Over three quarters of the murders linked to the Troubles occurred at or near the interfaces between sectarian neighbourhoods in Belfast (Shirlow 2003).

[4] This agency is responsible for providing and managing social housing in Northern Ireland.

[5] Indeed, while official inventories distinguish various elements added over time, differences exist in the methods used to count them. This uncertainty is visible in the official documents produced by government departments and their agencies.

Lastly, the peacelines sometimes appear in the background of works of fiction, as in *Eureka Street* by Robert McLiam Wilson (1997), for example.

In order to document the peaceline building process for my research, I collected various types of sources. For the early structures of the late 1960s and early 1970s, the only sources available to me were press cuttings and a general chronology of events established by Deutsch and Magowan (1973). The enquiries conducted by parliamentary committees into the civil unrest in 1969 produced only general evaluations of the role of the police and the army. Neither the British army nor the police archives were open to the public at the time of my research. Knowledge was disseminated in the individual and collective memories of the security forces. Oral sources were unavailable, as it was impossible to find and contact the officers in charge at this time, many of whom were certainly already retired and, moreover, unlikely to talk on classified matters. For the more recent period, similar difficulties arose, due to the high level of mobility of military and police personnel. Furthermore, it is practically impossible to ask security personnel about action taken during previous postings. Consequently, I met with a number of serving police officers, whom I interviewed regarding the decisions and problems they were facing at the time of the study. I could not meet with anyone from the army because they were no longer in charge of the peacelines or responsible for matters of law and order. I interviewed representatives of the Northern Ireland Office, namely the head of the Security and Policy Division and intelligence officers in Belfast. I also collected statistical data from the NIHE. Interviews with civil servants from this body enabled me to understand their action with regard to the peacelines.

The objective was also to take into account the spatial integration of the walls into the urban space and their impact on the urban area. The starting point for my survey was the unexpected discovery that these structures were discontinuous and only partially enclosed sections of urban space: rather than compartmentalizing space, the walls seemed to be markers of contested space and conflicts. Moreover, while the most imposing walls are highly visible (Figure 2), other structures were less visually imposing and could be mistaken for an ordinary property boundary. (Figures 3 and 4). I considered these walls as material artefacts made by the security and housing agencies in response to the conflict in Northern Ireland. The materiality of the objects had been a very important dimension in my analysis. The field survey encompassed *in situ* observations, in order to produce an inventory of the peacelines, together with a typology of the structures and their locations, and describe the spatial device. I then compared these visual data with the discourses of the stakeholders involved in urban policy. I also adopted a sensitive approach to the object and to the urban space. I walked these areas many times and took photographs and notes describing the peacelines.

Fig. 2. Cupar Way (June 4th, 2001) © F. Ballif.

Fig. 3. Torrens Avenue (June 2nd, 2001) © F. Ballif.

Fig. 4. Crumlin Road, Ardoyne (March 13th, 2000) © F. Ballif.

Photography was a research tool in itself through its documentary function, which I shall comment upon first. It enabled me to negotiate my presence in deprived, sectarian neighbourhoods, where my foreign status already gave me a certain freedom of movement, and made it easier to obtain certain information; the making of images also encompassed a naïve initial assumption, which associated a neutral aesthetic with a scientific stance, and which must be scrutinized.

Photography as a research tool

I used photography as a research tool that enabled the description of a spatial device. Indeed, as Albert Piette states (2007, pp. 24–27) the photographic image is "a specific mode of knowledge". The image is an imprint of the real, a clue; it forces the viewer to look at, and designates something. The isomorphic characteristic of the image (in that it gives access to the entirety of a situation at a given moment in time) means it does not say anything *by itself* but instead requires a descriptive commentary. Photographs associated with written notes and sketches functioned as an *aide-mémoire* and contributed to descriptions used to list and locate different structures. Photography also served to document shapes and materials. Finally, it was useful for "recording" the transformations of the peacelines, which changed over time, sometimes very quickly. Indeed, from the 1990s onwards, most of them were normalized in the course of urban regeneration and the renovation of public spaces. I was able to record some of these transformations during my fieldwork, and also made comparisons with older photos taken by others.

First and foremost, taking photographs and notes enabled me to produce an *inventory* of the peacelines, in the absence of any comprehensive documentation, and to locate them, as they are not marked on city maps (Figure 5). I also used photography to understand the structure of the peacelines. I wanted to photograph circumscribed and limited objects, namely the security walls built by the police or the Housing Executive. I wanted to capture these images in a clinical and exhaustive fashion, in order to grasp their materiality, their spatial layout and the configuration of the boundaries they marked. This corpus of images also made deferred observation possible; indeed, the written notes were enhanced and completed by the *a posteriori* observation of the photographs. The written descriptions provided further information on the configuration, dimensions and ground coverage of the walls. Consequently, my analysis included diagrams indicating the places where the pictures were taken, complemented by the photographs themselves and the corresponding descriptions (Figures 6a to 6e). Special attention was paid to the opening/closure of space, to thresholds, and to crossings (Figures 7 and 8). In these examples, the diagrams show that the enclosure of space concerns a relatively small surface area and that ground coverage is limited; the photographs show an ordinary townscape reshaped by the security devices and indicate that the enclosure is partial. In this way, the photographs complement the text and diagrams with the aim of giving a sense of the materiality of the studied object.

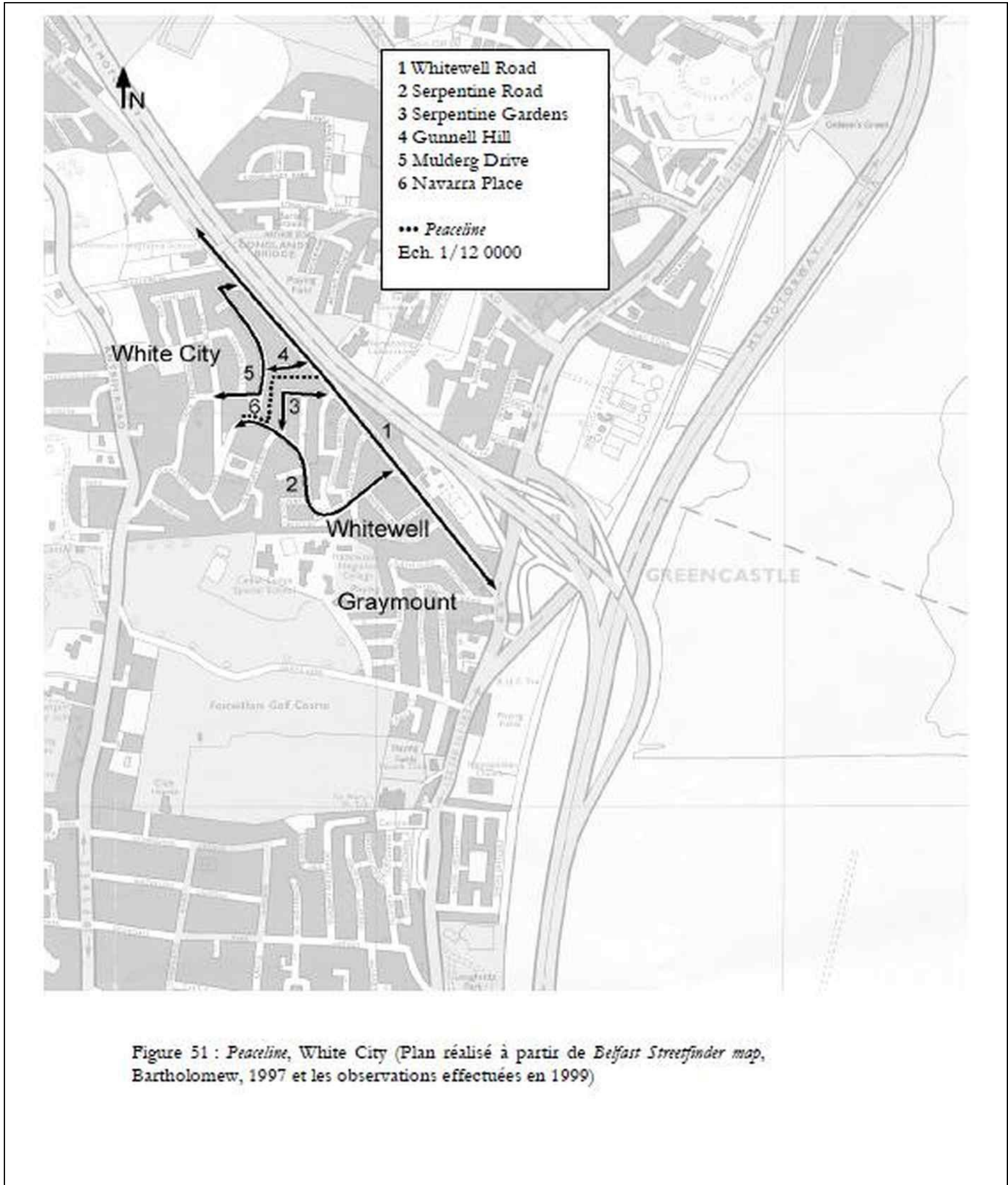

Figure 51 : *Peaceline*, White City (Plan réalisé à partir de *Belfast Streetfinder map*, Bartholomew, 1997 et les observations effectuées en 1999)

Fig. 5: Location map, White City © F. Ballif.

5 Le compartimentage urbain

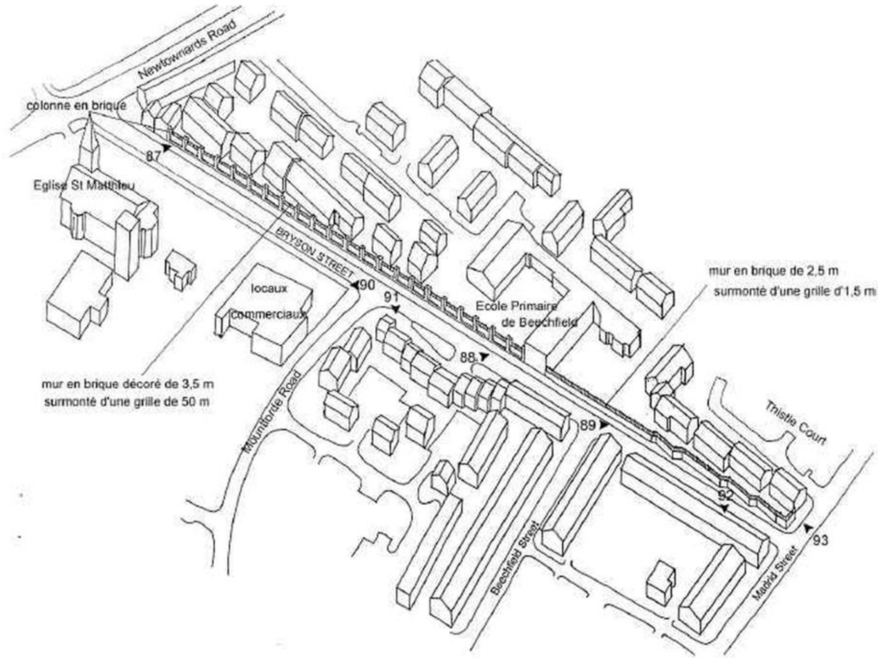

Figure 86 : *Peaceline*, Bryson Street (Schéma réalisé d'après EDC, *Belfast Peacelines Study*, 1991, p. 14 et les observations effectuées en mars 2000 et juin 2001)

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Figg. 6a to 6E: PhD extracts on the Bryson Street peaceline © F. Ballif.

Figure 87 : Bryson Street, mur de sécurité (mars 2000)

Figure 88 : Bryson Street, pignon de l'école primaire de Beechfield (3 juin 2001)

Figure 89 : Bryson Street, mur de sécurité (3 juin 2001)

Figure 90 : Locaux commerciaux de Bryson community enterprise, carrefour Bryson Street/Mountforde Street (3 juin 2001)

Figure 91 : Bryson Street, lotissement de la phase 6 de la RDA 26/27 (3 juin 2001)

Figure 92 : Bryson Street, St Matthew HAA (mars 2000)

La fermeture de Thistle Court

A l'extrémité sud de Bryson Street, près du carrefour de Madrid Street, les logements de la *St Matthew Housing Action Area* ont leurs façades tournées vers la rue (Figure 92). La priorité de la *St Matthew Housing Association* en charge de leur construction, était d'atteindre une densité maximale. Mais certains logements ne sont plus habités en raison de la localisation sur l'interface. Le carrefour de Bryson Street et Madrid Street est un *flashpoint* du quartier. Richard Williamson, chef du district n°2 de Belfast pour le NIHE, rapporte que des incidents mineurs s'y déroulent de façon chronique, les bandes d'adolescents du Short Strand et du quartier de Woodstock se bagarrent, les jets de pierre et les échauffourées y sont fréquents. Les tensions sont particulièrement sensibles durant la saison des défilés. Lors d'une prise de notes de terrain en juin 2001, un passant me raconte qu'il habite l'un des logements de la *St Matthew HAA* et que lors des dernières émeutes trois semaines auparavant, toutes ses vitres ont été cassées. En effet, ces incidents du 13 mai 2001 sont relatés par l'*Irish News*, journal nord-irlandais d'audience nationaliste. En face de la *St Matthew HAA*, Thistle Court, un petit lotissement du NIHE, est occupé par les protestants. Le NIHE cherche à assurer la sécurité de ses locataires et la rentabilité du parc locatif social. Or, le lotissement a un taux de vacance très élevé et plusieurs logements sont très endommagés (Figure 93). Les maisons de Madrid Street situées au carrefour de Bryson Street sont abandonnées.

Figure 93 : Thistle Court avant la fermeture de Madrid Street (4 juin 2001)

Lors d'un entretien en mars 2000, Richard Williamson affirme qu'« une barrière physique pourrait résoudre le problème », mais qu'il existe un conflit d'intérêts entre les administrations à ce sujet. Les pouvoirs publics, les élus locaux et les riverains n'ont jamais pu s'entendre sur la fermeture de ces rues, bien que la question ait déjà été évoquée par le NIHE lors de la réhabilitation de Thistle Court en 1985. Richard Williamson évoque le statu quo politique local du milieu des années 1990. Le député DUP pour Belfast-Est, Peter Robinson, est en faveur d'une fermeture. Mais les paramilitaires des deux camps, par l'intermédiaire de leurs représentants politiques, le *Sinn Fein* et le *Progressive Unionist Party*, se sont mis d'accord pour qu'il n'y ait aucune barrière. Leurs hommes sur le terrain s'efforcent de limiter les tensions. La communauté est impliquée dans la réduction de la violence. La police, dont le commissariat est situé un peu plus loin dans Madrid Street, préfère garder un accès direct à Templemore Avenue et est opposée à la fermeture de Madrid Street. Elle est également opposée à la proposition d'une barrière semi-permanente, dont elle devrait assurer l'ouverture et la fermeture[1]. Le NIHE gère les conséquences immobilières de cette situation. En 1998, il commandite une étude sur la Tower Street HAA à un bureau d'études privé, *Building Design Partnership* (BDP), qui propose deux options : fermer Madrid Street et ainsi séparer catholiques et protestants, ou bien construire un dispositif permettant de condamner l'accès

[1] Entretien avec Richard Williamson, NIHE, District 2, *District manager*, 6 mars 2000.

Fig. 7. Peaceline, Serpentine Road/Mulderg Drive, view from Serpentine Road, White City (March 4th, 1999) © F. Ballif.

Fig. 8. Peaceline, Serpentine Road/Mulderg Drive, view from Navarra Place, White City (March 4th, 1999) © F. Ballif.

Technical choices condition the production of images. I produced my images before digital photography was the norm, and thus chose to use film, with which I was more familiar (in conjunction with a 24 × 36 mm SLR camera). The cost of developing photographs necessarily limited the number of shots taken. To begin with, I took a certain number of recce pictures, and then returned to peaceline sites several times to produce series of photos as data to analyse. These series were produced along the pedestrian routes that had to be followed to access both sides of the walls. I shot frontally, at eye level. I used colour films (to ensure a better description of the materials used, and to avoid the "aestheticized" effect of black-and-white pictures, which were tantamount to art photography in my naïve opinion), a 28 mm lens to capture each site in its entirety, a 50 mm lens to render "what it actually looked like" and zooms for focusing on particular details. I framed the photographs at eye level in order to provide a "pedestrian's eye view", although the streets were also much used, if not more so, by cars. The photographs were taken from the street, as I was interested in the production of public spaces in which the walls were situated, which enclosed these spaces. I also had the somewhat all-encompassing vision typical of the urban planner who analyses urban space from an external perspective[6]. I presented the photos side by side in order to obtain an impression of the ground coverage of the walls in the street (Figures 9 to 11).

I made the choice of using fixed images to show complex places because they allow for a better analysis of details[7]. The difficulty in analysing these images, however, lies in the

[6] I did not go inside any of the houses to see how the outside is perceived from inside the home. The residents' view, i.e. what they see from their home, did not interest me as such, as my research focused on public stakeholders and the planning process. Furthermore, the practical difficulties involved were dissuasive: entering people's homes and connecting with residents would have been personally more challenging than I felt I was capable of.

[7] In any case, filming was not possible from a technical standpoint, as I did not really know how to made moving images at the time; this was before the integration of video capabilities into mobile phones and digital cameras as standard, which has since made this technique far more accessible.

fact that each photograph captures only a small part of a bigger space. It was therefore important to link the images both graphically and analytically in the descriptions produced. Nevertheless, there was a risk that these images could hamper the viewer's understanding by assigning an inherent meaning to the phenomenon at play, that is to say by showing a fixed reality, whereas in fact this reality is constantly changing. Furthermore, photographs say nothing about the conditions in which urban space is produced or the processes involved. It was therefore necessary to link the pictures to the stakeholders' discourses.

Fig. 9. Peaceline, Manor Street (August 10th, 1999) © Florine Ballif.

Fig. 10. Peaceline, Crumlin Road, Ardoyne (March 13th, 2000) © F. Ballif.

Fig. 11. Suffolk Drive, brownfield site (June 4th, 2001) © F. Ballif.

Photographs creates a certain distance, as they can be examined in a different place and at a different time, making it possible to perceive things that went unnoticed at first glance. For instance, my photographs made me aware of details that I had not previously spotted regarding street layouts. At several sites, where a wall has been built across a previously open street, the footways have not been completely remodelled: a kerb is typically added at the end of the blocked street, the former route of which is still visible (Figure 12). The explanation for this lies in the distribution of roles among the public agencies involved: the highways department does not intervene in the construction of security walls. The cost issue may also render additional roadwork unnecessary. But it seems that the main reason lies in the authorities' insistence that these devices still be considered temporary measures. This analysis then led me to reassess the discourses of the officials I interviewed with regard to whether the peacelines truly are provisional. This contradiction is visible in the structure of the peacelines documented in the photographs: in many cases, while it is obvious that these structures are later additions to the urban space, the materials used (red brick) match those of the surrounding built environment (Figures 5 and 12).

Fig. 12. Renovated security gate, Mountcollyer/Tiger's Bay (August 1999) © F. Ballif.

Photographs were also useful in documenting transformations, either past or under way, thus becoming archives of a bygone state of existence. I photographed the same location at intervals of several months. At the end of the 1990s, following the peace process, the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) launched an "environmental improvement scheme" in order to give a more "pleasant" appearance to the peacelines[8]. In Duncairn Gardens, a street which divides the New Lodge and Tiger's Bay neighbourhoods in North Belfast, peaceline works had a been a source of dispute between the NIO and the Catholic community from New Lodge. Interviews with the community group leader from the New Lodge Community Forum and a press review were used to trace the decision-making process. The elected representatives (the local councillor and the Member of the Local Assembly), together with the community workers of the area, met with NIO officials regarding these works. The first project presented by the NIO in September 1998 provided for a simple renovation of the security gates. These proposals did not satisfy the local representatives and a deal was struck to call upon Community Technical Aid (CTA) to draw the plans. This shows that the local community group was strong enough to oppose the government agencies. CTA is a non-governmental organization whose objective is to provide assistance on urban and architectural issues to community groups. CTA proposed a decorative pattern made of bricks and ironwork. This new structure would improve the image of the area without compromising residents' security. In the architect's view, such a structure is "very violent" because "a wall is a wall", but it is possible to "invest a wall with expression and art"[9]. The NIO followed CTA's recommendations but refused to entrust it with the implementation of the project, which the CTA architect regretted and interpreted as a means of keeping control. Nine months of negotiation were then needed for the different stakeholders to approve the

[8] Housing Policy Assistant Director, NIHE – interview, June 14th, 1999.

[9] CTA architect – interview, June 17th, 1999.

plans. Work was due to begin in September 1999; however, according to my observations, work only began in February 2000. In the picture, the old security gate is still in place. (Figure 13). I photographed the final result in June 2001 (Figure 14).

Fig. 13. Security gate, Lepper Street/Duncairn Gardens, view from Duncairn Gardens, before renovation (February 10th, 2000) © F. Ballif.

Fig. 14. Security gate, Lepper Street/Duncairn Gardens, view from Duncairn Gardens, after renovation (June 2nd, 2001) © F. Ballif.

Photographs are inevitably subject to certain prejudices and necessarily select only part of the reality. As Becker states, "the photographers known perfectly well that the pictures represent a small and highly selected sample of the real world about which they are supposed to be conveying some truth. They know that their selection of times, places, and people, of distance and angles, of framing and tonality, have all combined to produce an effect quite different from the one a different selection from the same reality would produce." (Becker 1986, p. 273). My photographs show a partial or even biased picture of the urban spaces I shot. For instance, I took the pictures of the peace walls with the idea that they had the effect of enclosing urban space. The photographs thus accentuate this notion. One of them shows a gate in the foreground with a view of a wall running alongside the road and merging into the hills on the horizon, which reinforces the visual effect of a massive and imposing structure (Figure 15).

Fig. 15. Springmartin Road, peaceline and security gate (March 3rd, 2000) © F. Ballif.

An "off-the-wall" presence: the camera as mediator

My photographs are peculiar as, in most of cases, they represent places where people are absent. The principal objective of this photographic work was to produce a collection of images to mirror the discourses of the stakeholders (police and planners) without the end users, residents or passers-by. I wanted to picture the artefacts that resulted from public decisions. The people in charge of building or maintaining them do not appear either, because I was not there at the time of their intervention. As is often the case with public space, we do

not see those who produce it. The locations concerned were not very busy and, with a few exceptions, I did not take any pictures representing passers-by. These areas were residential, close to neighbourhood boundaries materialized by walls where, even when crossing is possible (where a gate has been installed or the wall is not continuous), residents rarely went over to "the other side", through fear or unease (Shuttleworth 2005). Social life is also more focused towards the inside of sectarian neighbourhoods (Boal 2008). Moreover, the Northern Irish climate is not particularly clement, which means that people generally stay indoors, except during the summer. Nevertheless, these spaces are not completely empty: children play out, residents pass by and, in recent years, more and more tourists have been coming to visit troubled areas in search of a thrill.

Being in little-used outdoor spaces offers a great deal of freedom in terms of access and the use of the camera. No authorization or prior agreement is necessary to take pictures (although the publication of images could be restricted by image rights for people or buildings). Where peacelines abut military barracks or police stations, which is not very common, it is prohibited to take photographs, but this rule is rarely applied in the absence of guards. The question of access to the field (as for a factory, a police station, a dance hall, etc.) and the right to take pictures is therefore not explicitly raised. Nevertheless, taking pictures is not particularly comfortable. Personally, I did not feel totally at ease – partly because, in these residential areas, I was immediately identified as an outsider, but also because the emotional charge of these places is strong: they bear the marks of state or sectarian violence, and of death. Memorials to local victims or gardens of remembrance in the vicinity of the peacelines have proliferated in the last ten years, created and maintained by local community associations or ex-prisoners' groups (McDowell 2008).

Being there, on the social margins of residential spaces identified with a particular community – with or without a camera – was therefore slightly uncomfortable. I had the impression of being an intruder, of not being in my place here. This was a question not of access but rather of needing to justify my presence, even if passers-by paid little attention to me. Children provoked interaction, in which I was asked to explain what I was doing there. The camera then became a mediator to negotiate my presence and to continue the conversation. On numerous occasions, I encountered small groups of children, aged about ten, playing in the street in the summer, close to the peacelines. I did not intend to take any pictures of them, because I did not want to "steal" any images of them, and also because I was not interested in such photographs. But the children, out of curiosity, would initiate contact to find out what I was doing there. Then, without exception, they would ask me to take a picture of them. I accepted, and this produced other types of pictures – posed photographs that were not taken at my instigation (Figure 16); I complied with requests for "souvenir" photography. As Sylvaine Conord (2002) notes, "the photographer [...] defines at the moment of the shooting a way of showing certain aspects of the observed reality"[10] (Terrenoire, 1985, p. 515). "The subject(s) on the photographs intervenes sometimes in the making of the image, by the staging of the self produced in front of the camera lens,

[10] Citation translated from French by the author.

principally designed to control the manner of *showing* oneself." As my research object was not the daily practices in this space, I did not use these images. The conversations with these children provided some information about the way they visualized the social space and enabled me to understand the territorial complexities of their neighbourhood. One day, I met a group of three little girls who asked me the usual questions. After two of them had already headed home, the third insisted I go with her for a little walk. I followed her to the end of a small street, and after a few metres she stopped and said that we could go no further than the street corner because "it's protestant". No visible sign marked the limit. In this moment, I experienced the invisible boundaries that define the sectarian neighbourhoods of inner-city Belfast. She then took me to the nearby park, which is divided by a steel fence. She insisted I take a picture of her on the parapet of a bridge in the park (Figure 17). I asked her for her email address to send her the photographs, because I felt indebted for the trust she granted me spontaneously, and I felt an obligation to "give back" these photographs to her.

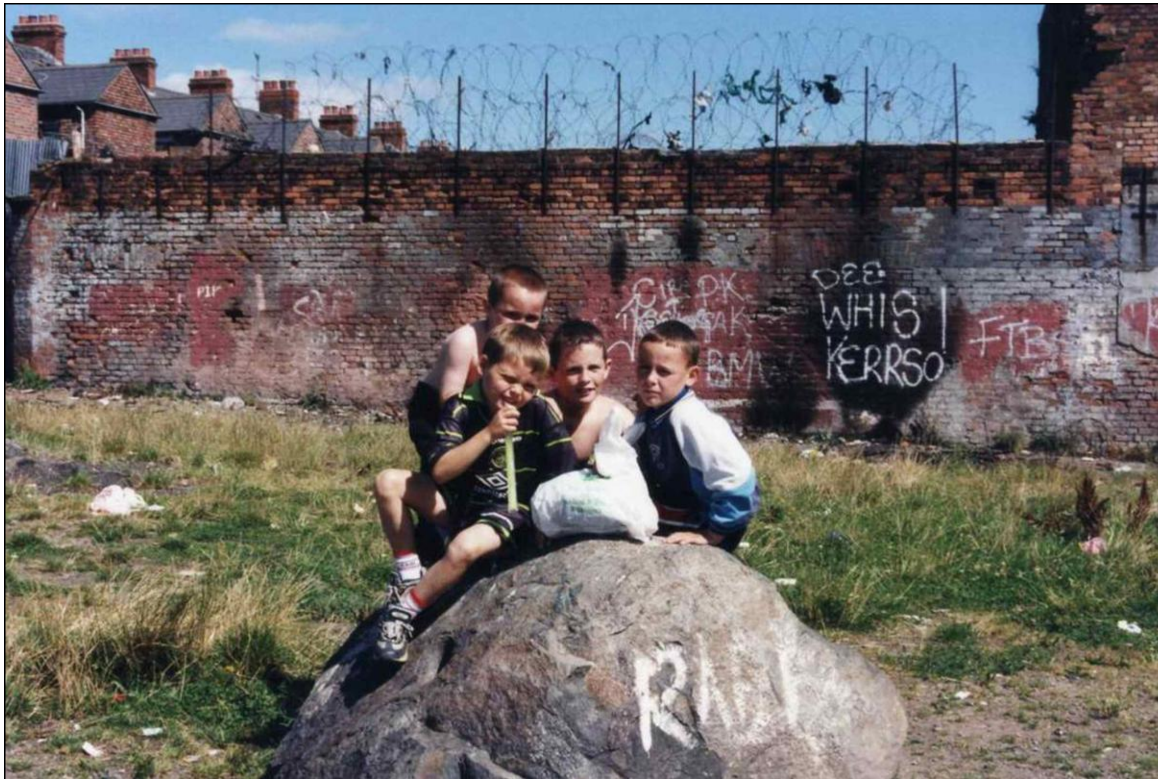

Fig. 16. Children, Manor Street (August 1999) © F. Ballif.

Figure 17. Girl on the bridge parapet, Alexandra Park (August 1999) © Florine Ballif.

To conclude: can photographs be "neutral"?

At the start of my research, I had a naïve desire to avoid "making art" with my photographs (something of which I would not be capable anyway). Indeed, according to Becker "Insofar as the artistic intention interferes with the photograph's evidentiary use, it does so by affecting the selection and presentation of details, so that some things are not shown, some details are emphasized at the expense of others and thus suggest relationships and conclusions without actually giving good cause for believing them, and by presenting details in such a way (through manipulation of lighting or the style of printing, for instance) as to suggest one mood rather than another. Since every way of making a photograph, whether for artistic purposes or for presentation as evidence in a courtroom, does all of these things, there is a problem, but it is one every user of photographs has." (Becker 1986, p. 285-86). Mostly, I had the intention not to provoke emotion, and to produce pictures that were "neutral" on the emotional level. Barthes (1980), in his famous essay, insists on the difference between *studium* and *punctum*; the first term characterizes meaning and general study, while the second refers to the sensitive dimensions, to details that attract attention and to significant anecdotes that break with the unity of the image. It is wrong to say that one is restricted to academic research and the other to art and journalism; nevertheless, the public tends to engage with photography according to these broad lines of analysis. These considerations thus guided my choices in framing and selecting the images for my thesis, by trying to show "ordinary" pictures that are plainly, if not poorly, composed (Figure 18). This "poor" aesthetic seemed to me all the more necessary given that the existence of the walls was

morally reprehensible (as it reflected the failure of society and the authorities to build a good city) in the minds of the stakeholders I interviewed.

Fig. 18. Peaceline, Springfield Park, behind the police station (March 3rd, 2000) © F. Ballif.

A picture "works" in relation to its iconographic surroundings (Terrenoire, 1985). My immediate references for these sites were pictures taken by local professional photographers,[11] including those of Frankie Quinn. These were useful in determining the kinds of images that I did not want to create, with the aim of producing more methodical research photos. I therefore also composed my photos by keeping in mind (and avoiding reproducing) the published work I knew from Frankie Quinn (1994), in particular a black-and-white portfolio in the humanist photographic tradition. I also discovered Frédéric Sautereau's work a little later.

Quinn's photographs, in my opinion, grab the viewer's attention with an architectural detail or the presence of a person. For instance, the man riding a bike alongside the wall in Cupar Way gives a great intensity to the picture (see the photo n. 9 in the web page http://www.frankiequinn.com/gallery/c/gallerysample.htm). By contrast, the image I selected of this location is much more static (Figure 2). In my photographs, I deliberately excluded passers-by to avoid emotion, or I photographed them from a distance so as to

[11] Associated at the time with the Belfast Exposed gallery: www.belfastexposed.org.

depersonalize or deindividualize their presence and focus rather on the information they convey. The figure of a mother with a pram or pushchair is common in Belfast's working-class areas. Quinn framed his photographs from above, highlighting the fence which runs along the street. The women and pushchairs, viewed head-on from above, contrast with the bleak landscape on the right-hand side (see the photo n. 9 in the web page http://www.frankiequinn.com/gallery/c/gallerysample.htm). In my photograph, on the other hand, the single, discreet figure (and her pram) is there merely to indicate the scale of the wall, which, furthermore, has been "normalized" and integrated into the urban space (Figure 19). In Manor Street, following a clearance operation, only one house remained. The owner of this house refused to move. It was nicknamed the "Little House on the Prairie" by the locals. Quinn photographed it by framing its occupier on the threshold (http://www.frankiequinn.com/gallery/c/gallerysample.htm). Sautereau composed his image in nearly the same way, but without anyone present (Figure 20); the house then became uninhabited, converted into a youth club for the area. Another picture, on the contrary, shows a neighbourhood resident in the foreground, reinforcing the strangeness of the house (Figure 21).

I photographed the house from a greater distance, so as to take the urban context into account, with the child that can just about be distinguished in the foreground testifying to the use of the place by residents (Figure 22). The house is unoccupied: it would subsequently be demolished to make way for the neighbourhood's renewal project. The pictures by the professional photographers adopt a different perspective and goal, and are of better quality, but as documents they provide information similar to mine – indeed, they show even more. These pictures by Frankie Quinn and Frédéric Sautereau may capture the viewer's attention with what may appear to be anecdotal details, in fact present characters who reveal the tensions or contradictions resulting from the presence of the walls, which is exactly what I, too, sought to document. It is the systematic gesture of producing series of pictures from every angle, zooming in on the materials used or on details of the walls, that sets my photographs apart as research images, rather than their aspiration to an aesthetic of "neutrality". Indeed, the rejection of a supposedly "artistic" aesthetic in this way is over-simplistic and misplaced – not least when one considers that documentary photographers often adopt an uncluttered frontal style that echoes researchers' concerns.

Fig. 19. Security wall, view from Mountpottinger Road, Short Strand (June 4th, 2001) © F. Ballif.

Fig. 20. Manor Street wall, July 1997, extract from *Of Wall and Lives* © F. Sautereau.

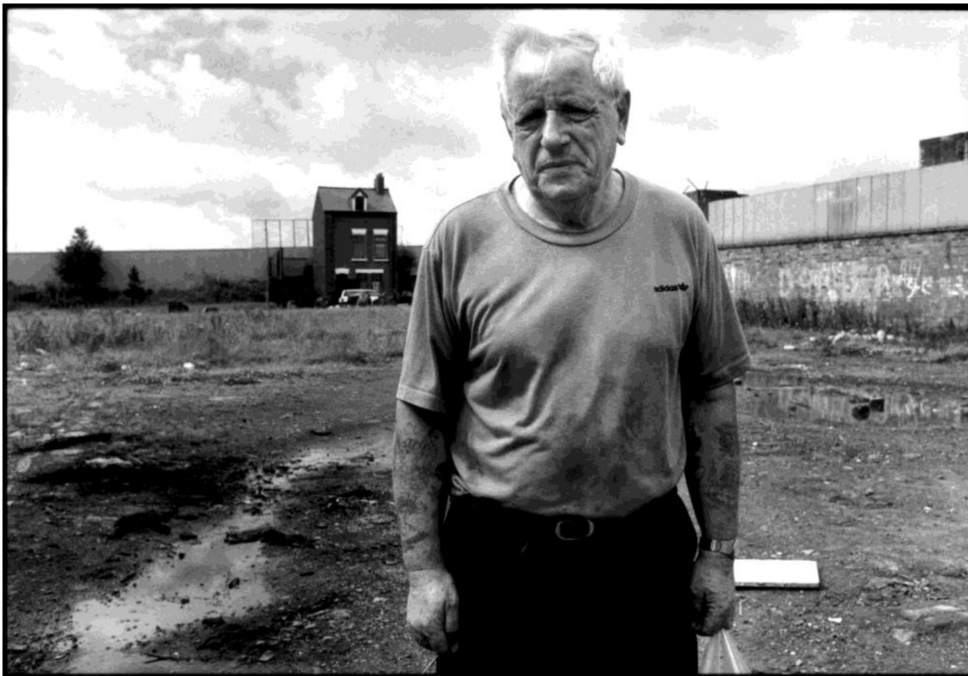

Fig. 21. Manor Street wall, July 1997 (2), extract from *Of Wall and Lives* © F. Sautereau.

Fig. 22. Manor Street, peaceline and the "Little House on the Prairie" (March 1999) © F. Ballif.

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