



In search of common grounds: Stitching the divided landscape of urban parks in Belfast



Mohamed Gamal Abdelmonem*, Rachel McWhinney

School of Planning, Architecture and Civil Engineering, Queens' University Belfast, David Keir Building, Stranmillis Road, Belfast BT9 5AG, United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

Political and spatial contestation in divided cities contributes to strategies of self-defense that utilize physical and spatial settings to enable the constitution of social boundaries, borders and territories. Urban parks that are designed to ease division through an open transitional landscape can instead facilitate further segregation through their spatial order and facility layout. This paper investigates the role of the spatial design and material landscape of integrated parks in Belfast interface areas as instruments of engagement or division. It does so by analyzing the spatial organization of the parks' facilities and the resultant 'social voids.' Space, time and distance were found to be effective tools for the negotiation of privacy, the manifestation of power, and the interplay of dominance and self-confidence. In the context of a divided city, strong community-culture tends to reproduce new boundaries and territories within the shared landscape. Through user interviews and spatial analysis, this paper outlines the design principles that influence spatial behavior in the urban parks of contested urban landscapes. It argues that despite granting equal access to shared public facilities, social voids and physical gaps can instill practices of division that deepen territorial barriers, both psychologically and spatially.

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Introduction: The landscape of sharing in a divided city

'A core aim would be to ensure that the contested city would contain more than just neutral spaces, but shared public spaces. The peculiarities of locality will remain, but the challenge is to make them inviting rather than threatening.'

[Mike Morrissey and Frank Gaffikin (2006: 886)]

Grounded in fragmentation and polarization, the contemporary city is accustomed to the notion of division that is ingrained in the structural complexity of social hierarchy, in cultural diversity and in the condition of coexistence. Layers of physical and social polarization do exist in the urban fabric, services, infrastructures and accessibility privileges (Mulholland, Abdelmonem, & Selim, 2014). This polarization becomes more evident in physical inequalities in urban space, where the spatial expression of insular communities dominates the urban landscape (Amin, 2002). Groups with similar problems are forced to cluster into enclaves that offer support and protection in situations that would normally be the government's responsibility. Social groups attempt to overcome their sense of insecurity by fortressing behind physical boundaries

that become part of their identities; the demolition of such boundaries becomes a non-tolerated offence. In these enclaves, myths about the 'other side' prosper and provoke fear that hinders the possibility of engagement (Goldie & Ruddy, 2010; Leonard & McKnight, 2011). Myths thrive on the way *Division* and *Shareness* stand in the collective memory of a group and become ideology in a narrative form that communicates coherent social positions, norms and fears (Lincoln, 1999). Divided infrastructures for housing, education, and other public services reflect layers of unspoken tensions and parallel lives that often do not overlap or have the capacity to promote meaningful exchange (The Cante Report, 2001).

By the very existence of the physical fabric of separation, the horrible past influences actions in the present and determines future attitudes. In this sense, the built fabric becomes an object of remembrance that is paradoxical and contested, with different meanings and connotations (Bevan, 2007). Hence, we introduce in this paper the notion of "shareness" as the antithesis of socio-political and ethnic division in the practice of everyday life in the contemporary city's public sphere. We use the term "shareness" to identify the condition of cognitive belief of an individual or a group of people in the equal rights of others (those different in racial-ethnic-religious-cultural background) to co-exist in public space. While the term "share/shared" reflects the act and action

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +44 (0) 28 9097 5426; fax: +44 (0) 28 9097 4278.

E-mail addresses: m.gamal@qub.ac.uk (M.G. Abdelmonem), rachel.mcwhinney@hotmail.co.uk (R. McWhinney).

to partake jointly in activities with others, this term does not translate the inner conviction of the rightness of such equal representation in public venues. In contrast, “shareness” communicates coherent social positions and defines the cognitive landscape of the urban experience in a given context.

The nature of division, be it ethnic, political, religious, or class, defines the structure of the city and the hierarchy of public spaces across the divide: pluralist, segregated, or contested (Gaffikin, Mceldowney, & Sterrett, 2010). The necessity of coexistence in public space leads groups to demarcate social and political territories based on gathering spots, patterns of sociability, and groups’ defining features, such as dressing style, common food, art performance, or vocal expressions. The neighboring Chinatown and Italian district in downtown San Francisco or in Dubai’s new developments present examples of distinctive identities that are a positive asset of a multi-cultural and diverse society. In contrast, Asian gatherings in Birmingham or Algerian neighborhoods in Paris are viewed as alien minority cultures in an increasingly divided society. While cities are formed out of the socio-spatial patterns of inevitable coexistence, the mix of ethno-cultural groups and the rights and contributions of those groups in a collective national society remain distinctively different (Parekh, 2000: 341; Gaffikin & Morrissey, 2011). Whether contestation among groups is perceived as good or bad, individuals’ attitudes toward shared living largely define the urban condition and shape the experience of public space. Hence, intercommunity exchange and contestation are a form of negotiation of power, dominance and space that outlasts the duration of the conflict. Long-term rivalry leaves memories and visual imprints that translate into a variety of physical forms, including walls, fences, murals, and even symbolic flags in extreme conditions (Calame & Charlesworth, 2009).

Central to overcoming such a state of division is the ability to confront issues of exclusive identity and discriminative loyalty in public space in favor of collective belonging and shared commitment to socio-economic revival (Cunningham, 2001). Spatial division builds a lack of confidence in the political establishment and in administrative structures that foster unequal access to resources, protection or opportunities (i.e., governance infused by divided loyalties and ethnic affiliations). The neutralization of these spatial consequences can only ensue from a restored confidence in the collective management of the city as equal for everyone. This idea helps us to understand the dynamics of the spatial landscape of ‘shareness’ in the modern city. According to Ralf Brand, contested cities are convenient cases from which to develop “design conventions because they provide high-contrast scenarios where the variety of authors, power and enforcement mechanisms, rationales, forms of expression and degrees of socio-activity are clearly visible” (Brand, 2009: 2674). However, while the notion of division is researched exhaustively in post-conflict cities, the practice of shared living in everyday life remains understudied. Walls and partitions that exist to isolate opposing communities and prevent confrontation and violent offences are the same lines around which problems and suffering are largely mirrored. Where they exist, lines of division harm as much as they protect. They act as negative urban features that hinder accessibility, walkability, and engagement and divert economic and job opportunities elsewhere.

In public space emerges an interplay of several spheres: physical (i.e., private and public), contextual (i.e., social and cultural) and global (i.e., virtual, media, social media, etc.). This interplay evokes tensions of collective memory, the search for the self, and the inevitable need to assert one’s identity (Bauman, 2000). In this sense, narratives of territorial division in divided cities become a powerful tool of this assertion, as well as an ethnic protector and a self-defense strategy that often associates sacred meanings. The legitimacies of shared belonging are displaced by the politics of dominance, with an ever-present sense of underlying conflict

between those who own the space and those who are alien in a continual reproduction of ancestral hostilities (Morrissey & Gaffikin, 2006). In these spaces of division, the undermined minority withdraws spatially and the empowered majority expands in a manifestation of inequality. However, the account of minority/majority division is neither definitive nor detectable in terms of spatial representation or historical pedigrees unless this division is physically defined or forced by political rivalry that attributes urban structure to inequality, privileged accessibility and decision-making (Brand & et al., 2008). In this sense, urban parks gain genuine significance as urban spaces where groups can react to the condition of co-existence and overcome boundaries of division in a quest to build a consensus of shared living; hence, urban parks are venues of ‘shareness’ *per se*.

Hence, urban parks come to the fore as places of exchange with significant social role as a complex system of open socio-spatial engagement (Marcus & et al., 1997). However, an urban park could be an irrelevant urban space to a community that depends on an active street life as a venue of local social networks. Low, Taplin, and Scheld (2009) argued that cultural diversity and mutual acceptance are expressed through behavioral patterns and the use of facilities in New York urban parks. Parks are therefore urban devices that tend to decode and shape sophisticated expressions of identity and power relationships in the city and to negotiate spatial relationships between the oppressor and the oppressed (Awan, 2008). Through its material design, space and venues of interactions, the urban park interplays these tensions, where the antagonistic rivalry negotiates the thresholds of interface areas on a daily basis.

Through the park’s basic elements of natural landscape, physical characteristics and events, designers and planners generate a spatial system and accessibility privileges that either enhance engagement or foster division. A wooded forest, an artificial lake, or a set of functional playgrounds could easily become a physical barrier if not integrated into an inclusive social system of shared venues and activities (Fig. 1). The accessibility of venues and the timing of events could drive people away from using the park. These decisions have far more impact than the mere spatial rationale of aesthetic logic that may appear from two dimensional drawings or maps. Equally central is to recognize the interest of each community/rival to extend their secure and exclusive territories into such shared venues, which are considered a territorial gain. Similar to home territories, communities prefer to have

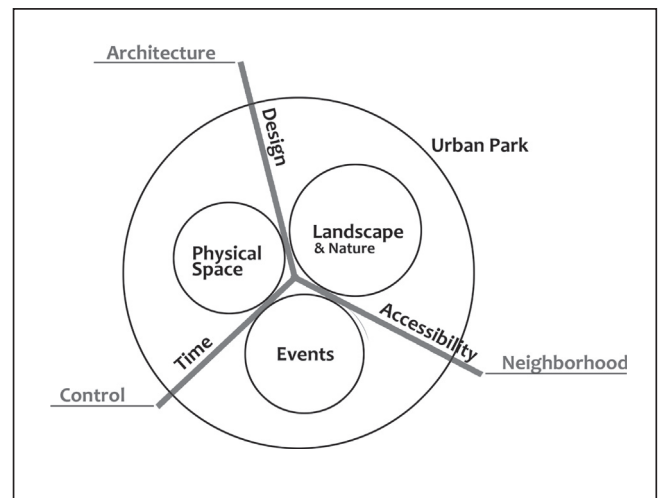


Fig. 1. Urban park design. Principal factors and settings of the contemporary urban park.

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