

# EMBEDDING MEMORY INTO THE LANDSCAPE — A PLACE FOR STOLPERSTEINE IN NORTHERN IRELAND?

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## Abstract

In Germany initially, and now across those parts of Europe that had been under Nazi control, small brass plaques – stolpersteine – have been cemented in pavements by the artist Gunter Demnig. Each stolperstein gives brief details about a person who lived in the building outside of which it has been installed, the date on which they were forcibly evicted and, finally, it records their fate in the Holocaust. Installed in 'ordinary places' (Cook and van Reimsdijk 2014), they are installations which visitors come across, rather than visit. They act as powerful quotidian counter-memorials, the antithesis of state-sponsored memorials to those who have died in conflicts. While not without their critics, most local people seem to have embraced this form of remembrance. Northern Ireland's 'Troubles' had a much smaller death toll than the Holocaust, but counter-memorials have already been erected for some of the over 3,600 dead, with more being established each year. Far from contributing to understanding or reconciliation, the design and placement of some of these counter-memorials, especially in interface areas, may exacerbate division. In this paper we examine the potential to transpose the stolpersteine concept for those who died in the conflict in Northern Ireland, and the challenges and benefits that such a venture might generate.

KEYWORDS: *Northern Ireland, Troubles, memorialisation, stolpersteine, victims*

## Introduction

Originally in Germany, and now across 23 other European countries, small brass plaques have been placed in pavements by the artist Gunter Demnig (Cook 2012). The inscriptions simply record basic information about residents who lived in the nearby buildings who were forcibly removed from their dwellings and transported to camps such as Auschwitz. They include Jews, Sinti, Roma and other minority groups. These stolpersteine, literally and metaphorically 'stumbling blocks', have produced considerable academic literature (see Drozdowski 2018; Hanauer 2016). Installed as they are in 'ordinary places' (Cook and van Reimsdijk 2014), they are memorials which are often stumbled upon, rather than visited. The result is a cultural landscape which is powerful exactly because the markers are unimposing and unexpected. This short paper will examine the potential to use some similar form of distributed memorialisation in Northern Ireland (NI), a society emerging from conflict. It will also explore some of the challenges that such memorialisation might pose and the potential to overcome these.

## Background to the Troubles

Since its inception in 1921, Northern Ireland, politically part of the United Kingdom but geographically part of the island of Ireland, has been a divided society. These divisions emerge from 'opposing nationalisms' (Boal 2002, 688) with Irish/Nationalist/Republicans on one hand and British/Unionist/Loyalists on the other. This characterisation is often further condensed to the useful, if reductive, terms 'Catholic' and 'Protestant'. From 1968, a 30-year period of ethno-sectarian conflict caused the deaths of over 3,600 people, over half of whom were civilians (Worden and Smith 2017), with injuries to 30,000, many of which were life changing. In NI this period is euphemistically known as the 'Troubles'. While raw numbers are tiny compared to the Nazi Holocaust, scaled to the population of Great Britain, this is the equivalent of 126,000 dead and 1.8 million injured (Horgan 2006, 659). Its effect throughout this small society was and remains considerable.

## Official memorials

Northern Ireland's communities did not wait for anniversaries of fifty or more years (McAttackney 2015, 116), but moved quickly to commemorate the Troubles once they had largely finished. There are, however, no public memorials to some groups who died in the conflict. For instance, while the names of local security force personnel who died have been added to existing war memorials in some Protestant areas, this is neither consistent nor agreed across Northern Ireland. The only memorial which names the forces of the state who died is in Staffordshire in England, a location described as 'curiously contextless and placeless' (Graham and Whelan 2007, 491). The lack of 'official' memorialisation in NI itself may be due to the disputed role that the security forces played during the Troubles, particularly its implication in collusion with loyalist paramilitaries (McGovern 2015) and in 'shoot-to-kill' policies (Rolston 2005). As the state denies being an active participant in the conflict, commemoration of those of its forces who died may not be in its best interests and, in any case, it can be argued that 'the... state has abrogated its sovereign powers by declining responsibility for commemoration and for the past' (Graham and Whelan 2007, 479).

## Civilian dead memorials and counter-memorials

While remembrance of the state actors who died in the Troubles seems muted, neither has the British government erected a monument to the whole of the civilian dead, whether in NI or elsewhere. Only in the case of large-scale atrocities are official memorials erected in public spaces for non-combatants. One is the Omagh memorial erected to remember the thirty-one victims of a bombing in 1998. There are few of these types of memorials and, across NI, there is little to mark the death and destruction. In Belfast, for instance, central areas were regenerated and the area 'normalised' (O'Dowd and Komarova 2011). Memorials to some of the individuals who died exist, but they are:

'... confined to the sectarianised neighbourhoods of the city's periphery...the demarcated sanctuaries of republicanism and loyalism.' (Robinson 2017, 120).

Foote's (2003) continuum of memorialisation places occasions of historical violence into four categories: sanctification, designation, rectification and obliteration. Much of the public space in Northern Ireland would seem to reflect the rectification or, on occasion, obliteration of memory.

Government-initiated monuments erected after conflicts tend to be grandiose structures, often designed to legitimise the state and its actions, and to articulate a single truth which suits the official narrative (Dwyer and Alderman 2008, 168). Their antithesis, counter-memorials, are vernacular (Stangl 2008; Stevens et al. 2018). Fraser (2012) noted 600 of these commemorating some of those who died, erected in public spaces across Northern Ireland, with more added each year (Graham and Whelan 2007, 480). Seldom, if ever, are these sanctioned by the authorities, and '...unlike the monument, the counter-memorial is quotidian; it is part of everyday life' (Rolston 2020). They take many forms across NI, most obviously as wall murals. From the beginning of the twentieth century, these were painted each year in Protestant areas, often depicting a Protestant king's victory in a battle in 1690. During the Troubles, many murals took on a paramilitary nature often honouring a combatant who had been killed. While any opposition tends to be private and muted, these are not universally welcomed by local people, perceived by some as: '...acts of intimidation, offering warnings to stay out or beware of the force behind the image' (McCormick and Jarman 2005, 50).

### **Metaconflict**

When violence concludes, communities can become disputatious about the conflict. The resulting 'metaconflict' (Bell et al. 2014; Mallinder 2019) impacts on commemoration. One issue is deciding who the victims are, and a hierarchy of perpetrators and victims is established (Fraser 2012, 47). The UK Government's definition of a victim (or survivor) included: 'someone who is or has been physically or psychologically injured as a result of or in consequence of a conflict-related incident...' (UK Govt. 2006).

This definition was disputed by some politicians who felt that it did not distinguish between 'innocent victims' and paramilitary combatants who had been injured, whom they termed 'terrorists' (Dawson 2013, 267). A combatant may deserve the designation 'victim' but that seems to be dependent on whether the combatant was on 'your' side, or the 'other' side (Hancock 2012, 220).

Even memory is contested. There may be counterclaims as to whose memory gets acknowledged, and the gaps in memorialisation may be problematic for some individuals. In short, commemoration, whether through memorials or some other

outcome, can challenge communities emerging from a troubled past. As Brown and Grant (2016) note: '...the salience of collective memory ...is maintained even if a conflicted and divided society shifts into a peace process' (141).

Some memorials have created controversy despite being intended as reconciliatory. Robinson (2017, 145) describes the memorial to a bombing in a small village, erected almost thirty years after three car bombs killed nine people. It comprises a statue of a young girl and, while not intended by the artist to represent one of the victims, has divided some of the community by seeming to portray the suffering of just one individual. Perceived as being imposed on the community from without, its impact has contributed to '...the further sectionalisation of social memory' (2017, 151) in the village.

### **Language and memorials**

Alderman (2012) reflects that geographers consider the landscape as a form of language but notes that '...they have devoted limited attention to interpreting the actual words and phrases inscribed into landscapes of public commemoration' (358). He goes on to examine how state highway markers in North Carolina excluded African American experiences, something now being partially addressed. In the Northern Ireland setting, the language used in counter-memorials can also portray a partial view. Loyalist memorials often imitate the State's war memorials in terms of the language used while republican memorials '...are often standardized and inscribed with a ritual rhetoric of volunteers who died for Ireland and who were "murdered" or "executed" if they were killed by British special forces' (Graham and Whelan 2007, 484). Even small markers erected by family members sometimes use the word 'murdered' (Robinson 2017, 156).

Robinson notes that choices made in the language employed on memorials is often aimed at a wider narrative:

'An inscription is not just a written inscription, a message, mnemonic, or narrative, etched, soldered, attached in prose to a site or memory... an inscription is also an aesthetic choice, the larger process by which a social memory is emplaced into a landscape, and dependent on how it is situated with a larger viewing community' (Robinson 2017, 151).

While the language of official memorials can be criticised as contributing to forgetting and excluding marginalised and subaltern groups (Rolston 2020), counter-memorials too have been criticised for being partial, by ignoring the role of females (McDowell 2008) and by expropriating symbolism from other sources to support a particular narrative (Rolston 2010). They can also be criticised as '...not only failing to promote reconciliation, but ... acting as a catalyst to more violence' (Pinkerton 2012, 132).

### A place for stolpersteine?

With metaconflict, disputed memory and contentious memorialisation around Northern Ireland's Troubles, there may be little place for discrete stolpersteine installed close to the place of killings, many of which are not recorded in other ways. What seems clear, if other memorials are a guide, is that such installations might be open to many challenges. A closer look at stolpersteine, and their evolution might be useful to expose some of these before considering how they might be viewed in Northern Ireland.

Stolpersteine can be seen as archetypal counter-monuments, as:

'...the focus on death, forced displacement, and absence is uniquely anti-monumental. There is nothing celebratory in the stones, nor do they create a space to mourn or grieve. They simply note the absence of a body once present' (Bennie 2019, 32).

The text of each stolperstein is stark. Figure 1 reads 'Here lived Sophie Küchemann, Née Löwenstein, Year of birth: 1858, Deported 23.7.1942 to Theresienstadt (concentration camp and ghetto). Murdered 6.12.1942'. Demnig, the artist behind stolpersteine, himself says that 'the idea [is] that we have to restore their names. In the concentration camp they were numbers' (Cook and van Riemsdijk 2014).



*Figure 1: A stolperstein in Hannover (Tim Rademacher - Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0)*

Demnig started to make and install stolpersteine in 1995 (Harjes 2005, 145). Initially at least, their installation was not sanctioned by the authorities. Indeed, at the beginning of the project, Demnig acted against the express desires of residents and local authorities (Apel 2014, 182) and the stones were installed 'illegally' (Cook 2012, 49). Some families criticised them as disrespectful, allowing people to walk on or over a relative's name on a pavement (Gould and Silverman 2013, 796).

Others worried that stolpersteine do not provide the context for the Holocaust as 'the stones themselves neither educate their audiences nor interpret the data they provide' (Harjes 2005, 148), and they hide more than they reveal (Apel 2014). There are instances where the Nazi perpetrators lived in the same residential neighbourhoods as the victims and, as members of the regime, rounded up those people now commemorated, and transported them almost invariably to their deaths. While this is also part of the Holocaust story, few clamour for memorials outside the perpetrators' residences. Nor do the memorials speak of those neighbours who gathered at the auctions of the contents of the emptied houses in search of a bargain. Indeed, there are concerns that: 'stolpersteine could in fact divert attention away from those who were responsible for, condoned or benefited from Nazi persecution' (Apel 2014, 190).

Despite a few objections some 70,000 stolpersteine have been installed so far in Germany, and 440 more are being produced every month (Demnig 2020). A small number have been defaced or attempts have been made to remove them by neo-Nazis (Cook and van Riemsdijk 2014, 142), but most are untouched and many have been 'adopted' and are cared for by local people (Gould and Silverman 2013). That there remains some dispute about erecting them is attested by the fact that the artist is sometimes accompanied by police when installing them (Cook 2012, 70). Nonetheless, there seems general agreement as to the desirability of memorialising these individuals and few dispute that the horror of the Holocaust should be remembered in this way.

What is less discussed are the categories of those who are memorialised in stolpersteine. An individual whose life was not considered exemplary may be judged by the artist to be unworthy of an installation. For some time the Nazi's own judgements seem to have been used to distinguish between deserving and undeserving victims of the Holocaust as, 'until recently, there were ... no Stolpersteine for those deemed asozial (anti-social) and arbeitsscheu (work shy) by the Nazis and imprisoned in concentration camps' (Apel 2014, 189). This uncomfortable policy has now changed but it appears that Demnig still retains the final say as to whether a stolperstein is installed or not. Apel points to a decision not to commemorate a deported victim who survived and went on to serve in the East German secret police – the Stazi. 'For Demnig, the life of a victim must be exemplary to warrant its memorialisation' (Apel. 2014, 189).

The dead of Northern Ireland's troubles includes local members of the security forces, members of the British army from outside NI and paramilitary combatants who died on 'active duty' on each side of the conflict. Some combatants were assassinated by paramilitaries from the 'other side' or targeted by forces within their own communities, in inter-paramilitary conflict or because they were believed to be informers. Many victims were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time and had no involvement in any organisation. Distinguishing the 'deserving' from the 'undeserving' victim is a difficult value judgement; deciding whether memorialisation is appropriate is equally challenging.

Colin Craig was killed along with two other members of the Ulster Volunteer Force, an illegal loyalist paramilitary organisation, in a drive-by shooting by republicans (Rolston 2020: Robinson 2017). Allegations later emerged that, at the time of the attack, Craig was being taken for interrogation as a suspected informer, which would have led to his almost certain execution. When this came to light, his name was removed from the mural commemorating the 'sacrifice ... for one's country' of the other two dead men (Robinson 2017, 159). Thomas Begley, a 23 year-old member of the Irish Republican Army, an illegal republican paramilitary organisation, is not commemorated in the memorial on the Protestant Shankill Road for the nine civilians killed alongside him when his bomb exploded prematurely (Rolston 2020).

It is relatively easy to see stolpersteine accepted by local people if they were to mark the place of death of an individual, particularly if (s)he were 'of' that community and if her/his death was caused by forces from outside that community – the 'other' community or the security forces – as that often fits the narrative of these counter-memorials. However, even if the person was a member of that community, were their life not seen as 'exemplary', if perceived to be an informer for example, then there is likely to be little support.

The category of victims to which it is easiest to ascribe the epithet of 'innocent' would be the 186 children who died in the Troubles (Duffy and McClements 2019). Michael McCartan was sixteen when he died in Belfast in 1980. His mother unveiled a plaque to him in 2019 (Figure 2). While painting a slogan on a wall, he was shot without warning by a plainclothes policeman. The plaque uses the more neutral 'shot' rather than 'murdered', but it is unequivocal in its final anguished statement that 'nobody was ever convicted of Michael's murder'. The houses behind which Michael was killed have



**Figure 2: Memorial on gable wall on Dromara Street, Ormeau Road, Belfast (Photograph: Stephen Roulston)**

been demolished and this gable is the closest surface on which to mount a memorial, but a stolperstein could be installed very close to where Michael died, on what is now a walkway along the River Lagan. Placed there with his family's permission, it would serve to 'ambush' the unwary, just as stolpersteine over Europe are doing, jolting people into thinking about the past and about a history which has forgotten many victims.

Harjes (2005, 149) is concerned that stolpersteine do not provide the full context for the Holocaust, accepting that supplementary material may help to fill those gaps. There is the potential here for a digital space to supplement any physical memorialisation with Quick Response (QR) Codes which link the viewer to more context about a particular stolperstein. QR codes might be more acceptable by being less overt in adding an additional layer of memory and are already widely used in cultural heritage tourism (see Solima and Izzo 2018). However, while overcoming the challenge of the description of the details of a person's death in a particular spot, it may merely move any contention online.

## Conclusion

Some fairly uncontroversial examples of individuals who may be suitable for memorialisation using stolpersteine can be found for all communities, perhaps the perceived 'innocent victims' discussed earlier. Evoking their memories by locating their names at the place where they met their deaths could bring social meaning to otherwise unremarkable locations. In consequence, this spatial palimpsest may change how such spaces are perceived by those who encounter them.

Those are relatively easy. Further along the continuum of victimhood it gets much more challenging. In Northern Ireland, there is no 'common vocabulary to describe those who died in the conflict' (Fraser 2012, 48), nor is there 'common ground on commemoration, apart perhaps, from the most poignant memorial of the Troubles: the book *Lost Lives* (McKittrick et al. 2001), which documents the circumstances of the deaths of all 3,665 victims' (Graham and Whelan 2007, 483). It is difficult to envisage a time when local people would accept the installation of a stolperstein for Thomas Begley or Colin Craig in the communities in which they met their deaths even though, in different circumstances, and from different perspectives, those young men too might be regarded as victims.

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