

A MNEMONIC DEVICE FOR BELFAST: DRAWING THE RING OF STEEL

Kate Catterall



A MNEMONIC DEVICE FOR BELFAST: DRAWING THE RING OF STEEL

Abstract

Belfast's socio-political and psycho-geographic landscape was shaped by the Troubles, a 30-year ethno-nationalist conflict (1968-98). On-going redevelopment of Belfast's center has erased obvious traces of the conflict, making it an uncanny environment for an aging population. The Bloomfield Report's proposed memorial remains unbuilt. Generationally, there are four fractured images of Belfast. Discontinuity in the image of Belfast, between generations and classes, is palpable. Parents, grandparents and children lack shared reference historic and psycho-geographic reference points. This paper explores the 'ring of steel' project, which aims to support transgenerational communication about the Troubles and bridge these four fractured images of Belfast. The project offers collective remembrance triggered by a physical and emotional recognition of spatial change within shared public space and it introduces subtle traces of the conflict to a portion of the population unfamiliar with the period as lived experience.

KEY WORDS: *Design & critical heritage, mnemonic device¹ (oed 2020) personal and collective memory; shared place/public space; transgenerational transmission of memory.*

Introduction

A Troubles memorial was delineated in The Bloomfield Report (1989); a discrete, mausoleumlike venue, as yet unbuilt (Catterall 2011). On 20 June 2020² Drawing the Ring of Steel³ (Coaffee 2003), a 16-hour live engagement event, will facilitate public recollection through one of a few mutual experiences of the conflict, a security cordon that encircled the city; protecting and rendering suspect an entire population.

Traversing architectural drawings inscribed on the street, audiences inhabit this past, aligning everyday life during the Troubles with contemporary airport experiences; initiating storytelling between generations; visitors and locals.

1. The concept of 'Mnemonic Device', presented by the author in workshop documents, is a hybrid between the OED definition of a mnemonic as 'memory aide' and reference to the Northern Irish punk band 'Stiff Little Fingers' and their 1979 track entitled 'Suspect Device'.

2. Due to restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic, this event has been postponed until September 23rd, 2021.

3. The 'ring of steel' was the name used by the security forces for the security cordons in Northern Ireland (1972–1998). It has subsequently been used as the name for crowd control/security strategies in central London and elsewhere.



Figure 1. Left, Map of the Ring of Steel (Brown 1984) Right, Image of Donegal Place, from Belfast City Hall, 1976. Arrow locates new vehicle & pedestrian checkpoint/ gate, part of the 'ring of steel' that replaced four discrete security segments 1972–76 The city centre was locked nightly at 6pm at this time, killing, the previously dynamic, nightlife of central Belfast. Image: National Museum, Northern Ireland (Photograph: NMNI Archive, BELUM Y6838).

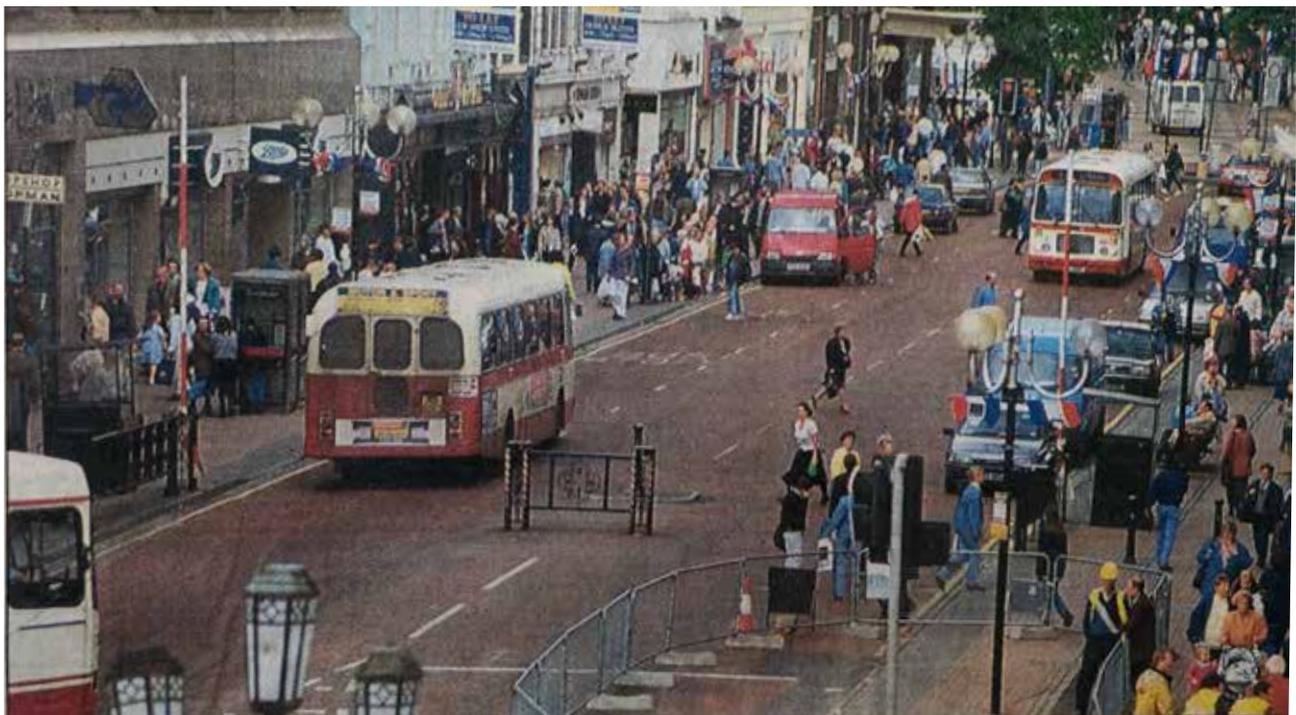


Figure 2. Donegal Place, 1995. Caption 'Gates to go as heart of city pumps life'. It is interesting to note the aesthetics of the checkpoint by this time; black, decorative and low profile. Akin to the gates of the City Hall opposite; rendered invisible before their ultimate. (Photograph) Belfast Telegraph 6 March 1995.

The cordon synonymous with the conflict, was hastily constructed by the Army Corps of Engineers thereafter determining aesthetic decisions in Belfast's built environment. Few design drawings survive, so a series were (re)constructed for Drawing the Ring of Steel from ordinance survey images, news footage, materials from the National Archive (U.K.) and on-site research.

Drawing the Ring of Steel and a legacy website including interactive GIS mappings of the structures (1972–2002), invite ongoing public discourse about contemporary impediments to shared remembrance/peace-building; a legacy of the Troubles.

Four cities: four generations

Between 1968 and 1972 fissures appeared along ancient townland boundaries in Belfast, activating them as sectarian boundaries during the Troubles conflict. By 1972, ad hoc security structures were pervasive in Belfast's working-class neighbourhoods and the city centre: they evolved into a network of permanent barriers, which came to be known as 'peace walls', and a semi-permanent barrier in the city centre called the 'ring of steel'. The conflict resurrected vivid memories of World War II for older generations, but their children, born after the war and then in their 30s, saw the socially vibrant and optimistic city of their youth quickly disappear.

For those born in the 1960s, memories of Belfast are synonymous with the 'ring of steel' a security cordon of steel security fences, concrete barriers and barbed wire, that encircled the city from 1972 until the 1990s. Their Belfast was a semi-lawless, dangerous, exciting place of poverty, punk, protest and pain, as represented in the Ulster Museum's 'Troubles and Beyond' gallery (NMNI 2018). This phantasm was replaced by an uncanny, post-industrial city.

To children of the peace process, Belfast is again a place of charming façades and opportunity, a destination city with a burgeoning tourist economy. Visitors flocking to see monuments to fictional historic moments which comingle with actual histories of an industrial past as filtered through the lens of Hollywood. Property developer's renderings extend this ideal, wealthy image of Belfast populated by young, middle-class, inhabitants, and erasing physical evidence of the Troubles and perhaps those who endured that time. Discontinuity in the image of Belfast, between generations and classes, is palpable. Parents, grandparents and children lack shared historic and psycho-geographic reference points, as Belfast is remade to negate unpalatable pasts.

Bloomfield's memorial troubles

'Monuments at the end of the 20th century are thus born resisting the very premises of their birth. The monument has increasingly become the site of contested and co-

opted meanings, more likely the site of cultural conflict than of shared national values and ideals' (Young 1992, 65). In a region of 1.6 million people, nearly 4,000 died and an additional 107,000 people are estimated to have suffered some physical injury during the 30-year conflict, Compared 'per capita within the entire USA, [... it] would have produced a death toll of over 500,000, approximately ten times the number of Americans killed in the Vietnam War' (O'Leary 2019, 37). Such an event cannot remain unmarked and should be negotiated in the shared public space.

A Mnemonic Device for Belfast is a design continuation of my critique (Catterall 2011) of the Bloomfield Report's memorial proposal (Bloomfield 1998), a memorial concept which became mired in the complexities of 'a hierarchy of victimhood' (Jankowitz 2014, 9); it remains unbuilt 22 years later. Ostensibly, elements of the memorial called for in Bloomfield's proposal have already been implemented through various organisations. For example, Wave Trauma Center provides space for 'rest and reflection, care and counselling'. 'An appropriate archive[s] of the Troubles' has also been addressed by a number of projects, including Healing Through Remembering's innovative memory projects, University of Ulster's Conflict Archive on the Internet (CAIN), and Queen's University Belfast's Oral History Archive.

Physical memorials to the Troubles are found in discrete grave sites, 'spontaneous memorials' (Doss 2008, 9) and gardens of remembrance and mark the lives of individuals, paramilitary groups and members of the security forces. These places cater to the unique needs of separate communities while a memorial which acknowledges a shared remembrance of the conflict is obviously absent.

Drawing the Ring of Steel: a mnemonic device for Belfast

In reaction to a series of car bombings in Belfast city centre during early 1972, six security segments were erected to protect the commercial centre from attacks. By 1976, the segments were consolidated into one larger enclosure. This 1.5-mile-long 'ring of steel' cordon took the form of a highly fortified perimeter fence punctuated by entry checkpoints and exit turnstiles. Four main checkpoints were located along the main north, south, west and east arteries into the city centre and were opened to allow pedestrian and limited bus and delivery vehicle access only between 8am and 6pm each day. A Mnemonic Device for Belfast utilises a redrawing of the 'ring of steel' as a mechanism by which to recall and present to the city one of a few mutual experiences of the violence; checkpoints which at once protected the commercial centre and rendered the entire population suspect.

An experiment: proof of concept

At dawn on the morning of 6th June 2015, the author conducted an experiment toward the design of a mnemonic memorial. On Donegall Place, opposite Belfast City Hall, with chalk a section of the historic security barrier that had encircled Belfast from



Figure 3. Left photograph, Kate Catterall. Ad hoc memorial for two UDR officers killed by a bomb while manning the Royal Avenue security checkpoint in 1986, a good example of a 'Spontaneous Memorial' the term coined by Jack Santino referring to, 'murder sites in Northern Ireland that had become shrine sites: places visited by families and supporters of victims of political assassination; places physically transformed by their gifts of flowers, notes, and other objects; places accorded special, even sacred, status by ritualised acts and offerings of everyday urban pilgrims'(1992). New crosses are nailed to a tree near the location each year in remembrance, by family, or colleagues. The poppy icon declares their protestant heritage as it perhaps aligns their deaths with official war deaths from WW1 and WW2. Center photograph, Kate Catterall. The Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) Memorial Garden behind the PSNI Headquarter, Knock Rd. Belfast. Right, Falls Garden of Remembrance to the Fallen Volunteers of "D" Company, 2nd Battalion, Belfast Brigade. Photograph, Cedric D. Morrison.

1972 to 1998 was marked in chalk and tape. Concerned police officers from Grosvenor Road Police Station observed this via security cameras and sent two officers to make enquiries. One enquired after a permit, the other officer in his 50s walked over the lines on the ground quietly and remembered. He and the younger officer stopped to discuss the drawing. 'This is where the barricades were'--'I don't remember them at all'--'haven't you seen the photographs back at the station?'--'Yes, but that wasn't here, so close to city hall'-- and so they continued. Permission to quickly complete and photo-document the prototype was given, but more importantly for the experiment, they had inadvertently proven that drawing the ring of steel could support transgenerational communication about the Troubles and bridge four fractured images of Belfast.

The mnemonic device workshops

'Taming wicked problems requires many people' (Rith and Dubberly 2006). Part of the process in developing the memorial project has been to conduct crosscommunity workshops on memorials to the Troubles. The six workshops conducted to date which



Figure 4. (Right) Photographs: Donegall Place security cordon; a.k.a. the ring of steel. (Photograph, *The Belfast Telegraph*, 1976). (Left) Drawing the Ring of Steel, prototype. 2015 (Photograph Kate Catterall, 2015)

have involved the participation of students, community groups leaders, government departments, researchers, and NGOs have utilised the conceptual positioning of 'Drawing the Ring of Steel' to focus participants attention on the shared, even mundane, experiences of the conflict and away from remembrance of sensational events, or divisive figures.

The proposals have explored how life proceeded against that backdrop of the Troubles, they have unearthed humorous stories, poignant memories and unsettling questions about the legacy of the conflict and its impact on contemporary society. The workshops were devised to engage a broad cross-section of the community, to aide participants in the development of unique design proposals and to measure the appetite for marking the Troubles in Belfast. The process undertaken in each workshop has been documented for later exhibition and publication, and the workshopping process itself has successfully reignited a vigorous civic discourse about the possibility of marking the Troubles era in Belfast.

Another workshop was hosted by the urban design collective called PLACE: Built Environment Centre. They also recorded a podcast of an archaeological walking tour of the ring of steel to initiate the workshops (McCabe and McCafferty 2018). That workshop yielded proposals for a values-driven youth workshop in East Belfast and a forest planted with a tree for each person killed during the conflict.



Figure 5. June 2016. Workshop #1 at Golden Thread Gallery, Belfast⁴

Another proposal which came from the workshop was a project to map and document the ring of steel by James Bamford. James became a project partner and developed the mapping concept into a remarkable interactive research site, that introduces visitors to the evolutionary timeline of the ring of steel 1972–2020. The interactive mapping is now a central piece in the ‘legacy website’ designed to house documentation of the performative event and subsequent transcriptions of narratives gathered at the event and contextual research.



Figure 6. Proposals from the second round of one-day workshops, University of Ulster, March 2017. A collection of wearable conversation starters. Anne Boylan Earls Jewellery course, 2017.

4. Three participants viewing images of the security cordon ‘ring of steel’ 1972–1999, after walking the route of the cordon prior to workshopping concepts for their own memorial devices.



Figure 7. Workshop at Place: Centre for the Built Environment. June 2019. Photograph, Kate Catterall

Drawing the Ring of Steel: locating memory and meaning in downtown Belfast

After meeting at the Peace and Beyond Conference in 2018 the author approached Paula McFetridge, Creative Director of Kabosh Theatre Company⁵ to discuss drawing the ring of steel, which initiated a partnership to develop the performative component of the event. From there the form and parameters for the mnemonic device coalesced. The event would speak directly to all those who had 'endured' the conflict, not survivors or victims. The primary audience would be locals rather than tourists. It would be performative and ephemeral not a constructed memorial. It would celebrate resilience and those lives lived against the backdrop of violence. It would evoke the quotidian experiences, rather than spectacular episodes. Drawing the Ring of Steel is designed as a theatrical performance to be staged at the sites of the four security checkpoints around the city centre. This image of the Troubles era security cordon, one of the few culturally mutual experiences of the conflict, will reappear on 21 June in 2020; a remarkable date on which no violent events occurred during the thirty-year conflict. This participatory event should facilitate story-telling across communities and between generations, between locals and visitors and should acknowledge all those who endured that period before it passes from living memory. Traces of the old barricades in the form of carefully drawn schematic plans will be inscribed on the ground at the specific locations of the old checkpoints using yellow chalk, paint and tape. The sixteen-hour performance will engage audiences throughout the day as they walk to and from the city centre.

5. Kabosh Theatre <https://kabosh.net/production/greenandblue/>



Figure 8. Belfast's Ring of Steel: A GIS mapping project (James Bamford, Northern Mapping Services, in consultation with Kate Catterall, and funded by a CRC digital publication grant; belfastringofsteel.com). Images kindly provided by the National Archive, National Museums Northern Ireland and by esteemed Belfast photographer Martin Nangle.

At each checkpoint performers will redraw the lines of the security checkpoints and barriers and will enact choreographed search-motions. Other performers in period 1970's dress, will interact with the public, engaging them with questions about their memory or knowledge of the 'ring of steel' and collecting stories of remembered encounters at the cordon. Flash mobs of performers will flood the four checkpoints at key moments creating additional levels of theatrical engagement.

The event acknowledges the experience of Belfast's aging generations and makes visible a larger history omitted from official stories of Belfast; even as it is regularly explored by curious visitors utilising a growing number of private, conflict tourism enterprises. The event is designed to welcome older members of the community into the newly refurbished social spaces of Belfast's urban centre inviting their insights, memories and stories to become part of the current city; regaining their 'right to the city', as imagined by Henri Lefebvre (1968).



Figure 9. Illustration of *Drawing the Ring of Steel*, live engagement event. Performers/installation crew (yellow), performers/Journalistic interviewers (back left). Plan drawings: temporary lane delineators, chalk-paint & non-slip safety tape. (Preliminary design drawings, Kate Catterall, 2018).

Beyond the barriers: Next steps for drawing the Ring of Steel

A legacy website will function as a repository for ongoing research related to the Troubles period and its impact upon the built environment. More specifically it will house documentation of the performative *Drawing the Ring of Steel*, transcriptions of stories recorded on the day of the event and the interactive GIS mapping of the evolution of the 'ring of steel' from 1972 to the present.

The ephemeral performative drawing may serve as a study for a more permanent installation, with drawings inscribed in steel, or brass, rather than chalk. Like Edwin Lutyens' Cenotaph, constructed first from wood and plaster, then stone, *Drawing the Ring of Steel* could evolve to mark the conflict, within the context it occurred, in perpetuity.



Figure 10. Map locating all four main gates/entrances punctuating the ring of steel. The four installation sites to be encountered --Donegal Place (S); Royal Avenue (N); Castle Street (W); High Street (E). (Kate Catterall, January 2020)

An exhibition at University of Ulster York Street and Belfast Exposed gallery will show documentation of the one-day performative event, relevant photographic research materials and design development documents. A concurrent symposium will address the design of Belfast's urban environment and its impact on the peace process.

The 'ring of steel' mapping project may also evolve to include GIS interactive mapping of Belfast's ancient townlands and the ubiquitous 'peace walls' which align. Moving out from Belfast in concentric circles the site may ultimately include a mapping of three possible Irish borders debated prior to 1921.

Conclusion

In 2013, a woman stood in Donegall Place with her daughters, 5 and 7-years old, struggling to describe a Belfast, she knew as a girl. She happened upon a cognitive bridge to connect their worlds; something current and familiar to help introduce the children to the Belfast of her own childhood. She urged them to imagine security checkpoints, just like the ones at the airport, right here and you have to go through the checkpoints every day to go shopping. They got it, and she discovered a link to make my life back then accessible to future generations. Recognising that this feat of

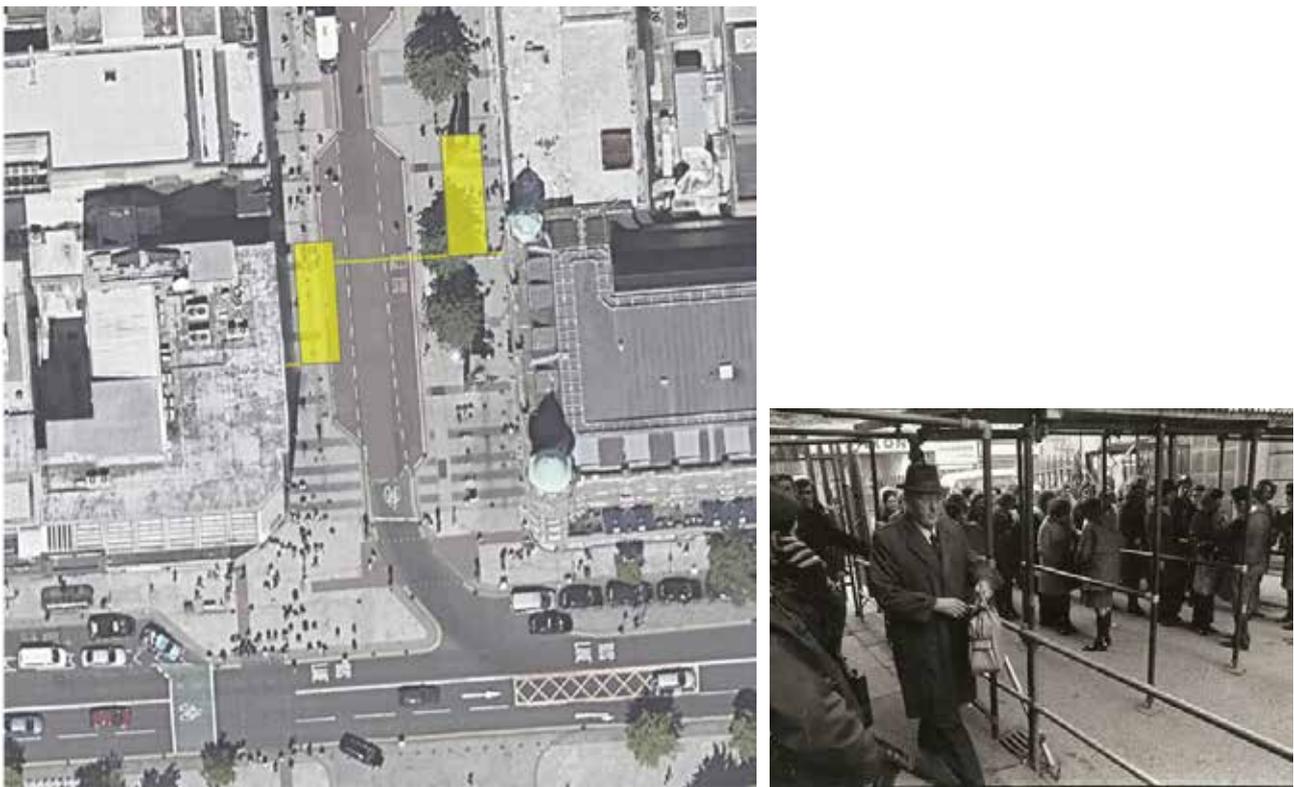


Figure 11. Left, describing location of performance site to the South on google map of Belfast today. (Kate Catterall, 2020). Right, new checkpoints, Castle Street Belfast (Belfast Telegraph 1976)

transgenerational communication had proven impossible for many, set in motion a process leading to the design of a mnemonic marker for the Troubles, culminating in the performative *Drawing the Ring of Steel*.

The project offers collective remembrance triggered by a physical and emotional recognition of spatial change within shared public space and it introduces subtle traces of the conflict to a portion of the population unfamiliar with the period as lived experience. It will mark how far we have come as a society, by the absence of the 'ring of steel', while recognising the scale of the endeavour yet to be undertaken toward becoming a healthy, informed, inclusive society devoid of such barriers.

If considered as a cognitive bridge Drawing the Ring of Steel, and projects like it, can also serve to support and 'build social cohesion and reconciliation so that everyone has a sense of belonging' (U. K. & Irish Governments 2020, 31), connecting disparate images of Belfast and reconnecting all generations with their city.⁶



Figure 12. Catterall, Kate. 2016. Bollards that frequently replaced the ring of steel and that one day may be removed and replaced by a steel line drawing so ceding again 'The Right to the City is the right of all inhabitants, present and future, permanent and temporary, to inhabit, use, occupy, produce, govern and enjoy just, inclusive, safe and sustainable cities, villages and human settlements, defined as commons essential to a full and decent life' (2020. Home. [https://www. right2city.org](https://www.right2city.org))

6. The 'New Decade, New Approach' (NDNA) Deal negotiated the restoration of the Northern Ireland Executive after a three-year hiatus, endorsed by all major political parties on January 10, 2020.

References

- Abramson, Daniel. 1999. *Make History, Not Memory*. No. 9 / Constructions of Memory: On Monuments Old and New. Harvard Design Magazine. <http://www.harvarddesignmagazine.org/issues/9>.
- Bamford, James. 2020. Belfast Ring of Steel GIS interactive mapping. <http://belfastringofsteel.com/>
- Bloomfield, Sir Kenneth. 1989. *'We Will Remember Them': Report of the Northern Ireland Victims Commissioner*. Design, origination, print commissioned and managed by The Stationery Office Northern Ireland. Accessed 28 Jan. 2020 <https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/issues/violence/victims.htm>
- Brown, Stephen. 1985. *Central Belfast's Security Segment: An Urban Phenomenon*. Area, 17(1) (March 1985), 1–9. The Royal Geographical Society (with the Institute of British Geographers) Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20002110> Accessed: 13–02–2020 18:32
- Catterall, Kate, 2011. *'Collapse: The Erasure of Time, History and Memory in the Urban Landscape of Northern Ireland'*. In *Visual Rhetoric and the Eloquence of Design*, edited by Leslie Atzmon, Parlor Press, LLC.
- Coaffee, Jon. 2003. *Terrorism, Risk and the City: The Making of a Contemporary Urban Landscape*. Ashgate Publishing Company.
- Doss, Erika. 2008. *The Emotional Life of Contemporary Public Memorials*. Amsterdam University Press. (Page 9. Santino, Jack. 1992. Not an Unimportant Failure: Rituals of Death and Politics in Northern Ireland. Displayed in Memorial Light, ed. Michael McGaughan. Antrim Arts Council).
- Forthspring Inter Community Group*. 2014. (Various contributors) *Forthspring 5 Decades Project: Talking about the Troubles*. European Union (EU) Peace III Programme.
- Governments, U. K. & Irish. 2020. *The New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) Deal*. Commitments to Northern Ireland.
- Jankowitz, Sarah E. 2014. *The Order of Victimhood: Violence, Hierarchy and Building Peace in Northern Ireland*. Palgrave MacMillan.
- Lavery, Dermot & Michael Hewitt. (Directors). 2019. Doubleband Films Production for BBC Northern Ireland & Northern Ireland Screen. <https://www.Lostlivesfilm.Com/>

References

Lefebvre, Henri. 1968. *Le Droit à la ville*, 1996 [English translation *The Right to the City*]. Electronic Source. Accessed: 1 May 2020. <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/henri-lefebvre-right-to-the-city.pdf>

Logan, Karen. Ulster Museum Troubles Gallery. 2018. Curator [https:// www.nmni.com/collections/history/troubles](https://www.nmni.com/collections/history/troubles). Accessed 4 June 2020

McBride, Alan. Wave Trauma Center. [https://wavetraumacentre.org.uk/who-we-are/wavecentres/ belfast/](https://wavetraumacentre.org.uk/who-we-are/wavecentres/belfast/)). Accessed 3 June 2020.

McCabe, Rebekah & Conor McCafferty (producers). 2018. Infinite City Podcast. Season 1: Episode 2. *Remembering the Ring of Steel with Kate Catterall*.

McCahill, Mike. 2019. Wed 16 Oct 2019 09.00 EDT. Last modified on Wed 18 Dec 2019 10.15 EST <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2019/oct/16/lost-lives-review-troubles-northern-ireland-documentary> - documentary City. Accessed 20 May 2020. <https://www.right2city.org/>

McKittrick, David. 1999. *Lost Lives: the stories of the men, women, and children who died as a result of the Northern Ireland Troubles*. Edinburgh: Mainstream.

O'Leary, Brendan. 2019. *A Treatise on Northern Ireland, Volume I: Colonialism*. Oxford University Press.

Queens University Belfast. 1998- George Mitchell Centre. Oral History Archive <https://victimsandthepast.org/dealing-with-the-past/oral-historyarchive/>

University of Ulster, 1998 - Conflict Archive on the Internet (CAIN) <https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/>

Thornton, Chris. 2020. Lost Lives: An egalitarian 'monument to the dead' <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-51480198>

Turner, Kate. 2019. *Healing Through Remembering*. <https://healingthroughremembering.org/> Accessed 21 May 2020.

Young, James E. 1992. 'The German Counter-Monument: Memory against Itself in Germany A mnemonic device for Belfast 2021 58 Today'. *Critical Inquiry* 18 (2) (1992): 267-96. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1343784>.