12. Mobilizing the meaning of greening in a conflicted city

A case study from northwest Belfast

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Introduction

Belfast is a city recovering from a vicious sectarian conflict (usually officially dated as running from 1969 to 1998) which fractured the city along ethno-political lines. Today these fractures remain, demarcated physically by 'peace walls' which divide the city, and by an imaginative geography which still apportions certain parts of the city to 'us' and 'them' (Murtagh, 2011; Lang and Mell, 2020). In an attempt to overcome these divisions, the city council, with the support of the EU, have recently constructed a greenway (officially titled the Forth Meadow Community Greenway, from here, Greenway) which aims to knit the city back together through the provision of green space shared between the city's two main communities, often described using the acronyms CNR (Catholic/Nationalist/Republican) and PUL (Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist).[1] The project is about reshaping both the physical and imaginative landscapes of the city, breaking down literal and imagined barriers between divided territories. In this sense it is a project which is about creating a new way of seeing

1 In this chapter I use the technical terms CNR (Catholic/Nationalist/Republican) and PUL (Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist), as well as the more vernacular 'Catholic and Protestant' to describe political affiliations in Belfast. Although the former are more technically correct (as they consider these groups as ethno-nationalistic, rather than simply religious), the latter is the terminology more frequently used in everyday life by people living in the city, such as my interviewees. These identities were the poles around which the majority of the conflict was centred and remain key poles for the organization of Northern Ireland's (NI) society today.

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and knowing the city as much as it is about imprinting a physical change into the city's material fabric.

A wide range of studies and frameworks have explored the relationship between urban politics and urban greening (e.g. Angelo, 2017; Anguelovski et al., 2019; 2020; Zuniga-Teran et al., 2021; Alexander, 2024). Here I make use of a framework recently developed by Hillary Angelo (2021), which argues that acts of urban greening are supported by a social imaginary that 'green is good', developed through the process of modern urbanization. This social imaginary means that greening protagonists can use acts of greening to remake cities and citizenship without necessarily facing the kinds of conflict or opposition faced by other urban redevelopment schemes. In a city where politics has been closely entangled with violence, and which remains deeply divided along ethno-sectarian lines, using greening as a tool to take the heat out of potentially controversial projects has obvious appeal. The risk, however, is that this can move projects outside *all* politics, not just the forms of politics associated with ethno-sectarian division and violence. That greening the city is understood as something inherently good thus becomes a double-edged sword; while a pragmatic and useful means of moving beyond a conflictual politics, greening projects can also elude the types of oversight and discussion fundamental to democratic decision-making about city life.

Making use of Angelo's framework, this chapter explores two dimensions of the role greening may play in conflicts about urban futures. First, it explores how the social imaginary of greening is mobilized in ways useful in a place where politics can be particularly conflictual. Second, it explores how greening can be a means of articulating, and mediating, conflicts between different urban actors about what moving beyond war and towards peace might look like.[2] Below I briefly set out Angelo's framework, and in the subsequent section, I bring it into dialogue with a case study, illustrated through three vignettes.

2 In these two sentences I use the word 'war' to provide clarity for the reader. In the rest of the document I refrain from using this word – using the word 'war' for Northern Ireland's troubled past is, itself, contentious. For the reader this perhaps illustrates the degree of disagreement which remains associated with Northern Irish politics – not even the language used to discuss this politics can be agreed upon.

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The meaning of greening

Hillary Angelo's *How Green Became Good* (2021) is centred around an historical study of the Ruhr region in Germany, which Angelo uses to explore – and develop a theoretical argument about – the social and spatial effects of greening in urbanized areas. Centrally, she argues that the process *of* urbanization can transform nature from a direct material good into an indirect moral or affective signifier – a signifier she calls 'urbanized nature'. This urbanized nature can then, she explains, be deployed as a variable *within* urbanization to fix problems, something she describes as *urban greening*: 'the normative practice of using everyday signifiers of nature to fix problems with urbanism' (ibid.: 3). Most importantly for this chapter, she argues that urban greening 'is a particularly powerful way of intervening in the built environment because, although specific projects are embedded in the political economy of each moment and reflect its biases, […] they are constructed as universally beneficial investments in the public good by both greening protagonists and their target audiences' (ibid.: 5). Urban greening is thus marked by something of a paradox: While urban greening projects can be 'technologies of control which instantiate narrow, historically and class-specific ideas about what constitutes good cities and citizens, they are nevertheless carried out and widely received as universally beneficial investments in the public good' (ibid.: 23).

Angelo's theory is built around the concept of a 'social imaginary': a shared set of practices, symbols, and narratives through which society is made sensible and meaningful. Charles Taylor (2003) describes such imaginaries as at once deeper and broader than a simple social theory; they are instead a kind of 'background' through which society becomes comprehensible, but one difficult to straightforwardly describe on a page. The concept was developed by Cornelius Castoriadis (1975/1997) and famously deployed by Benedict Anderson (1983/2006) to explore how the 'imagined communities' associated with modern nations came into being. The relationship between social imaginaries and material practices is neither straightforward nor necessarily linear (Gaonkar, 2002; Calhoun, 2016). Anderson (1983/2006), for example, emphasizes that the idea of nationhood was developed with the advent of new technologies and forms of communication. However, he also points out that certain material practices involved with realizing the nation – the creation of a physical border, for instance – are meaningless without the shared social imaginary of nationhood. Charles Taylor puts this more abstractly:

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> The relation between practices and the background understanding behind them is therefore not one-sided. If the understanding makes the practice possible, it is also true that the practice largely carries the understanding. (2003: 107)

Angelo makes an analogous argument regarding the relationship between urbanization and the practice of greening. If urbanized nature is a product of the process of urbanization, deploying it in practice, through acts of urban greening, can only be comprehended as benevolent once a shared social imaginary that greening is good has been developed. The primary focus of Angelo's book is on the way this social imaginary is developed and then migrates through space and time. However, as a recent forum discussing Angelo's work noted, some of her theory's 'most interesting and politically relevant aspects' are the way it explores 'the interaction between material and immaterial dynamics, and the extent to which urbanized nature – as idea and project – can escape the influence of social hegemonies' (Wachsmuth et al., 2024: 57). This chapter focuses upon these two facets of her work, first by exploring how the meaning of urban greening is mobilized through a variety of material practices, and second by exploring how urban greening can be mobilized by actors aiming to contest contemporary arrangements of power.

Angelo herself points out that her work 'primarily documents greening in its top-down, large-scale, and hegemonic moments' (Angelo, 2021: 22), thus only partially representing the diversity of ways which urban greening might be mobilized. This chapter, by contrast, explores the way urban greening is deployed by a variety of different actors contesting the same geography. This is possible because urban greening is a 'specific idiom or grammar of moral action rather than a specific viewpoint' (ibid.: 22), meaning that 'greening is a practice that is available to a wide range of actors and political projects even in the same place and time' (ibid.: 22).

Ultimately this means that there is no inherent relationship between the potential of urban greening and the ability of urban actors to shape the trajectory of urban development. On the one hand, urban greening can be deployed by actors as a means of cementing established norms and circulations of power. On the other hand, urban greening can be deployed as a means of highlighting, and disrupting, the status quo. Perhaps most importantly, though, through deploying urban greening as a practice of remaking the city, urban actors can come to re-evaluate their own work; put differently, whilst deploying this social imaginary, actors are, themselves, subject to it. These dynamics

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have important consequences for opening and closing the space for politics in the making of urban futures, as set out empirically through the case below.

Belfast and its fractures

The conflict in Belfast can be thought of as an 'urban problem' in two main ways. First, most literally, the spark which lit the ethno-political conflict in its modern form came from a series of marches in 1968 and 1969, for which concerns about housing equality and corrupt municipal governments were central motivations (Wiener, 1976; Stewart, 1997). The landscape of housing in Northern Ireland has changed markedly since, but housing remains an important political topic, and one which is often associated with CNR–PUL political issues. Second, the conflict led to the destruction of public space, literally (through the construction of barricades and the shockwaves of bombs), but also more metaphorically, due to the widespread violence deployed by various groups to control, and demarcate, their respective urban territories. In a very literal way, the scars of this destruction remain written across the city in the form of 'peace walls' – large steel and brick constructions, most of which are impromptu barricades turned into permanent structures over the decades (Boal, 2002; 2008). Also known as 'interfaces', and initially built with the explicit aim of ensuring segregation in the name of securitization, these walls are now often perceived as barriers to integration and realization of enduring peace. As important as the physical walls which transect the city, however, are the imagined walls which accompany them; whilst crossing a road during a walking interview conducted as part of this study, my interviewee paused on its centreline, describing it as an 'interface' because Protestants walk down one side of the road and Catholics down the other.

The largest visible peace wall in the city is officially called the Cupar Way interface and divides the PUL heartland of the Shankill Road and the CNR heartland of the Falls Road (see Figure 1). Further west lies the Springmartin Road interface, which is effectively joined to the Cupar Way interface by a piece of land known locally as 'the Mackies site' (see Figure 2 and Figure 3). The Mackies site was once home to the city's second-largest machinery factory, which sent industrial equipment around the world; its importance to the city was emblematized by a visit from Bill Clinton, who in 1995 delivered an important peace-process speech from a stage on the factory floor. Despite successfully surviving the worst of the city's ethno-political conflict, deindustrialization

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brought an end to the factory, which was demolished in 2003. A bellwether for the city's economic fortunes, in the early 2000s the site was used as a municipal dump, where waste from the construction of a new downtown shopping centre was deposited, and in 2016 a corner of the site was used for the construction of an entrepreneurial hub. Meanwhile, the municipal dump fell out of use, and until recently most of the site was vacant, overgrown, verdant, and wild. Where the factory walls once effectively joined together the Cupar Way and Springmartin Road interfaces, by the 2010s the vacant site served as a buffer between the PUL and CNR communities: a no man's land keeping the two territories separate.

But in 2020, the diggers arrived at the Mackies site. They'd been sent by the Belfast City Council, fuelled with EU funding, to realize the Greenway. Costing just over £5.1 million, conceptually the Greenway is very simple – it is a cycleway and walkway which joins together a series of green spaces across the northwest of the city, including Mackies. The broad context of the project is illustrated in Figure 1, which shows the positioning of the Greenway relative to the city centre, the city's main interfaces, and the largely CNR Falls Road area and PUL Shankill Road area.[3] Figure 2 provides a more detailed illustration of the ways in which the project joins together green spaces across this geography. Figure 3, meanwhile, illustrates why the project is particularly significant for the city, and politically complicated: as this map shows, the Greenway punches straight through the Mackies site, and therefore effectively through the city's longest and most famous peace wall. Explicitly aiming to create a shared space, it ultimately aims to facilitate the intermingling of the PUL and CNR communities not only by physically opening the space between them, but also by breaking down the imagined geography which still demarcates their boundaries.

3 This chapter argues that it is an oversimplification to describe Belfast as a city of two homogenous communities, demarcated into two neatly bounded ethno-political territories. It would be distinctly hypocritical to make this argument in the text whilst using maps which demarcate the city along ethno-political lines. For this reason, the maps below do not display ethno-political information. I appreciate that this may slow the readers' progress a fraction, by forcing them to read the maps in parallel with the text, but I request the readers' forgiveness, on the basis that this avoids a mistake too many descriptions of Belfast make: arguing for the need to bring the city back together, whilst redescribing it in dualistic terms, thus reinscribing the idea that it is a city of two homogenous communities.

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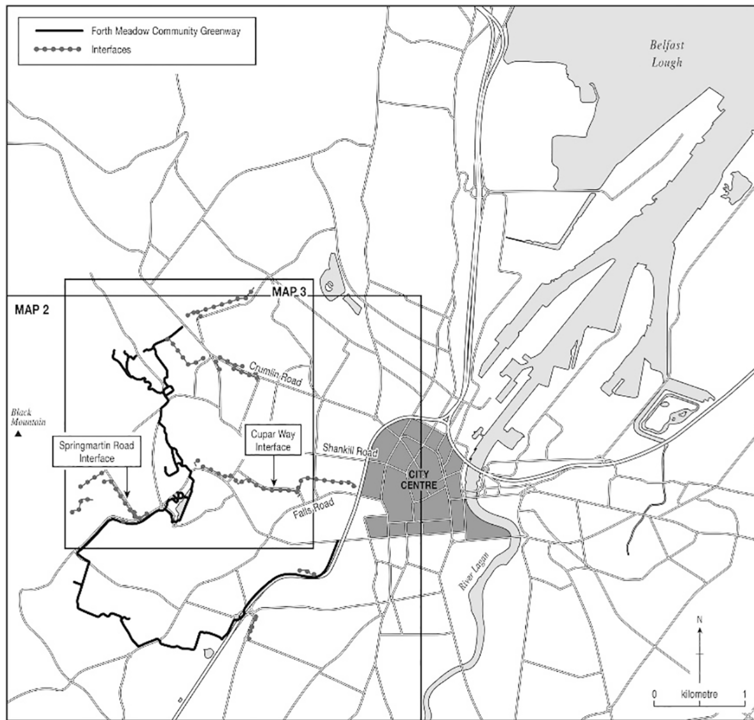
Figure 1: Context map of the Forth Meadow Community Greenway.



Source: Durham University Cartographic Unit.

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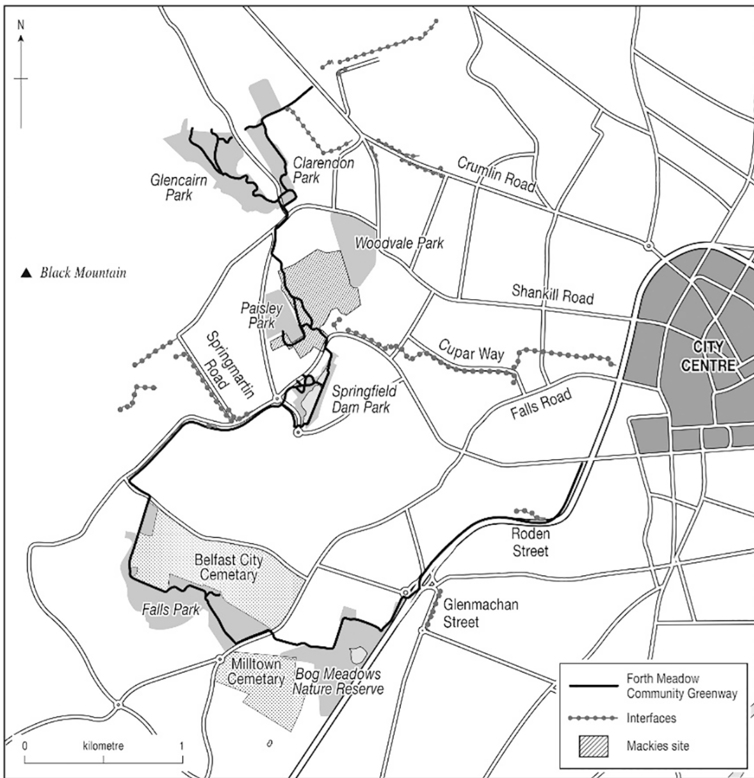
Figure 2: Map of full extent of the Forth Meadow Community Greenway.



Source: Durham University Cartographic Unit.

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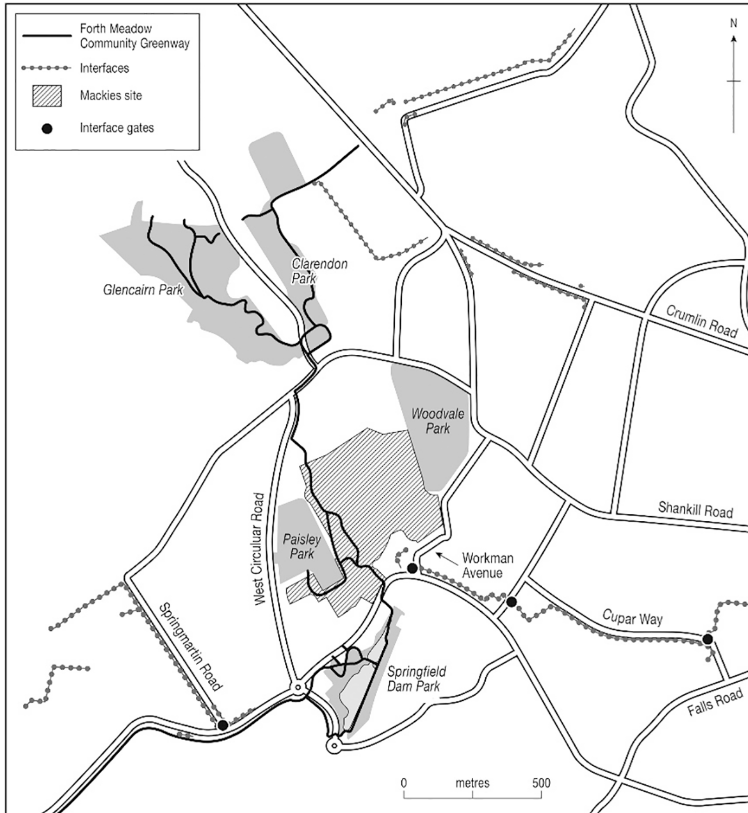
Figure 3: Map of the Forth Meadow Community Greenway and key interface zones.



Source: Durham University Cartographic Unit.

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Stitching together a fractured city

The following three subsections look at the Forth Meadow Community Greenway in three different ways, using three different aspects of Angelo's (2021) framework. The first examines how the Greenway has been constructed as a 'universal public good', and therefore something which can be shared; the second explores the cracks in this universality; and the third sets out an example of counter-greening, used by protesters against the Greenway. The latter two sections include descriptions of the interaction between the Greenway and a counter-campaign titled the Take Back the City coalition (from here, TBTC). This coalition has formed to argue for a different usage of the Mackies site – they argue that the site should be used, at least partially, for social housing, in order to try to help the city alleviate its homelessness crisis. Given the sectarian geography and the political history of housing struggles, this has become deeply controversial. Initially wholly against the Greenway, TBTC now support the Greenway, but only as part of a wider reimagination of what the Mackies site could become. TBTC argue that the Greenway should anchor a new community which reimagines how people should live together in Belfast.

As set out in the second section ('The meaning of greening'), I focus this chapter on the practices by which urban greening is ascribed particular meanings, rather than the channels through which prior meanings are transposed into this project. Methodologically, this means focusing on what the Greenway does, and how it achieves this, rather than focusing on the origins and dispersal of ideas about what greenness is. To explore this, a variety of methods have been used: ethnographic observation, document analysis, and 40 semi-structured interviews (many conducted whilst walking through the space). Interviews have included a range of actors, including members of the city council, local community volunteers, local activists, and local residents. Ethnographic work has included time spent on the Greenway, at local community events, and at activist-organized events. Document analysis has included policy documents, internal council documents provided by project managers, information provided by local historians, and local newspaper reports. Data collection commenced in September 2023, when the final section of the Greenway was completed and opened for use.

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The construction of universality

> Providing a greenway benefits everybody. It benefits all communities. It brings people together. It enriches an area. It regenerates the area. So, to create a greenway … everybody benefits from it.
> *John Kyle, Belfast City Councillor (BBC, 2022)*

On 24 June 2022, City Councillor John Kyle appeared on BBC Northern Ireland Newsline to make the above statement. This framing is common across much public messaging surrounding the Forth Meadow Community Greenway and is reflected privately in many of my interviews with Greenway project team members. Here I explore the ways this impression of universality is created, in particular by separating the Greenway from 'the social', as set out in Angelo's framework. Angelo emphasizes that because greening projects 'are physically and temporally separate from both work and home and their social relationships, it is generally possible to sustain an idea of these spaces as separate from social interests as well – as segregated from economic questions and forms of race, class, and gender inequality' (Angelo, 2021: 24). The key point here is that the splitting of the Greenway from these forms of social relationships isn't something incidental to the project, but is central to it, and is achieved through a variety of proactive if often mundane practices. Below, I set out how this is achieved, largely through the professional practices of those involved in planning and delivering the Greenway, including those working on behalf of the city council, and external contractors who helped deliver the project. I do this by exploring how the Greenway's creation is related to four key domains: first, by managing the relationship between the Greenway and the city's industrial history; second, by imaginatively relating the Greenway to an aspired-for future, where nature (and by implication, the Greenway) are separated from the city surrounding it; third, through an extensive 'animation' project, which aims to bring the Greenway to life in ways amenable to the city council; and fourth, by ensuring that the Greenway is a space of transit rather than dwelling.

Firstly, much of the Greenway was carefully separated from explicit references to past companies and businesses, mainly because employment in Belfast has often historically been associated with one's ethno-religious iden-

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tity. The naming of a key bridge on the Greenway – which runs through an area immediately adjacent to the Mackies site, over a lake called the Springfield Dam – provides a good example, as one interviewee explained:

> People were conscious that that is an interface at Springfield Road. And you were going to have a very distinct … two communities, basically. Or even a territorial view that north of the road is PUL community and south of the road is CNR community. And it manifested itself in – I'll give you an example: We still haven't formally named it because of dispute about whether it will have two languages or not, but a name for the new bridge in the Springfield Dam. And it was interesting how some people reacted. […] There was quite a strong reaction to anything that namechecked Mackies, because Mackies was perceived as being an employer that perhaps hadn't been an equality employer back in the day. But there was more understanding over something like, call it something related to the foundry, because … do you see what I mean?

The interviewee went on to clarify that:

> You also realize the nuances of what people will accept […]. People were open, for example; everybody recognized that heavy engineering was a local thing. So historically, a name like 'Foundry': 'yeah that's okay', said the people on the south of the road. Or something to do with nature […]. Somebody had 'Seven Cygnets Bridge'. So yeah, that was good. It's just that thing about what's neutral, and what's not, and that's a reason to do engagement as well.

If careful narration of the past laid the foundation for the Greenway's separation from the social, this was supplemented by a specific vision for what the Greenway might become – the second practice deployed by those developing it. Angelo describes this as 'aspirational' urban greening, in the sense that it means creating an aspired-to image for what the act of urban greening will achieve prior to physical action. One of the Greenway's key project managers from the city council describes how this was achieved:

> We arranged study visits to other areas, you know, taking some of the residents to the likes of Half Moon Lake […]. It was just, again, to demonstrate how this 'oasis' effectively – that's what I would like to think of

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> Springfield Dam – can sit within a very, you know, urban environment. And the two can sit side by side.

The project manager went on to explain why they thought this was important:

> I think, you know, again, legacy of the conflict is people have an element of fear and mistrust and, you know, anxiousness. And it's just the unknown more than anything else. So, we were trying to demonstrate as to where space such as what we were trying to create could sit within that very dense urban environment.

The image of what the Greenway might be is, here, being created prior to spades entering the ground: It is a space that sits 'side by side' with the 'dense urban environment' of the city. Professionals working on the project tended to emphasize two main benefits of this for the project. One, it helped to smooth the process of project implementation. If key local stakeholders were brought on 'study visits' as described above, this meant they were more likely to get on board with the council's plans for the Greenway. Once they'd experienced a slice of this aspired-for future, in other words, it helped council workers to set about actually realizing it. Two, it helped to reinscribe the idea that the Greenway was somehow separate from the particular politics of the city which surrounds it. As is set out above, the Greenway here is construed as an 'oasis', where one can imaginatively escape the partisan and violent history of the city. The dense urban environment around it is, in turn, associated with the legacy of the conflict. Put more abstractly, the Greenway is separate from the social life of the city, not part of it, and certainly not a product of it. By planting this image in the minds of key stakeholders, the professionals employed to realize the Greenway were, thus, projecting their own aspirations for the future of the project onto those who would later inhabit it. In this sense, these visits not only helped to pave the way for the material reworking of the city, but also aimed to reshape the way this material reworking would come to be interpreted once complete.

This imaginative preparation dovetailed with an extensive 'animation' project delivered by the council, designed to bring the Greenway to life – the third way which the Greenway's relationship to the social life of the city was managed. The term 'animation' is a curious one – the spaces the Greenway now runs through were animated prior to the Greenway, but often in subversive ways. Drinking, drug use, bonfires, the riding of motorbikes, sectarian

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fights, and riots are some of the many behaviours which have animated this space within the past decade. The type of animation promoted by the city council, by contrast, includes things like nature walks, bike riding, and litter picking. According to one project manager, the animation programme was akin to trying to coach key locals about how the Greenway should 'correctly' be used, and then hoping they would take these lessons and spread them more widely. Importantly, these are not only leisure activities but particular forms of leisure; they revolve around 'green' and largely individual behaviours – seen as neutral and accessible to all – but not around things like team sports, which both have historical connotations and require constructing more close-knit social affiliations.

More materially, the Greenway has been created as a space of transit, rather than a space of occupation – the fourth way which the Greenway is split from the social life of the city surrounding it. My walking interviewees often point out that there are no benches in the Mackies site; instead, the Greenway runs a relatively direct route through the site, with few spaces to pause apart from a railing where one can lean to feed ducks in a nearby pond. Rather like Mike Davis's famous description of 'bumproof' benches in Los Angeles (1990: 233), designed to allow someone to pause but neither sit nor sleep upon a bench, this lack of space for occupation channels people through the space, rather than encourages dwelling, or occupation. Aligned with this micro-geography which discourages dwelling, at a broader scale the Greenway has come to be framed in the public sphere as standing in opposition to efforts by TBTC to build social housing on the site, mainly because – as one local stakeholder described it to me – housing in this part of the city is 'capital-P Politics in bold' (in the sense of being about CNR–PUL relationships). A wide variety of interviewees, but particularly those who were involved with the Greenway's delivery, and local residents not involved in TBTC, describe the Greenway as the inverse of the housing campaign; it is about something different; it is about transit through space, rather than occupation of it; it is about sharing, as opposed to owning.

Here the spatial form of the Greenway begins to matter, and its material components – benches, or lack thereof – emerge as a means of carefully distinguishing from the territorialized housing which surrounds it. The public framing of the Greenway as something existing in opposition to TBTC isn't necessarily something those delivering the Greenway aimed for. But it can be considered an effect of a particular set of practices which shaped the Greenway as a space of transit rather than one of occupation. Once established, this dualism mapped neatly onto the struggles between TBTC and the city

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council; this struggle then served to amplify the distinction between the ideas of dwelling and occupation.

To reiterate, the Greenway has been carefully created as a space separated from particular types of social relationships, building upon pre-existing understandings of nature as being separate from society, in order to generate the impression that the Greenway is a space somehow separated from the particularities of the city surrounding it. The Greenway's 'naturalness' provides the foundation for this process – it is an 'oasis' surrounded by a city of red bricks – but this doesn't determine the Greenway's separation from the social, much less realize it. Instead, as I've emphasized here, this results from a careful series of steps which divorce it from issues such as employment or housing and animate it with particular forms of leisure.

The idea, or impression, that green space is somewhat separate from the social life of the city is, of course, neither specific to Belfast nor specific to today. But in contemporary Belfast it is provided with particular inflections, given the city's legacy of sectarianism. More importantly perhaps, it marks this project as different to most of the other projects delivered by EU 'Peace' funding, in which specificity is more easily discernible: cross-community football teams, for example, are for football players from two communities rather than for everyone; entering a cross-community centre often involves stating your name and purpose before entering (or, sometimes, as I have discovered when entering such places to conduct interviews, setting off alarm systems). By contrast, the openness of the Greenway means that it provides benefits for a wide array of users.

However, there is an inconsistency in claiming that the Greenway is a universally beneficial project and one which aims to create a specific or particular form of shared space. As set out in the following section, this inconsistency has been recognized by several actors linked to the project, most notably TBTC (who see it as demonstration of the Greenway's failures) and professionals delivering the project (who have endeavoured to try to work around it, through a variety of practices). In different ways, each group of actors have critiqued this inconsistency and attempted to leverage it to reshape the project, as is set out in more detail in the following section.

Sharing for some?

The central rationale underpinning the Forth Meadow Community Greenway was summarized neatly by a Greenway project manager in an interview:

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> It was a very difficult first meeting. I always recall that it was 'so that's your side, and that's our side', you know? And you know [we were saying] 'we're trying to create a shared space here!' And when I think back to that very early meeting and where we are now, with those same community organizations … That's not the language now.

The quote also highlights the success the Greenway has had delivering those aims: 'That's not the language now.' Those who regularly walk the Greenway have, similarly, described the physical space to me in effusive terms – one described it as a 'lifesaver'. Another told me a story about bumping into a famous ex-paramilitary from 'the other side', whose face he recognized as one he used to hate; the two had a conversation and a laugh about how transformed the space, the city, and the relationship between them now were. There is hope that these shared pockets will spread along the length of the Greenway, and early evidence suggests that this is possible; one elderly man told me that in the summer he was going to get 'a few old boys' he'd met in the shared parts of the Greenway and show them deeper into 'his side' where they were still too afraid to walk alone. This is a perfect example of the breakdown of territorial boundaries which the Greenway has aspired to achieve.

But, despite these successes, the Greenway isn't beloved by everyone. Councillor Kyle's words heading the previous section were a response to a protest by TBTC, who argue that, in fact, the Greenway doesn't benefit everyone and thus isn't a universal good. More specifically, TBTC argue that because the land is public it should be used to benefit the public as a whole, including homeless people, who arguably have a greater need for public space than their housed counterparts. Thus, TBTC argue that at least some of the site should be used to build public housing. Because the Greenway has been framed as a universally beneficial space, their argument threatens one of its central premises, hence drawing Councillor Kyle's response on the evening news.

The Greenway is what is known as a cross-community project, meaning a project which should benefit the city's different ethno-religious communities and bring them together. Such projects have done much vital peacebuilding work since the 1990s, when large injections of EU funding helped cement the ceasefire and peace agreements. According to some of my interviewees, however, the logic underlying such projects has remained stuck in the past: first, because such projects tend to see Belfast as a city of two communities, despite the city's rapid diversification thanks to the arrival of overseas migrants; second, because the projects often serve to dichotomize Belfast when

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contemporary relationships between communities are much more mosaic-like (with fractures, for example, within PUL and CNR groups and everyday connections between them); and third, because they encourage identification along ethno-religious lines rather than any other basis. This, paired with a stagnant electoral politics which profits off division, has driven cynicism about official cross-community work; a local community worker bluntly told me that 'the whole system runs on division'.

I do not aim to discuss the pros and cons of this model here – an area of research thoroughly explored elsewhere (Graham and Nash, 2006; Coulter, 2019; Coulter and Shirlow, 2019; De Young, 2023) – but simply to point out that it is a *particular* model for understanding what Belfast is, and has embedded within it *particular* ideas about who should benefit from the city's development and why. TBTC have made this point through their activism; they've pointed out that just because the Greenway aspires towards equal ethno-religious benefits does not mean that everybody benefits, and certainly doesn't mean that the benefits can be considered universal. To make the claim that the Greenway benefits everyone is, they argue, to make a claim about who one considers 'everybody' to be (rather than to make a statement about what the Greenway is). Put differently, TBTC are arguing that this shines a light on which groups are really considered full citizens of Belfast today.

Many of those involved with planning the Greenway, arranging the project management team, and creating and animating the project 'on the ground' also hold reservations about the Greenway's underlying cross-community logic, albeit for different reasons to TBTC. One project manager involved with planning and developing the Greenway explained to me their feelings on the use of the term:

> [C]ross-community isn't necessarily applicable now, because we are a much more diverse community, and we constantly feed that back to our funding body because they obviously set us targets, and it was always 'so many people from this community and so many people from that community' and you know, also, a BME [black and minority ethnic] mix, and you're sort of thinking: 'No, no, it has to be much broader than that!'

Other project workers involved with delivering project consultation and animation explained to me that this way of seeing the city actually undermines the benefits which the Greenway is supposed to achieve, in particular because it limits the basis of identification with, and connection through, non-ethno-

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religious identities. For example, it encourages identification as either PUL or CNR rather than as cyclist or dog walker. In more academic language, one project worker involved with the consultation process explained using Robert Putnam's (1995) terminology that it limits the formation of bridging capital in lieu of bonding capital, encouraging intra-group bonding in lieu of its inter-group alternative. Some project workers from both the planning and delivery teams acted upon these reservations, challenging this logic subtly, for example, by writing evaluation reports which criticized it. Others more actively challenged the project's delivery, abandoning the identification of Greenway volunteers on an ethno-religious basis, instead selecting them on the basis of their skills and willingness to help maintain the space.

This dynamic is interesting, but more significant for this chapter is the fact that these members of the Greenway planning and delivery team remain confident that the Greenway is a project which aspires towards universal benefits, despite workers' awareness of and reservations about the logic underlying it. The reason why these actors remain convinced of the universality of the Greenway's benefits is often suggested at the end of my interviews; once reservations about project delivery are out of the way, project workers from both the planning and delivery teams encourage me to go down to the Greenway and see how good it is in practice. In one sense, this is simply a classic example of the ends justifying the means: Because the Greenway has, in parts, created a pleasant and shared space in the city, the logic underpinning it is retrospectively justified. Moreover, as set out in the previous section, now completed, the Greenway is a space which is open for anybody to go and use.

Here I'm less interested in the veracity of these claims (i.e. whether the Greenway really is a universally beneficial space or not) and more interested in the means by which these claims are made. When I asked one community worker why they thought the project worked, they replied that going down to the Greenway and experiencing the space was 'good for the soul'; another project worker from the management team told me that once the plants and grasses on the Greenway started to grow, then people would realize how good it really was; as aforementioned, another described it as an oasis in the depths of the city. As part of the development of the Greenway, a 'charter' was developed, whose final paragraph runs as follows:

> Enjoy the Forth Meadow Community Greenway. Walk it, enjoy it, breathe in the best of this city. Proud of our past, looking forward with confidence

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> to the future. That is what the new Forth Meadow Greenway represents – as we all walk on common ground. (Belfast City Council, 2023: 1)

Here, Angelo's framework provides a means of interpreting what's happening. Through it, she argues that nature's easily accessible and broadly enjoyable phenomenological effects reinforce the idea that urban greening projects are investments in a universally beneficial public good rather than acts of managerialism (or, indeed, politics); most people can walk through this common ground, and everybody can breathe its atmosphere, so everybody must benefit from it. The directness and universality of such experiences are important here; my interviewees can send me out to experience the benefits of the Greenway, confident that I don't need specialized skills or technology to do so – confident that I will enjoy it because such enjoyment is quasi-universal. To a large degree (when I'm not subject to cold Belfast rain), they're correct. Important too, Angelo emphasizes that such experiential benefits are neither fictive nor imaginary but are 'real' in the sense of being supported by a wide and growing body of scientific evidence. Although such evidence isn't readily accessible in everyday life – it usually requires skills, money, and technology to realize – it provides corroboration for nature's more direct affective power, cementing belief in its universal goodness.

Crucially though, Angelo points out that green projects can be universally experientially enjoyable, and provide broad measurable biophysical benefits, *and* be acts of managerialism which inaugurate normative, non-universal ideas about what good cities and citizenship should be. The overall effect of this is that both urban greening protagonists and urban greening recipients can understand acts of urban greening as universally beneficial, whilst simultaneously being aware of the managerial aims embedded within these projects. In other words, urban greening protagonists come to genuinely believe in the universality of the good which they are delivering, obscuring their own understanding of its normative aims. In this specific example, Greenway protagonists come to understand the project as one which has universal aims and benefits, despite the project's aim of creating a space shared on an ethno-religious basis; the dissonance between these two things leads to the reservations about the Greenway's delivery described earlier.

Perhaps the best evidence as to the particularity of the Greenway's vision of what the city is, and what a good Belfast should be, is the fact that the EU funding guidelines for similar projects are now gently shifting, emphasizing inclusivity in addition to cross-community thinking; the logic underlying

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the Greenway has thus already been, subtly, confined to a particular historical moment. That project planning and delivery workers have criticized and moved away from cross-community thinking demonstrates a degree of agency regarding what specifically this project, and the future of the city, should be. These actions might also best be considered attempts by those close to the ground to keep pace with the shifting reality of what the city is, despite the recalcitrance of funding structures and institutions.

But, of course, the Greenway remains as a physical entity which crosses the city; in this sense its physical form will gradually become an anachronism for a particular vision of Belfast, in much the same way that the peace walls are. Today the peculiarities of this vision are best emblematized by the Greenway's route: it wends its way through the city in a relatively nonsensical way if you want to get to work, school, or any other amenities, but perfectly sensible if you understand the city's sectarian fault lines (it transects them like a river transects contours). In this sense, as Angelo's framework helps to make clear, it is a project which has reconstructed the city as a social world by spatializing particular ideas about what the city is. Importantly, though, this particularity is obscured by the fact that the phenomenological benefits of being in this space make it seem to be universally beneficial. This allows the maintenance of, as Angelo puts it, 'a paradox' – the Greenway is a managerial project with particular aims but is viewed as universal both by those who are being managed and by those delivering the management.

Greening vs. greening

Angelo argues that once urban greening has been ascribed a particular meaning, this meaning can be appropriated: mobilized by a wide variety of actors, not simply those involved in creating the meaning in the first place. Here she builds upon Anderson's (1983/2006) point that social imaginaries, once developed, can be reflected back at their creators. For example, Anderson's work shows that historically the idea of nationhood was often a product of colonization, subsequently mobilized as a tool in counter-colonial struggles. Here a similar dynamic is at play, whereby those who are challenging the Greenway – the TBTC coalition – have used greening as a means of protesting against it. The most obvious example is provided by a seedbombing campaign. Ongoing, this campaign started in earnest in February 2020, when a large group of

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seedbomb-wielding campaigners turned up at the Mackies site, lobbing their seedbombs into the site's most contaminated section.

This act is interesting in the context of this article for three central reasons. First, this method of protest was, in fact, a method also being used by the city council to develop the Greenway; they too have seedbombed sections of the greenway, using this as a means of engaging the local community with the project's development. In this sense the activists were redeploying the meaning which the council had ascribed to the act of urban greening – as something politically neutral and about the creation of a universally beneficial public good – and aiming it back at the council. Second, the location of this act is significant. This is one of Belfast's most sensitive interface zones, which has seen some of the city's worst rioting over the past decade, including the throwing of many petrol bombs. Lobbing projectiles over interfaces thus plays at the edges of conventional political acts in Belfast, but seedbombing remains playful, rather than violent. This isn't simply an act which is powerful and happens to occur within a given context. It is made powerful, and significant, through its relationship with a particular context. Third though, it also involved not only appropriating, but also subtly reshaping, the meaning of urban greening developed by the council. The seedbombs used by campaigners were made of sunflower seeds; the campaigners were consciously aware of the fact that planting sunflowers can help to 'detoxify' land. For the campaigners this had a practical purpose – they want the land detoxified so that housing can be built upon it – but it also stands as a metaphor for their wider efforts to subvert what they call the city council's 'toxic' planning system.

The planning system is a central target of the TBTC campaign: a system which is characterized, in TBTC's view, by mobilization of (rather than elimination of) sectarian differences, tokenistic forms of environmentalism, and ill use of public land. According to TBTC, each of these issues is emblematized by the Greenway. My aim here is not to adjudicate as to whether these campaigners are right or wrong. Important instead is simply to emphasize that, like the toxic legacy of industrial waste in soil, for these activists these issues are historic ones, now deeply embedded within the planning system, beneath the surface level available for public scrutiny.

Rather than engaging directly with this system, then, these activists argue that it needs complete reconfiguration. According to them, like toxic land, it is not possible to build the city's future upon a toxic system. However, rather than simply protesting against this system, these activists aim to demonstrate that it is possible to root out toxicity and start afresh. By transforming the Mackies

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site through the use of seedbombs, the activists are both making a claim to this space (i.e. testing out what it means for this space to be 'public') and trying to demonstrate the possibility of its transformation. They have continued to conduct this seedbombing campaign on an annual basis, and their social media descriptions of this act provide a neat summary of how they frame it:[4]

> Last year we sowed 6000 wildflowers at the Mackies site in west Belfast – vacant public land, sprayed with nasty chemicals. We can detoxify our future! Join us this Spring to watch them bloom and be part of building a sustainable, inclusive community. (PPR, 2022)
>
> Seed-Bombs = Wildflower Meadow Biodiversity, inclusion, integration, sustainability, participation, human rights, equality, rights of nature. These are the seeds of the #TakeBackTheCity plan for this massive site in Belfast. (PPR, 2023)

Paired with pictures of flowers being blown in the wind, the meaning of this act is both material and symbolic. About literally claiming space, and literally detoxifying it, it is also about deploying symbolism broadly understood to be nonconfrontational (flowers) as a means of supporting a transgressive activist act, which involves detoxifying the future and laying the seeds for something new. The activists describe this as an act that is somewhat prefigurative, in that it involves incrementally working towards the future they desire, rather than simply waiting for institutional actors to adapt and change. In multiple ways, then, the seedbombing is a way of transmitting this subversive agenda. In particular, it mobilizes the idea that acts of urban greening are inherently benevolent, to stake a controversial claim in a contested piece of land in a way that is provocative yet playful, communicating a particular critique in a way which carefully avoids direct confrontation.

The seedbombing thus corroborates, and stretches, Angelo's framework. On the one hand, it clearly demonstrates that the meaning of urban greening can be appropriated by a variety of actors in the same setting, and thus turned to different ends. It thus gives credence to the idea that the meaning of urban greening is a social imaginary, which, once created, is not exclusively owned by already-powerful actors. On the other hand, the seedbombing was not simply

4 These social media posts come from an account associated with an organisation known as PPR, which stands for 'Participation and the Practice of Rights'. PPR is closely affiliated with TBTC, and most of TBTC's leading members are also members of PPR.

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a direct appropriation of the tools and meanings the council ascribed to urban greening. Instead, it involved a slight reshaping of the meaning of greening: a shifting of this meaning to suit the campaigners' particular ends. It was also an act which deployed the flowers' form *and* content. In this case, the sunflower seed planting is about literal and metaphorical detoxification. Overall, this act serves as a means not only of articulating a position different to the council's, but also of serving – in a very minor way – to reshape what political action looks like in this part of Belfast. By playing at the edges of what is conventionally understood as political, the activists were stretching the boundaries of political action in a new direction.

Conclusion

Ultimately, this chapter explores three main topic areas. First, it explores the ways urban greening affects the possibilities open to particular actors aspiring to re-create the city. On the one hand, the process of urban greening may open up space – in both a literal and a more metaphorical sense – for actors to operate in areas with particularly contested, claustrophobic politics. By appearing to be about something else – about something which is not the politics of the city – urban greening can offer actors a means of remaking the city which might otherwise not be possible. This opens up the agency of particular actors, allowing them to operate more freely in otherwise constrained environments. In the case study above, this is currently true for both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic actors. On the other hand, actors delivering acts of urban greening are not immune to its effects. They too are subject to the social imaginary that 'green is good'. Thanks to this, even people working within projects, who are acutely aware of their particular aims, may come to believe in such projects' universality. As aspired-for futures must be imagined prior to their realization, this presents a set of invisible, imaginative barriers around the possibilities for cities set out by urban future-makers.

Second, this chapter takes Angelo's framework in directions underexplored in her work. It does this partly by looking closely and ethnographically at the mundane ways in which the social imaginary of urban greening is materially reproduced, but mainly by exploring the ways in which different groups with different relationships to established circulations of power can mobilize that power. The chapter finds – as Angelo posits – that urban greening is a kind of shared moral grammar, through which different urban actors can communi-

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cate their claims. To stretch this metaphor further, one might suggest that it is a means through which different urban actors can open up dialogue with one another. For example, the seedbombing described here serves as a means through which counter-campaigners communicate their claims to the council, through indirect, material means. As debates continue to flourish about what it means to create more sustainable, greener urban futures, perhaps more attention should be brought to these more material forms of communication through the city.

Third, the chapter makes an empirical contribution to existing knowledge about Belfast. Much of the existing literature focuses squarely on the city's political conflicts; there is a notable paucity of literature examining what might best be termed the city's political ecology. This chapter makes an incremental contribution here. In doing so it also highlights something specific: that in creating a 'shared space' between the city's two most prominent communities, this project largely perpetuates the view that the city is composed of only two communities that need a third space to mediate between them. Like a nail holding together two pieces of wood, the Forth Meadow Community Greenway at the heart of this chapter ties together the city even as it perpetuates the view that the city remains divided. This belies the view voiced by almost all of my interviewees that this view is an antiquated one, which lives on in policy documents and funding structures much more than in the streets. It is thus a view perpetuated through the efforts of the Greenway delivery team, who were forced – to some extent – to work within these constraints in order to deliver the project, despite their own reflexive understanding that these constraints were problematic.

To draw these points together then, much of this chapter has been oriented around nature's tendency to obscure, a quality which can be used to hide the particularity of a project's vision within a blanket of universality. Using nature to obscure or naturalize social relations is, of course, nothing new (e.g. Loftus, 2012; Angelo, 2017). It is too easy, though, to say that this is simply the effect of a deeply rooted dualism in Western ontology which separates nature from culture (and thus also from society and politics). Here, instead, I've zoomed in on the specific ways in which this dualism is remade and thus serves as a means to abet the obfuscatory effects nature can have. More specifically, I've aimed to explore the ways in which the social imaginary that urbanized nature is of universal public benefit is remade through specific, often quite mundane, practices of built environment professionals as actors in the context of urban future-making.

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It would be easy – with a critical sensibility – to view this tendency to obscure as a negative thing. In particular, it is certainly possible that, if they are presumed to be of universal benefit, urban greening projects might elude the kinds of debate and criticism so necessary for urban politics and democracy. But here I've pointed out that, in this specific project, these forms of debate are alive and well – both in the 'public' realm of contests between the Greenway and counterprotesters, and in the more 'private' (or 'backstage') realm of project decision-making and planning. Moreover, the ability of this project to elide certain forms of social and political relationships at certain moments (for example, through divorcing itself from the city's ethno-sectarian past) opens up space for its realization. In this sense, the project has been afforded more latitude to reshape the city than non-green projects might have been permitted. In this sense, the social imaginary that 'green is good' has expanded the range of options available for those aiming to enter the debate about what the city's future should be.

Rather than being a practice with a particular relationship to power, then, urban greening is a practice which develops and articulates the power of particular urban actors in particular ways. The better this is comprehended, and explored empirically, the more we will be able to unpick this practice, opening it up to the kinds of debate fundamental if we aspire towards both greener and more democratic forms of urban futures.

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