

# Hidden Voices, Healing Spaces: Centring Women in Healing, Peace, and Policy Reform in Belfast's Interface Communities

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## 1 Introduction

This research investigates how planning and the built environment can contribute to social healing and peacebuilding in contested cities, through the lens of women's roles and gender-based theorisations of contested space. By questioning how peace manifests spatially in post-conflict cities, this research reveals the extent to which reparative planning can and should have a role in healing contested urban communities. Additionally, by using a case study of Belfast, Northern Ireland, the usefulness of using a gendered lens through which to understand healing processes in post-conflict cities is illustrated, revealing the gendered dimensions to living and working in and reproducing healing spaces. Moreover, this research assesses national and local policies in peacebuilding, evaluating the extent to which they have been successful in generating healing effects for communities in Belfast. In doing so, a deeper understanding of the role of structural actors in facilitating reparative planning is produced. Finally, this research questions the use of traditional participatory methodologies in planning research, and advocates for reflexive approaches to be deployed when engaging with communities in post-conflict cities.

## 2 Methods

This research uses a qualitative approach to examine the lived experiences of women in these communities in Belfast. Focus groups have been deployed with local women's groups, offering spaces to discuss power relations, the influence of stakeholders in their local community, and their sense of healing in the contested spaces in which they live. For a more structural perspective, semi-structured interviews have been conducted with policymakers, civil servants, community workers, and political representatives to unveil institutional narratives and approaches within these communities. Finally, policy analysis has been conducted to evaluate the ways in which local and national policies are effective in achieving or manifesting peacebuilding and healing in Belfast. Moreover, by analysing policy outputs, the role of structural actors in facilitating reparative planning has been developed.

## 3 Discussion

The city of Belfast, Northern Ireland endured over thirty years of conflict, which claimed the lives of over 3000 people. Belfast now lives with the physical scars of conflict in the form of defensive urban architecture, known as interfaces, which segregate rival factions of working-class communities within the city, despite currently functioning within a time of peace. Indeed, since the signing of the Good Friday Belfast Agreement in 1998, an extraordinary peace accord designed to end three decades of conflict, the number of interfaces continuing to divide communities in Northern Ireland stands at approximately 50 ([Department of Justice \(DoJ\) 2019](#)). As a post-conflict city, Belfast is actively engaged in attempting to heal from its past and embrace a respectful and prosperous future. In a world in which conflict is commonplace, the devastating consequences of it are increasingly impacting how we construct our urban communities. In so-called 'post-conflict' cities, the reconstruction of communities that are situated in heavily contested spaces is an area of urban planning research that is constantly evolving. The relationship between the built environment and peacebuilding is examined within this research, ([Harboe & Hoelscher 2023](#)), exploring the ways in which peace is negotiated spatially as well as politically. Healing approaches within planning advocate for community and survivor-centred methods of planning, arguing that peacebuilding is designed not only by macro processes and political decisions, but by everyday acts in ordinary communities ([Mac Ginty & Richmond 2013](#), [Coyles et al. 2023](#)). It is within this context that the concept

of healing becomes a useful framework for reshaping how we, as planners and policymakers, approach interventions in cities and communities recovering from the scars of war, violence, and conflict.

In cities healing from conflict, peacebuilding is negotiated incrementally by grassroots programmes, community initiatives, and active integration of opposing factions. These everyday acts are crucial in healing communities affected by violence and are often organised by women and women's organisations. Space is therefore not neutrally formed, but actively produced and contested by social, economic, and environmental processes that consequently affect the communities that inhabit it (Harvey 2005: p. 23). The built environment therefore echoes and replicates harms, injustices, inequalities, and power dynamics, transforming it into a geopolitical stage (Markowitz 2020). Therefore, peacebuilding is undoubtedly a spatial process, one that has considerable influence on the (re)production of the post-conflict built environment. In conducting this research using Belfast as a case study, the roles and experiences of women will be highlighted, offering a unique perspective through which to investigate interfaces in Belfast. This research reveals previously under-researched narratives not only of the conflict itself, but of how these communities have persevered and rebuilt. The impacts of conflicts in cities across the world are particularly felt in a gendered way, with gender influencing each resident's experience of the aftermath differently (Moser & McIlwaine 2014). Therefore, a key aim of this research has been to illustrate the value of the gendered experience when transforming contested spaces within post-conflict cities. The women's sector in Northern Ireland was particularly vocal on the need for a true and lasting peace process, often spearheading public demonstrations, while simultaneously populating many of the grassroots movements in communities, founding women's centres, Women's Aid in 1975 and local women's associations, supporting each other to thrive (Connolly 1999). Despite their key role in encouraging and sustaining peacebuilding activities in Belfast, the stories and roles of women within wider narratives of peacebuilding are often missing. Since the signing of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement in 1998, the role of women within Northern Ireland has changed, with more women than ever before entering politics and populating high-level positions of power within the state. In a time in which both First Minister positions here are filled by influential women, alongside a female Head of the Civil Service and a female Lady Chief Justice, the tides have truly shifted for women in Northern Ireland, at least at a structural level.

## 4 Results

By using Belfast, Northern Ireland as an example, the key premises proposed by reparative planning theory will be confirmed to be present in various forms in Belfast, demonstrable through data collected during fieldwork. This research also demonstrates the key role of planners and policymakers in transforming contested spaces into inclusive and shared environments, using women's groups as an example. Subsequently, this research has contributed to a growing body of knowledge on the relationship between peacebuilding and the built environment, as well as the development of the use of reparative or healing planning approaches. Moreover, the use of Belfast as a case study provides evidence of, for example, healing strategies contained within the spatial spiral model proposed by Catalina Ortiz and Oscar Gómez Córdoba in their territorial healing concept (Ortiz & Gómez Córdoba 2024)(Ortiz & Gómez Córdoba, 2024). It is hoped that new aspects to these approaches might be revealed, further expanding its impact and relevance to cities across the globe. Moreover, the usefulness of participant methodologies, such as focus groups, in generating healing effects for communities affected by conflict has been evaluated. Consequently, the use of more flexible methodology considers the expediency of participatory methods when conducting focus groups in communities and consider how traditional methods of research in urban planning have proven to be too rigid to yield fruitful data in complex and contested communities. These insights are based on reflections from primary fieldwork, further contributing to academic debates on methods in urbanism and geography. Additionally, this research reveals the experiences of communities who are actively conducting peacebuilding activities from both semi-structured interviews and focus groups, which provide comprehensive and contemporary insight into the production of healing spaces in Belfast. By considering the gendered dimensions to living and working in interface communities in Belfast, this research has considered the extent to which gender can enhance our understanding of healing in these spaces. It is hoped that by investigating these spaces with a gendered lens, renewed understandings into the link between the built environment and how women specifically live, work and thrive within it have been unveiled, as well as how women have influenced, and continue to influence, healing strategies.

Finally, it is anticipated that this research will contribute to growing discussions around the effectiveness of policies in achieving peacebuilding in Belfast, by way of policy analysis. This research has highlighted the structural position on interface areas, and how government departments have approached, or failed to approach, planning through a reparative system. Findings from this research

may also reveal insights that might be useful to governments locally and nationally, providing insight into contemporary experiences of communities living and working along interfaces in Belfast. The role and views of women, for example, may prove to be useful to government departments who actively manage and support interface communities in Belfast. Moreover, the findings from this research may be useful to the communities themselves, particularly those who seek empirical research to evidence their experiences. When conducting this research, ensuring that the process is not merely an extractive one, in which the researcher obtains information from participants with no perceived benefit to the communities it is from. Rather, it is hoped that this research might prove to assist the communities involved by providing fresh insights into the dynamics at play in their communities and encourage new practices of, has been a key priority. Rather it is hoped that participants will be fully informed and engaged throughout the data collection process. Following this, participants will be provided with access to the research outputs once completed. Consequently, it is hoped that this research could then be incorporated into bids for funding applications, community regeneration, and further resources for those most impacted by violence. However, it is acknowledged that despite anticipating this research to follow the expected outcomes and aims, it is deeply rooted in empirical research. Therefore, there is a strong possibility that the trajectory of this research will evolve as new findings influence future avenues of investigation. These findings may provide ample ground for future research into the value of reparative and therapeutic approaches in planning in post-conflict cities, and stimulate novel discussions into the importance of addressing injustices that the built environment may be complicit in. Overall, it is expected that this research will prove to be valuable, offering refreshing insight into not only the concept of healing, but also the communities themselves along interfaces in Belfast.

## **5 Conclusion**

This research approaches interface areas through a reparative planning approach, applying the concept of healing with a focus on Belfast, Northern Ireland. Healing spaces, by focusing on empowering communities to reclaim narratives and foster collective resilience, can offer an alternative contribution to further understanding these communities in Belfast and expand the realms of research from a spatial perspective. Likewise, the use of the case study of Belfast can contribute positively to expanding the applicability of reparative planning practices and of healing to further explore the European dimension of its application. This research will also contribute to a growing body of knowledge on the relationship

between peacebuilding and the built environment, and how this can be applied in the healing of post-conflict cities. Specifically, it is intended that this research examine how the spatialisation of conflict manifests, through scrutinising what healing spaces are, how they are defined by communities and the impact they can have on transitioning cities into restorative and prosperous post-conflict environments. Moreover, the use of participatory methods in research, such as focus groups and semi-structured interviews, will be evaluated to highlight the healing effects of inclusive and engaging research for communities living and working along interfaces in Belfast. This research will also examine the role of policymaking in achieving reparative planning, by evaluating the effectiveness of peacebuilding policies previously enacted in Belfast. It is hoped that this will reveal current policy narratives around peacebuilding agendas and expose areas of improvement as evidenced by data collected during policy analysis conducted as part of the research.

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