

# **CONFLICT IN CITIES AND THE CONTESTED STATE**

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### ***Divided Cities/Contested States***

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## **Football Frontiers: Competition and Conflict in Belfast**

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### **Editorial note**

This working paper is the result of an independent piece of research investigating the role of sport in cities affected by conflict. Nonetheless, the work is closely related to 'Conflict in Cities' research and the fieldtrips were generously funded by 'Conflict in Cities'.

### **Biographical note**

Lefkos Kyriacou worked as a research associate for 'Conflict in Cities and the Contested State' and is now a researcher at The Centre for Urban Conflicts Research (UCR), an interdisciplinary centre based in the Department of Architecture, University of Cambridge. He is a registered architect practicing in London having worked on a number of projects including schools, houses and churches. Lefkos is a Bye Fellow and Director of Studies for Architecture at Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge. Email: [lgk20@cam.ac.uk](mailto:lgk20@cam.ac.uk)

# Football Frontiers: Competition and Conflict in Belfast

Lefkos Kyriacou

**Abstract.** Association football<sup>1</sup> has long been identified as a universal sport; FIFA, the sport's international governing body, has more 'member nations' than the International Olympic Committee or United Nations<sup>2</sup>. As well as ubiquitous, the game is a deeply place-bound phenomenon with a particularly strong connection to the city; conceived in nineteenth and twentieth century urban environments, the foundations of contemporary club football remain in cities and are a major part of everyday urban life. Connected to its universality, rootedness in place and presence in the everyday is football's capacity to be associated with conflicting groups within contested and divided urban environments.

This working paper aims to open up a discussion on the role of football within the particular urban condition of contested cities shaped by ethnic, religious and national conflicts. The focus is a case study of senior club football in Belfast and the paper is in two sections. Firstly, a spatial history of football in contested Belfast aims to establish the sport as an arena for the dynamics stemming from urban conflict and segregation. Secondly a study of the contemporary inter-communal city derby reveals how competing clubs associated with conflicting urban groups are able in small ways to transcend the intransigence associated with the territoriality of the divided city in which they are situated.

*Keywords:* **Architecture, Belfast, Cities, Conflict, Football.**

## Introduction

The type of conflict that I am concerned with in this paper involves the contestations and struggles of communities, identified here in ethno-national terms, who are living in the same city; the conflict can turn violent but is not defined by violence. Understanding the nature of football in cities affected by ethno-national conflict can reveal the role of this urban phenomenon in channelling rivalries and ameliorating conflict, or exacerbating divisions when flashpoints during and beyond the match lead to violence and unrest.

How these dynamics play out varies greatly in different urban, political and socio-economic environments but a hitherto under-studied factor is the nature of different types of conflict present in these cities that can, in varying degrees, unfold through their football clubs. Whilst specialists in sports studies and social sciences have looked at football and conflict there has been little work done by architects and urban experts in this area. I am focussing on football specifically in cities and in this case cities affected by ethno-national conflict.

As an indicator of the 'conflict factor' within the United Kingdom, during the 2010/11 season the average cost of policing Rangers v Celtic fixtures in Glasgow

was £372,925 (Strathclyde Police, 2011), where club support falls along sectarian lines. This figure was nearly two and a half times the average cost of policing the North London derby, Arsenal v Tottenham Hotspur (Metropolitan Police, 2012), a fixture with comparable attendances but where club allegiance is largely disconnected from broader ethno-national, religious or political identities and ideologies. Furthermore 85% of policing costs for Rangers v Celtic matches in 2010/11 were incurred beyond the stadium, and this does not include acts of terrorism, related to football and sectarianism, such as letter bombs sent to Celtic staff in 2011<sup>3</sup>. Whilst Glasgow is not a divided city insofar as it is not afflicted by residential segregation, societal divisions in the form of sectarianism are made manifest through its football clubs. Furthermore, football and sectarianism in Glasgow are closely linked to the conflict in Northern Ireland and the divided city of Belfast, which is the focus of this paper.

It is important here to explain how I understand football as urban. It is not simply that football happens in urban areas. Football clubs are identifiable in territorial terms, for example city rivals in Liverpool or Manchester can be referred to as the red or blue 'half of the city'; an urban image seen through the prism of football. But football's association with the city is more than language used to express territoriality. Football clubs are defined by their place in the city: the history, culture, identity and demography of the neighbourhood and community in which they are situated. In turn the environment around a football ground can be shaped by the club's presence. Shops and bars become branded and landmarks of club identity, such as monuments, memorials and even museums can be established. Municipalities, the police and clubs themselves must also manage the mobility of large crowds on match day, involving large-scale traffic management and security operations. Equally the journey to the game for many fans is a special and ritualised part of their everyday lives.

Football's role in ethno-nationally contested cities is conceived here in the context of Pullan's notion of 'frontier urbanism' that is primarily characterized by 'the settling of civilians as frontier populations, and the use of urban spaces and structures to promote a particular power and to foster confrontation' (Pullan, 2011: 31). I am interested in contributing to the question of how institutions and frontiers in contested cities are drawn together in their architecture and urban structures through an examination of football in Belfast. Pullan argues that societal rifts in contested cities have a need to be expressed and examples such as museums of national struggle can be seen as preferable to violent conflict even if the stories they tell are

aggressive and incendiary (Pullan, 2011); in a similar vein this paper will examine the conflation of Belfast's frontiers and footballing institutions.

Segregation is a major area of study in cities and contested cities in particular whilst the sporting landscape is perhaps not sufficiently recognised as an urban phenomenon arising from segregation. This paper aims to contribute to the existing literature in two key respects. Firstly, to link football studies and urban studies and secondly to use football to shed light on ethno-national contestation, contributing to the growing literature on 'divided cities'. Methodologically, I have drawn inspiration from Conflict in Cities and the Contested State (CinC), a multi-disciplinary research project including specialists in architecture, urbanism, politics, sociology and geography. CinC has undertaken several years of fieldwork in contested cities such as Belfast, Jerusalem and Nicosia, a large part of which has been observing, recording and reflecting upon everyday activities and situations that take place in the city as a way of understanding the nature of the contestation on the ground. CinC methods of research include site observations, graphic documentation, interviews and visual analysis of the city. For this paper, urban club football was chosen as the area of study, as opposed to international competition, as it is a useful lens for analyzing the role of sport in everyday city life.

In his work on Arab football clubs playing in Israel, of which there are several hundred, Tamir Sorek identifies that 'the soccer sphere is constructed to serve as an enclave of integration, in which the Palestinian citizens of Israel attempt to suspend their national identification as Palestinians; and in doing so, maintain inwardly and outwardly a circumscribed display – in time and space – of civic partnership with the Jewish majority' (Sorek 2007, 5)<sup>4</sup>. Within the urban context of this paper, the inclusive/integrative potential of sporting competition is also a key theme for football in Belfast, whether as a border-transcending phenomenon, a reinforcer of difference or a paradox that accommodates both. This paper is not a typological study or architectural history of football stadia but an investigation into the spatial and temporal dimensions of football in the contested and divided urban environments of Belfast.

The aim is to better understand how the urban structures of sport are overlain by and interact with the topography of a divided city. It is hoped that this investigation can contribute to the broader question of whether the spatial practices of inherently adversarial football supporters can be constructively inclusive rather than only intensifying conflict in cities. This study investigates the interrelated roles of place and conflict in sport. Violence, contested topographies and associated shifting urban demographics have certainly impacted on Belfast's football clubs and their

associations with the city's communities and neighbourhoods. Conversely the sport has demonstrated a capacity to amplify, channel and transcend Belfast's divisions.

The paper is in two sections. The first section is a history of how the footballing landscape of Belfast has been severely damaged by the Troubles yet has shown a capacity for resilience and transformation through on-going conflict. The sub-sections look at the context of Belfast's clubs within a divided city, the death and commemoration of a major club from West Belfast, the manifestation of mainland British clubs within the city and how Belfast's clubs have been transformed and conceived through conflict.

The second section emerges from a year-long study of the Irish Football Association Premiership season (2012/13), focussing on existing inter-communal rivalries in Belfast that are played out through the sport. The sub-sections look at the architectural and urban structures that accommodate the matches between the city's clubs and the spatial practices that surround two inter-communal football rivalries.

## **1. A spatial history of football and conflict in Belfast**

### **1.1 Introduction: divided Belfast, football city**

Football is the most popular individual sport in Belfast although the amalgamation of different Gaelic sports is a major pastime for the Catholic, nationalist community. Although rugby functions across Ireland, Protestants primarily play it in the north whilst the majority of Catholic involvement is in the Republic of Ireland (Cronin 2001, 39). Despite falling attendances at football matches in the city since the Second World War, a large proportion of Northern Ireland's population, Protestant and Catholic alike, play an active role in the sport which has made football in Northern Ireland the focus of several studies by academics working across disciplines including sociology, law, politics and history that have been invaluable references in carrying out this research. This paper aims to add to the existing literature on football and conflict in Northern Ireland by looking at the spatial manifestations of the sport in the architecture and urban fabric of Belfast.

Senior club football in Northern Ireland falls under the auspices of the Irish Football Association (IFA). The IFA, founded in Belfast in 1880, is the world's fourth oldest football association and was the governing body for the whole of Ireland until partition of the island in 1921 when the Football Association of Ireland was formed to regulate the sport in the Irish Free State.

Belfast's footballing landscape can be perceived as a cluster of small semi-professional and amateur clubs playing in a weak provincial league when compared to the global might of the English Premier League or Glasgow's 'Old Firm', Celtic and

Rangers. This is in part due to the relatively small size of Northern Ireland's football territory, severed from the rest of Ireland after partition and further eroded by sectarian conflict that has seen major clubs disband or relocate south of the border whilst others have been severely damaged. Conversely with six senior football teams, Belfast had as many clubs within its national division in the 2012/13 season than any other city in Europe with half the Irish Premier League comprised of teams from Belfast. The importance of the sport in the city can be further gleaned from the naming of Belfast City Airport after George Best, one of the world's most celebrated players who grew up in East Belfast and whose memory remains revered by some members of both main communities.

Despite the sport's popularity, senior football in the city is visibly damaged by the long-term neglect of its football grounds that has resulted in major dilapidation of the stadia. Safety legislation introduced in Great Britain after the 1989 Hillsborough disaster was not enforced in Northern Ireland until 2009 when over 60% of the 70,000 seats and standing spaces in five of Belfast's main football grounds were deemed unusable due to disrepair and non-compliance with safety standards (Northern Ireland Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure 2006)<sup>5</sup>. As a result, regardless of demand, football matches in Belfast cannot currently be played in full stadia. This situation has proved the impetus for a range of projects in planning or implementation stage to repair, rebuild and develop the city's grounds in the hope that safer, fuller stadia could play some part in rejuvenating the sport.

In addition to the problems with physical infrastructure and facilities, Belfast's football clubs are, to varying degrees, associated with one or other of the city's conflicting communities and affected by their location within a divided city. It is important here to note that branding Belfast's football clubs with overarching ethno-national identities requires caution. The city's clubs do not operate exclusionary policies with respect to the players that represent them rather the association with Protestant and Catholic communities reflects the predominant demography of the club's fan-base. The location in the city is intrinsically linked to this given the highly segregated working class neighborhoods in which most of Belfast's football clubs are based, also meaning that local club support is largely the preserve of the city's working class.

The importance of football in Northern Ireland is not easily defined. The sport is immensely popular yet its senior clubs are small and face significant challenges. The teams themselves are not selected through exclusionary policies but there is no club that can be identified as truly mixed in terms of its support. The impact of such



uncertainty on the clubs' urban loyalties and their situation in the city is certainly a theme that has informed this research.

A thread throughout Belfast's football history is the perceived bias, within the Catholic, nationalist community, that Northern Ireland's football authorities have acted strongly in favour of clubs with Protestant fan-bases [Cronin, 2000]; whereas supporters of clubs with a Protestant fanbase, such as Glentoran and Crusaders would argue that only Linfield has been favoured in this way<sup>6</sup>. This perception of Linfield, whose home is Windsor Park in South Belfast (figure 1), is reinforced by the continued use of their home ground as the national stadium of Northern Ireland.



*Figure 1*

*Windsor Park, home to Linfield and the Northern Ireland national team, located in The Village area of south Belfast © Conflict in Cities*

The area around Windsor Park is known as The Village and until the property boom of the late 1990s was a predominantly working class Protestant neighbourhood<sup>7</sup>. Despite recent demographic changes (Bairner, 2006: 164), the area around Windsor Park still bears signs of loyalist allegiance in the form of flags, graffiti and murals<sup>8</sup>. In 1985, Linfield signed a 100-year lease with the Irish Football

Association to play home internationals at Windsor Park, giving them a significant financial advantage over their rivals<sup>9</sup>. Furthermore Linfield operated a longstanding, unofficial sectarian recruitment policy, the only club to do so over an extended period, and despite the prominent signing of a local Catholic player in 1992, the perception remains: Windsor Park is an iconic site for unionists and ‘an alienating space in the eyes of most nationalists’ (Bairner, 2006: 161). Equally, during the Troubles the perception of Linfield as the establishment’s favoured club actually resulted in Protestant fans from rival clubs, such as Crusaders, favouring teams from predominantly Catholic areas, such as Derry City and Cliftonville, over Linfield (Sugden and Harvie, 1995: 14); in these cases football appears to actually undermine the ethno-national divide.

Football in Belfast has strong connections with Glasgow, a city with its own sectarian rifts. For the Catholic, nationalist community, the genesis of (Glasgow) Celtic and its development into one of Europe’s most storied clubs has been the inspiration for the formation of Celtic clubs in Northern Ireland, including both Belfast Celtic and Donegal Celtic in Belfast. (Glasgow) Celtic was a club formed for Irish migrants living in the east end of Glasgow in the late nineteenth century, championing Irish culture and nationalism since its inception. Glasgow’s Celtic Park was built by the voluntary efforts of Irish labourers with a contemporary report likening the new ground to ‘leaving the graveyard to enter paradise’ whilst turf was brought over from Donegal and planted with shamrocks in the new pitch (Inglis, 1996: 432). Celtic’s longstanding rivalry with Rangers, the club of the establishment with a major Protestant fan-base, was mirrored in Belfast until 1949 by Belfast Celtic’s rivalry with Linfield.

It is important to make the distinction again that sectarianism in football in Belfast is not so much embedded in the teams but in the urban situation of the club: the supporters, location and even the establishment of the football ground and building of the stadium. We will see in this paper that football clubs in Belfast are deeply connected to the place in which they are situated. Furthermore the historical relationship between football clubs in Glasgow and Belfast makes the important point that new and distant places can be absorbed into the ‘tradition’ of a local club. The verse that Irish Patriot Michael Davitt recited in 1892 at the symbolic planting of Irish turf at Glasgow’s Celtic Park encapsulates this phenomenon. The verse is composed from the point of view of the turf and addresses the club and its supporters (Bradley, 1998: 18):

‘On alien soil like yourself I am here;  
I’ll take root and flourish of that never fear,

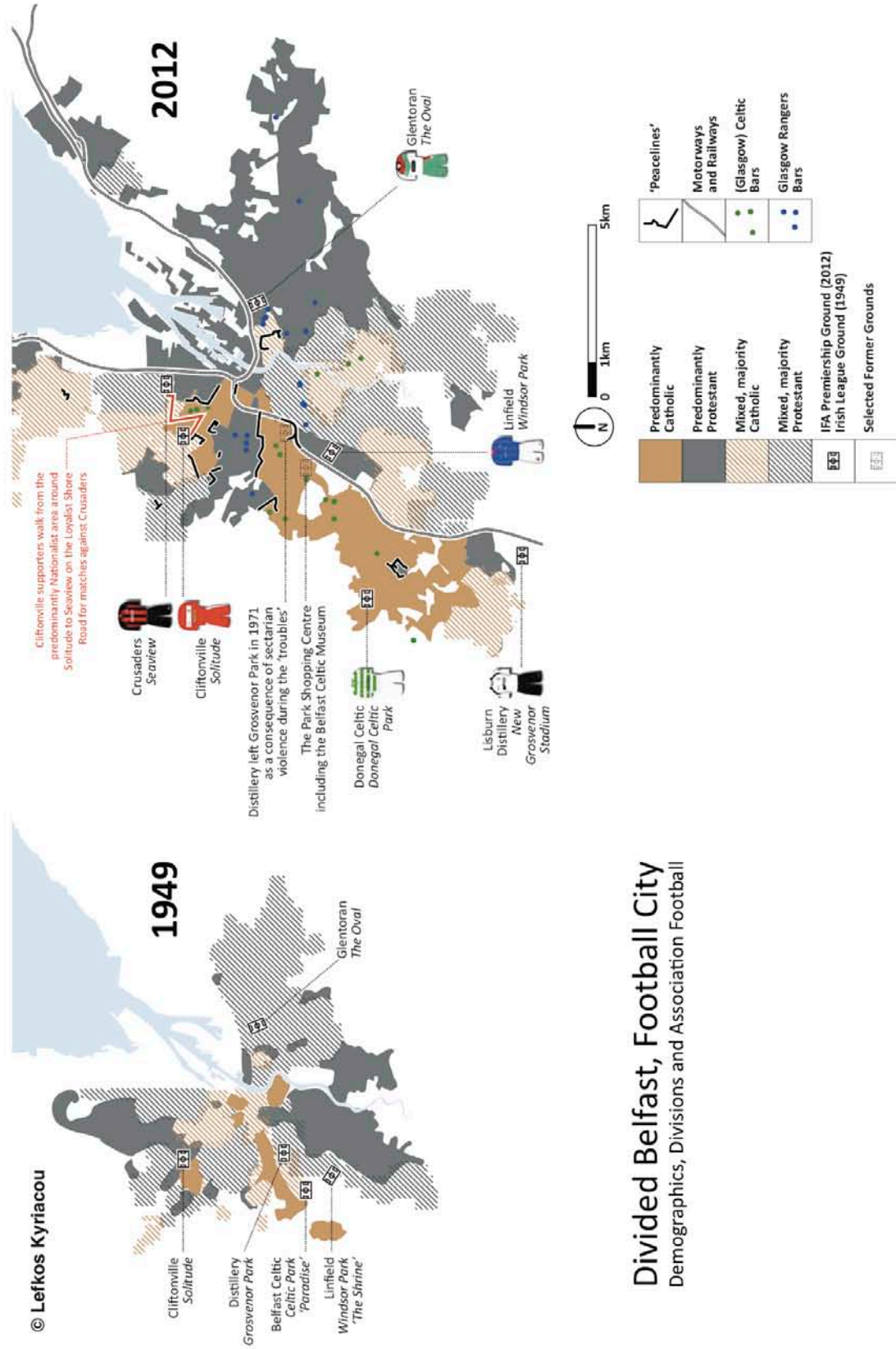
And though I'll be crossed sore and oft by the foes  
You'll find me as hardy as Thistle and Rose,'

## **1.2 Football in West Belfast: the death and memorialisation of Belfast**

### **Celtic**

The disappearance of Belfast Celtic, one half of the city's 'Big Two' along with Linfield, until its disbandment in 1949 is a notorious example of the impact of urban conflict on sport. Yet despite its death as a sporting entity over 60 years ago, the club has followed an unusual urban trajectory and maintained a spatial presence in the contemporary city. Football clubs are enduring urban institutions and their grounds have proven to be resilient public spaces. In British cities clubs have been known to relocate, although usually over small distances and within the same urban area. Attempts to move a football club over a great distance or to another city is met with significant resistance from supporters. A much rarer scenario is that a club disbands but even where this has happened, new clubs have tended to form at the same ground or by the former fanbase (Stefan Szymanski, 2009)<sup>10</sup>. So for a major football club and its ground to be completely erased as with Belfast Celtic is a highly unusual and traumatising urban and sporting phenomenon. Established in the late nineteenth century the club were based in Catholic West Belfast, for the most part at Celtic Park off the Falls Road. Belfast Celtic enjoyed a significant level of sporting success: crowds of up to fifty thousand, numerous domestic trophies and international recognition on overseas tours. Inextricably linked to the Belfast Celtic story was the sporting rivalry with clubs supported by predominantly Protestant communities, most notably Linfield, who played a short walk away across Donegall Road (figure 2a).

In 1920, Belfast Celtic along with football clubs from Dublin withdrew from competitive football during the Irish War of Independence. The withdrawal followed violent incidents that had occurred at matches involving these clubs (Coyle, 1999: 46). Belfast Celtic returned to the Irish League, now severed from the south, for the 1924-25 season and enjoyed significant success on the field up until their board took the decision to leave the League again after the annual Boxing Day/St Stephen's Day fixture against Linfield in 1948. Tensions would have been high around this fixture following the political changes taking place south of the border with the *Oireachtas* severing constitutional ties with Britain and declaring Ireland as a republic. The match at Windsor Park ended in a pitch invasion by Linfield supporters who attacked several Celtic players and broke the leg of Celtic's Protestant centre-forward Jimmy Jones having pulled him from the pitch into the terraces<sup>11</sup> (Cronin, 2000: 67).



## Divided Belfast, Football City

Demographics, Divisions and Association Football

Figure 2  
Demography, divisions and association football in divided Belfast:  
(a, bottom) 1949; (b; top) 2012 © Lefkos Kyriacou

Following this violence Belfast Celtic's position was deemed untenable by their board who set about selling the team's leading players to English and Scottish clubs before announcing a withdrawal from the league. The club's board and the IFA may not have envisaged the decision to be permanent, but once the team had disbanded in 1949 Belfast Celtic never reformed competitively. A combination of factors meant there was never a 'right time' for the club to reform: sectarian tensions would have needed to de-escalate and logistically there were administrative procedures to undertake for the club to re-enter senior football (Coyle, 1999: 122-123).

After the club's disappearance, Celtic Park functioned as a greyhound track until 1983, when the ground was redeveloped as a shopping mall called the Park Centre; a long, slow death for a major urban institution. Despite not kicking a ball for over sixty years, Belfast Celtic lives on through a society established in 2003 that maintain an active website and social media presence. The society, largely comprised of people that never saw the team play, states on its website that it is 'living proof that the Grand Old Team is not forgotten' ([www.belfastceltic.org/history](http://www.belfastceltic.org/history)). The cultural activity of the Belfast Celtic Society centres on commemoration of the club in West Belfast, the focal point of which is the Belfast Celtic Museum. Incongruously located within a commercial unit in the Park Centre on the site of the former stadium and between a clothing and gift card store<sup>12</sup>, the museum exhibits tell the story of the club and include memorabilia such as kits, photographs, programmes and newspaper articles (figure 3). The space at the back of the museum is set up as a small stage where a play on the Belfast Celtic story is performed that celebrates and commemorates the lost rivalry with Linfield<sup>13</sup>. The backdrop includes banners from both clubs and the focal point is a street sign pointing to the 'Shrine' and 'Paradise', the popular monikers given to Windsor Park and Celtic Park respectively<sup>14</sup>.

In 2012 the society launched the Belfast Celtic Trail in West Belfast comprised of fifteen commemorative green plaques called 'Belfast Celtic Circles' that were erected along the length of the Falls Road. The plaques take in the broad hinterland of the club including the Park Centre, the graves of its most famous players, both Catholic and Protestant, along with clubhouses, bars and shops historically associated with the club<sup>15</sup>(figure 4). John Bale, building on Yi-Fu Tuan's idea of 'topophilia', has argued that once football clubs are formed in a neighbourhood and community, they become deeply rooted in that place (Bale, 1993). Belfast Celtic are not a living football club but they remain rooted in the urban memory of the city and are actively commemorated in the streets, bars, cemeteries

and commercial spaces of West Belfast. The memorialisation of Belfast Celtic provides a counterpoint to another example of the relationship between conflict, memorialisation and sport in Belfast: the plan to build Northern Ireland's new 'national' sports stadium on the former site of the Maze prison. This proposal was an attempt to re-imagine an urban space loaded with divisive and sectarian meaning as a site of reconciliation (Bairner, 2006). However the idea was hotly contested and ultimately abandoned in favour of regenerating the city's existing stadia<sup>16</sup>.



*Figure 3*  
*Commemorating Belfast Celtic: the Belfast Celtic Museum during the launch of the Belfast Celtic trail through West Belfast © Lefkos Kyriacou*



*Figure 4*  
*A 'Belfast Celtic Circle' on the grave of Celtic goalkeeper Tommy Breen at the entrance to the Milltown Cemetery © Lefkos Kyriacou*

In the aftermath of Belfast Celtic's dissolution, Distillery Football Club became the nearest alternative for Celtic supporters (Sugden and Bairner, 1993: 84). Grosvenor Park was located just over a kilometre away from Celtic Park but in a mixed area at the volatile seam between Catholic and Protestant neighbourhoods (figure 2a). The influx of Catholic fans on match days led to violent flashpoints that eventually resulted in Distillery leaving their ground in 1972. After a series of temporary homes, the club resettled in the Belfast suburb of Lisburn and rebranded as Lisburn Distillery, incorporating a phoenix rising from the flames into their new crest. But with Distillery's resurrection in the urban periphery and the razing of a second stadium in West Belfast<sup>17</sup>, a football vacuum for the Catholic community had been established in the heart of the city (figure 2b). The Catholic, nationalist football fan-base in Northern Ireland was further eroded by Derry City's departure from the Irish League before restarting competitive football in 1985 south of the border in the League of Ireland.

### **1.3 The manifestation of English and Scottish clubs in Belfast**

"If you're a Rangers fan come in and have a beer, if you are Celtic, forget about it." *A guide addressing a bus of tourists on the Shankill Road in 2008*<sup>18</sup>

Catholic football supporters would have been fragmented in a number of ways by the events surrounding Belfast Celtic, Distillery and Derry City. Some would have abandoned football through a disdain or disinterest in a sport that could no longer guarantee a viable place for their clubs to play competitively in Northern Ireland (Cronin, 2000). Others would have focussed their energy on the exclusively nationalist Gaelic Sports, furthering segregation in the city (Sugden and Harvie, 1995). Many fans, from both communities, that could not abandon the sport they loved looked overseas to British clubs, some to cities with less obvious sectarian associations such as London, Liverpool and Manchester but a great number to Glasgow and the 'Old Firm' of Celtic and Rangers, where support falls along sectarian lines (Sugden and Harvie, 1995: 10).

The support for football clubs is highly visible in the day-to-day life of the city. Throughout Belfast, a significant number of adults and children wear replica football shirts in their everyday lives, outside watching or playing the sport. Many are the shirts of English teams, some are Belfast clubs but the large proportion are shirts of Celtic or Rangers which are an indicator that you are in the heart of a predominantly

Catholic or Protestant community<sup>19</sup>. The following of English and Scottish clubs has been greatly facilitated by cheap travel that enables the more devoted fans to attend matches by plane or ferry. But it is the ubiquity of televised games that are screened throughout the city's bars, pubs and social clubs, closely associated with particular teams, which has the most profound effect on Belfast's urban landscape with most Celtic and Rangers bars located in predominantly Catholic and Protestant neighbourhoods respectively (figure 2b)<sup>20</sup>.

Amongst Belfast's numerous bars and pubs, certain establishments celebrate their heroes, sportsman and combatants alike loudly and in tandem. In these instances, the shop fronts and drinking rooms are transformed by murals and photographs into shrines for those that died fighting in the Troubles and other conflicts whilst the 'proxy warriors' (Hoberman, 1986: 6) of association football and Gaelic games are depicted alongside them (figures 5 and 6). The energy and passion of Belfast's support for British teams and Glasgow's 'Old Firm' in particular is channelled within the city through its pubs and social clubs. Unlike the urban frontier of the stadium on match day this situation, in inter-communal terms, is an isolated experience with no opportunity for contact or confrontation. Possibly the most significant impact of Belfast Celtic's disbandment is that Belfast lost a great inter-communal sporting rivalry but the sport did not lose its sectarian rifts. Now the major sporting rivalry between Belfast's conflicting communities is played out through a footballing frontier in Glasgow and separately within the social clubs of Belfast.



*Figure 5*

*Times Bar, a Glasgow Rangers pub on the predominantly Protestant York Road with murals commemorating fallen soldiers and celebrating Northern Irish footballers George Best and David Healey © Lefkos Kyriacou*





*Figure 6 (bottom)*

*A portrait of Joe McDonnell, provisional IRA volunteer hanging in the Donegal Celtic social club next to photos of the team © Lefkos Kyriacou*

#### *1.4 Football clubs conceived and transformed through urban conflict*

The footballing landscape of Belfast was irrevocably damaged by the violent collapse of its footballing frontiers resulting in the disappearance of Belfast Celtic and relocation of Distillery. But football is an urban phenomenon so the city itself was scarred by the loss of two football grounds and the impact on the surrounding communities and neighbourhoods both symbolically and economically. However into this vacuum two clubs have emerged over the course of the recent conflict that are associated with the city's Catholic, nationalist communities: Cliftonville from North Belfast and Donegal Celtic from West Belfast.

Donegal Celtic, in terms of Belfast's sporting history, is a nascent institution situated in and founded during the urban expansion of West Belfast during the Troubles. Housing development on the edge of the city during the 1960s and 70s required expansion into the city's green belt. Such a planning proposition is contentious at the best of times but was greatly exacerbated in this case by sectarian concerns as the housing provision was intended for the city's Catholic community and as such would result in the territorial expansion of nationalist communities in West Belfast (Boal, 1996: 158). Donegal Celtic and its identity were formed by those

settling into these new estates, with the club and surrounding streets named after places in County Donegal in the Republic of Ireland<sup>21</sup>.

A renewal of the city's longstanding association with (Glasgow) Celtic was embodied in the team's green and white hoops, the Celtic cross on their crest and pre-match huddle, customs and imagery adopted from the mother-club and captured in a mural at the entrance to their ground<sup>22</sup> (figure 7).



*Figure 7*

*The mural at the entrance to Donegal Celtic Park; the entrance of the clubhouse is concealed by a masonry wall, constructed as a shield from gunfire.*

© Lefkos Kyriacou

Despite its name, traditions and location, Donegal Celtic operates a non-sectarian policy with regards to player recruitment and Protestants have represented the club since its founding, although its fan-base is firmly based within West Belfast's Catholic, nationalist community. Unlike Belfast's established senior football clubs conceived in the urban milieu of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the genesis, development and struggles of Donegal Celtic are intrinsically linked to a changing city in the midst of the Troubles. It was an aim of the founding members to provide a football team for the local community settling into the new housing but also a forum wherein locals could organise events and entertainment during the darker days of the city's history and when the area was lacking employment and inward investment<sup>23</sup>.

Donegal Celtic was established as both a sports club and social centre incorporating a *shebeen*, an illicit drinking den that developed as the club became more popular into a licensed club and community hall. The club facilities attracted

football fans and the wider community from neighbouring Catholic areas such as Andersonstown<sup>24</sup>. For the first thirty years of its existence, Donegal Celtic performed impressively as a junior and intermediate club in cup competitions<sup>25</sup> but the club's annual application for entry into senior football was rejected on more than ten occasions by the Irish Football League whilst clubs with fan-bases in Protestant, unionist communities were being admitted. It was not until 2002, after a joint legal challenge with Lurgan Celtic from County Armagh, backed by the Equality Commission, that the Irish Football League accepted both clubs into senior football (Hassan, 2002: 80). The authorities were likely concerned about a 'Celtic' Team from Belfast returning to senior football in the city and the potential recurrence of sectarian flashpoints. Certainly Donegal Celtic faced numerous challenges during the Troubles<sup>26</sup>.

In 1990, the IFA rearranged an Irish Cup fixture between Donegal Celtic and Linfield amid security concerns over staging the game in West Belfast. Instead Donegal Celtic's 'home' tie was played at Windsor Park, in what was then a predominantly unionist area, despite a legal challenge from the club's board. Violent clashes in the stadium during the game made international news<sup>27</sup> and formed the opening of Sugden and Bairner's book on sport and sectarianism, demonstrating the potency of football to exacerbate sectarian tensions (Sugden and Bairner, 1993). During the Troubles, the facilities at Donegal Celtic Park were also subjected to arson attacks and shootings and a two-foot deep masonry wall was built to shield the clubhouse entrance from gunfire<sup>28</sup> (figure 7).

Whilst security concerns were transforming the face of the club, the popularity of Donegal Celtic during the height of the conflict grew and its facilities were enlarged as Catholic communities avoided travelling outside their neighbourhoods making the clubhouse and its facilities an important social hub for the local area<sup>29</sup>. The development of Donegal Celtic's ground during this protracted period of conflict in Belfast's history is an example of segregation offering 'an environment conducive to ethnic entrepreneurship' (Boal, 1996: 155) but also one of urban regeneration in deeply problematic circumstances.

Whilst Donegal Celtic's formation and subsequent struggles were born out of the Troubles, Cliftonville's status as the nationalist community's favoured team in Belfast emerged through the city's transformation by the conflict. Despite the emergence of Donegal Celtic, Cliftonville enjoys support in west Belfast as well. Cliftonville play at Solitude<sup>30</sup>, North Belfast, in a once mixed area that gave the club a Catholic and Protestant fan-base. North Belfast was deeply fragmented during the Troubles with divisions hardening between the two communities including the

proliferation of the physical barriers or 'peacelines' (figure 2b). The resulting urban demographic shifts transformed the Cliftonville Road around Solitude into a predominantly Catholic area, in the process losing the club the great majority of its Protestant fan-base that no longer felt safe enough to attend games ([www.theguardian.com/football/blog/2013/apr/11/cliftonville-solitude-treble-belfast](http://www.theguardian.com/football/blog/2013/apr/11/cliftonville-solitude-treble-belfast))<sup>31</sup>.

During the Troubles, Cliftonville's fixtures became increasingly volatile with the IFA imposing a ban on Linfield playing in North Belfast and, like the infamous cup game with Donegal Celtic, Cliftonville were forced to play their 'home' fixtures against Linfield at Windsor Park. Despite the challenges facing Cliftonville during the Troubles, Solitude endured as a football ground whereas Cliftonville Cricket Club, located on the Cliftonville Road, was forced out of their ground after sectarian attacks in 1972. The site, still known locally as the 'cricky', now functions as a GAA facility. The value of football's universality in the context of a contested city is evident in this case. The football ground resisted demographic change arising from conflict whereas the cricket field, a site that was targeted for its association with the Protestant, unionist community, is now used for Gaelic sports.

Despite the difficulties and dangers faced by Belfast's 'Catholic' clubs it would not have been a viable geographic proposition for a club so far from the border with the Republic of Ireland to follow the path of Derry City, reject domestic football and join the League of Ireland<sup>32</sup>. Instead Donegal Celtic and Cliftonville persevered through significant challenges to continue playing football in the city in which they were founded and where their fan-base is rooted (Hassan, 2002: 78). Belfast Celtic and Derry City are examples of how Catholic-supported clubs could not successfully compete in Northern Ireland, let alone on an equal footing with predominantly Protestant supported teams. Cliftonville and Donegal Celtic demonstrated resilience during the Troubles and although neither club have come close to matching the success of Belfast Celtic, both remain established in senior football and supported by the Catholic communities of north and west Belfast. As a result the IFA can accommodate a level of inclusive footballing competition in Belfast and given the concentration of senior clubs in Belfast, dozens of city derbies take place every season<sup>33</sup>. Whilst violent sectarian incidents remain infrequent at matches, football remains a focus for inter-communal rivalry.

Furthermore, this research has identified the important role of some sports grounds in Belfast that serve the function of a community centre as well as a setting concerned with sporting spectacle. In particular, the reciprocal relationship between football clubs and the Catholic, nationalist neighbourhoods of West Belfast explains

the resilience and flourishing of Donegal Celtic through the Troubles but also the extraordinary 'life after death' of Belfast Celtic.

This analysis of the relationship between sport and contested Belfast seems to indicate that the landscape of club football in the city is a topography shaped by conflict and segregation. Conversely I am interested in whether football as an urban phenomenon can itself shape the conflict within a divided city. Can the inclusive competition we have observed in Belfast lead to the breaking down of division or does it serve to exacerbate the conflict? Belfast has a long and violent history of conflict, and football presents a hitherto under-used lens through which to analyse how people reproduce urban spaces, create and contest frontiers and channel confrontation in the city. In the following section we will examine this phenomenon through an analysis of the architectural and urban structures of contemporary inter-communal rivalries between Belfast's football clubs: the local derby games.

## **2. The spatial and temporal dimensions of the Belfast derby**

### **2.1 Introduction: The architectural and urban structures of segregated congregation**

A Belfast football derby requires fans travelling to visit grounds in parts of the city that they would not otherwise venture to, including Catholics from north and west Belfast travelling south and east into predominantly Protestant areas and vice-versa. Travel between grounds is largely, but not exclusively, undertaken by coaches organised by clubs or their supporters' groups that makes security at matches more manageable for the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), focussing their resources at the point of entry to the ground<sup>34</sup>.

The environment around the city's stadia has been affected by the need to accommodate security risks associated with such fixtures. The city's oldest grounds: Solitude (1890), Glentoran's Oval (1893) and Windsor Park (1905) have become embedded in residential neighbourhoods through urban expansion and densification in the form of housing and transport infrastructure (figures 1 and 2). Twentieth century urban planning in Belfast was rooted in notions of defensible space and in the context of a city becoming increasingly fragmented along ethno-national lines, the implementation of these ideas served to exacerbate the city's divisions (Boal, 1996: 157). Communal segregation persists in Belfast with large areas of the city comprised of wards that are over 90% Catholic or Protestant (O'Dowd and Komarova 2011). Notably Belfast's football grounds are situated in these highly segregated wards in predominantly Catholic or Protestant working class neighbourhoods, whilst the nature of a local football derby requires clubs and their supporters from different

parts of the city to travel to and congregate in these grounds (figure 2b). The environment around Belfast's football grounds has been adapted to incorporate particular architectural and urban structures to deal with this situation. At the Oval and Windsor Park, these take the form of protected narrow pedestrian pathways that cut through the surrounding area and link the visitors' section of the ground with major road connections. This facilitates controlled policing points in the stadium and on the street, whilst ensuring the separation of home and away fans in the environment around the football ground.

Policing and security measures are a feature of football grounds in most urban areas, not only divided cities, but the extreme nature of the physical manifestation of this in some of Belfast's grounds is notable. The starkest example is the 200 metre long covered walkway from the Oval's Railway Stand to the Dee Street Bridge through the residential Mersey Street area of east Belfast (figure 8). The walkway is encased in mesh, security fencing and barbed wire to separate the route of the travelling fans from the surrounding area on match day. In 2011 new social housing was constructed between the stadium and railway bridge by a major Belfast developer. The design of the 88 dwelling estate accommodates the visiting fan's pathway along its length with a crenelated, windowless brick wall that runs along the back of the two storey semi-detached houses, separating the estate from the pathway and re-enforcing the sense of segregation and fortification.



*Figure 8*

*The route to the visiting supporters' stand at Glentoran's Oval running alongside a housing estate. © Lefkos Kyriacou*

Spatially this pathway and similar enclosed routes for visiting fans at Windsor Park and to a lesser extent at Solitude<sup>35</sup> are an amalgamation of checkpoint-type architecture and the Belfast ‘peacelines’ albeit with the important temporal quality of only being used on match day (figure 9). Nevertheless they are permanent structures in the city that support the segregated congregation of the local football derby in the particular urban condition of divided Belfast. Re-imagining these crude architectural devices within the context of regenerating Belfast’s football grounds will be an important challenge for architects and planners. As O’Dowd and Komarova have found in their work on regeneration in Belfast, conflict over residential development remains intransigent and deep-rooted but there is ‘evidence of transition to less exclusivistic attitudes in leisure and work spaces’ (O’Dowd and Komarova, 2011: 2013). It could be argued that football clubs have an opportunity to develop more careful interventions in the environment around their grounds that can accommodate temporal segregation during matches without the highly visible apparatus of security that is currently employed.



*Figure 9  
The architectural and urban  
structures of the Belfast  
football derby: the fortified  
pathway for visiting  
supporters connecting  
Bouchier Road with Windsor  
Park. © Lefkos Kyriacou*

The manner and degree in which football and conflict interplay is fluid with the sport able to amplify or transcend divisions between conflicting communities. Urban space seems to be central to this, requiring an understanding of the reciprocal relationship between fans and the physical fabric that supports football in cities. Football scholarship during the Troubles identified the integrative potential for the sport in Northern Ireland, but the evidence at the time pointed to the sport's capacity to exacerbate the conflict (Sugden and Bairner, 1993). My study has included a year long analysis of the 2012/13 Irish Premier League season which has brought into focus the transformation of how city derbies between 'Catholic' and 'Protestant' clubs play out in the grounds and the wider urban area. Two case studies will examine football derbies that took place in north and west Belfast during the 2012/13 season, areas that suffered greatly during the Troubles and which still experience sectarian tensions and unrest (O'Dowd and Komarova, 2011).

## **2.2 Donegal Celtic v Linfield**

'...the day an RUC man turns up at a local GAA club, no doubt sporting an orange sash with union jack patterned shorts and socks, will no doubt be the day that heralds the unification of Ireland' (Lennon, 1989)

Although football is quite different to Gaelic sports in that both communities have always played an active role in it, in 1989 it would have seemed quite fanciful to suggest that unionists would have been welcomed into the clubhouse of West Belfast football team Donegal Celtic, yet an analysis of contemporary football in Belfast suggests that the sport may be becoming more inclusive.

Architecturally and functionally Donegal Celtic Park is similar to Belfast's Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) club grounds. The facilities include two large halls for social functions whilst spectators are accommodated in small brick and steel stands in contrast to the traditional typology of terraced earth embankments and grandstands at Belfast's older football grounds. Like the GAA grounds it is as much a community facility and social club as it is a sports ground. Inside the club's main bar, a portrait of Joe McDonnell, a provisional IRA volunteer who died in the 1981 hunger strikes is prominently displayed clearly identifying the space with Irish Republicanism (figure 6).

The enlargement of Donegal Celtic Park during the Troubles has proven to be unsustainable since the de-escalation of violence after the 1998 Good Friday Agreement. The increased mobility of the surrounding communities and the greater options available for leisure and social life in the city mean that the social club and halls are rarely full. As a result, the club has hit serious financial problems



exacerbated by the intense policing of away supporters that denies the club any revenue from visiting fans using the home clubhouse and in the case of games against better-supported teams such as Linfield, it has restricted ticket sales<sup>36</sup>.

The challenges that the club faces are exacerbated by their peripheral location but it is not just distance from its potential fan-base in the heart of the Falls Road. Support for a club of Donegal Celtic's size is heavily reliant on the area it is based in and they are situated in the heartland of the GAA. The GAA have been associated since their inception with consolidating Irish culture and nationalism through their own games and GAA clubs and bars in West Belfast are clearly identifiable as religious and nationalist symbols named after Catholic saints, Irish patriots and revolutionaries.

There are spatial dimensions to the GAA's exclusivity in that club membership is largely based upon the parishes of the Roman Catholic Church and the use of GAA grounds for sports such as football and rugby is prohibited (Gaelic Athletic Association Official Guide, 2012: 61)<sup>37</sup>. Until 1971 the GAA enforced rule 27 that stipulated any member who played or encouraged 'imported' sports such as Association Football would be suspended from the association. Despite the deletion of 'The Ban' rule, the board at Donegal Celtic believe that a parochial attitude persists amongst the GAA in that a Catholic-run football club would encourage a complementary engagement with Gaelic sports amongst their members, but GAA clubs do not reciprocate<sup>38</sup>.

This situation led Donegal Celtic's board in the 2012-13 season to experiment with switching their home and away stands to let coaches for travelling supporters park within the football ground and allow a greater number of visiting fans to see the game in the larger home stand, increasing match day revenue and giving them the opportunity to socialise afterwards in the clubhouse. The board did not anticipate problems with football supporters from rival clubs potentially mixing with local fans and had the support of the Irish Football Association. Invitations to social events at Donegal Celtic Park have been accepted by administrators and supporters' groups of teams associated with the city's Protestant communities, including Linfield and Crusaders, and in the words of the Donegal Celtic chairman, some 'came wearing poppies and this has not been a problem'<sup>39</sup>.

The first re-orientation of the home and away stands for a match against Linfield saw the travelling supporters' coach remain in the ground during the match. Union Jacks filled the east 'home' stand whilst the club's flag, the team crest within an Irish Tricolour, remained flying (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/0/football/20212450>). Donegal Celtic once had to play a 'home' fixture against Linfield in the then

predominantly Protestant area of south Belfast, a match that ended in violence. Now Linfield supporters have experienced being 'at home' in a west Belfast sports ground that is ostentatiously identifiable with the Catholic, nationalist community, in a fixture that passed without incident. This example may be no more than a small act of economic expedience from a financially disadvantaged club but it demonstrates resistance on the part of Donegal Celtic to transcend the conflict and compromise in order to better the club's standing. Certainly this particular inter-communal sporting rivalry has transformed over the past two decades into a less volatile urban frontier. The difficulties football faces can rescind as broader conflicts de-escalate and this case hints at the importance of protecting the fragile threads of shared urban life in contested cities such as football derbies, even when in the darkest times they appear to be nothing but trouble.

### **2.3 Crusaders v Cliftonville**

The city's most established contemporary inter-communal football rivalry is the North Belfast derby between Cliftonville and Crusaders who finished first and second respectively in the 2013 Irish Premiership. Based at Seaview on the predominantly Protestant Shore Road, Crusaders were elected to senior football following the withdrawal of Belfast Celtic from the Irish League. On derby day at Seaview, Cliftonville fans eschew coach travel in favour of walking to the game<sup>40</sup>. The route starts at Solitude, moves along the predominantly Catholic Cliftonville and Antrim Roads, zig-zagging to negotiate the obstacle of a major North Belfast peaceline before turning onto Skegoniel Avenue, a predominantly Protestant area (figure 2b). Here the PSNI escort the fans onto the Shore Road to Seaview<sup>41</sup>.

Fixtures such as this are identified by the Irish Football Association as high risk at the start of the season and are subject to months of planning involving meetings between club officials, the IFA, PSNI and representatives of the local community where the match is to be played (Irish Football Association, 2014). The concerns of the Skegoniel residents are central to the discussions but whether these are legitimate safety fears or the result of sectarian intolerance is debatable. However, as a result of the advanced planning and seasonal repetition, the walk is now a choreographed ritual with one online fans forum discussing the game in early December and anticipating the route and involvement of the PSNI (news.bbc.co.uk/dna/606/A78332286).

Claims have been made of provocative chanting by Cliftonville supporters but there is no evidence of violent behaviour on either side, whilst Unionist politicians have questioned whether the march provokes problems, asking if the supporters

should be bussed to the game instead (<http://belfastmediagroup.com/'bus-reds-fans-into-seaview'-proposals/>). This has been resisted but the profile of this fixture has been raised above the level of other city derbies and been drawn into the broader conflict.

In the aftermath of the civil unrest that surrounded the decision to stop permanently flying the Union flag at Belfast City Hall in 2012, there were a number of violent loyalist protests in the city. After a hiatus, a small group of 'flag' protesters<sup>42</sup> targeted the North Belfast derby by taking up a strategic position at the entrance to Seaview before the match. As a result, the PSNI called off the game due to safety concerns, as most Cliftonville fans had been unable to gain access to the stadium. Both clubs were united in their condemnation of the protesters for hijacking the event, with a Crusaders director calling it a 'vindictive act...awful. Not just for the two clubs but for the civic life of Belfast' ([www.bbc.co.uk/sport/0/football/21494807](http://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/0/football/21494807)).

The disruption of the North Belfast derby was caused by a politically motivated group and not football supporters of the rival teams. The 'flag' protesters usurped a high-profile inter-communal sporting fixture to be attended by thousands of people so they could amplify their own sectarian agenda. For Belfast and Cliftonville this is not a new phenomenon. Following the re-routing of Orange Marches in 1996, loyalists obstructed Cliftonville supporters gaining access to a match in East Belfast; a moment described by Bairner and Shirlow as when 'territorial politics became even more closely involved with sport than ever before' (1998: 170). Football supporters and political activists are drawn to city centres and have the capacity to congregate and significantly affect and control urban environments; consequently, as these cases demonstrate, it is in urban public spaces where sporting rivalries and broader religious, political or ethno-national conflicts are drawn together.

In the first section of this paper, we concluded that football is transformed by conflict and segregation, whilst the research and analysis of the contemporary inter-communal derby seems to indicate that football, as an urban phenomenon, has the capacity to shape the conflict. The football pitch is ubiquitous and one of the most instantly recognisable symbols in any city yet as an urban public space in Belfast it has the capacity to become a proxy for the wider conflict; venerated by supporters' groups and perceived as estranging for those that oppose them. The identity of the stadium can be reinforced by its architecture, history and the visual and vocal expression of football fans that have the capacity to mobilise in large numbers and take over public spaces within and beyond the football ground. This study of the temporal and spatial conditions of football in Belfast contributes to an understanding

of how urban spaces can empower certain types of 'frontier populations' in contested cities.

Beyond the stadium, the hinterland of a football club varies across urban environments, conflict situations and football cultures. Even under the duress of ethno-national conflict, as in Belfast, football clubs remain place-bound and enjoy a reciprocal relationship with the wider city. Belfast is able to accommodate a degree of inclusive competition meaning that teams associated with conflicting urban factions can regularly play against each other at football grounds embedded in urban environments that are divided or contested. Belfast's football supporters will traverse the city, negotiating divisions, to congregate in stadia albeit separated according to allegiances. One could conceive the case of football in Belfast as segregated congregation both as a sporting and urban phenomenon; a lens that could be adopted for analysing how urban space creates frontiers and channels confrontation in other contested/divided cities.

### **Conclusion**

The significant quality that footballing competition possesses that sets it apart from violent conflict is that football clubs do not want to eliminate their rivals; victory is sought on the pitch but maintaining the competition is inherent to sport. Glasgow Rangers and Celtic, one of Europe's bitterest sporting rivalries, have been known as the 'Old Firm' for over century because there is a longstanding perception that the two clubs profit from maintaining a hegemony over the Scottish game. Rather than suffering from the deep-seated sectarian rivalry between their fans both clubs benefit from the conflict that surrounds them. The 'Big Two' label used for inter-communal rivalry in Belfast also reflects this phenomenon.

When connections form between football clubs and political, ethno-national or religious groups, the nature of the football frontier transforms. The dark side of this relationship is that certain clubs can accommodate groups of fans that exhibit racist, sectarian and other ideologically radical views and engage in violence; football in Belfast has certainly experienced such problems. Conversely dozens of Belfast derbies take place every year and despite visual and vocal expressions of ideological sentiments including chanting and flag-waving, these matches tend to pass off without major incident reflected in the relatively insignificant cost of policing Belfast's football matches (Police Service of Northern Ireland, 2012)<sup>43</sup>; in stark contrast to the multi-million cost of policing the Union flag protests in 2012/13. ([http://www.psni.police.uk/directory/news-archive/news-2013/february-2013/general\\_\\_cost\\_of\\_policing\\_union\\_flag\\_protests\\_07\\_02\\_12.htm](http://www.psni.police.uk/directory/news-archive/news-2013/february-2013/general__cost_of_policing_union_flag_protests_07_02_12.htm)).

We have also seen evidence of football's influence in the contested environments beyond the stadium. In our example of the north Belfast derby, the street presence of loyalist 'flag' protesters and the match day walk of the Catholic, nationalist Cliftonville supporters both contribute to an ethno-national identity. The difference is that football by nature involves rules that both clubs have accepted, in this case extending to a planned match day walk that negotiates a 'peaceline' between conflicting communities.

This paper has discussed how in a contested city such as Belfast, football clubs are affected by segregation and associated with conflicting groups. Conversely inter-communal football rivalries are not subject to the 'zero-sum' thinking associated with political territoriality that renders conflict more intractable (Anderson and O'Dowd, 2002). When it is effective, the competitive nature of the sport can allow victory and defeat on the field without the perception of gains and losses in the context of the conflict; although it is in contested urban spaces beyond the stadium, as demonstrated with the North Belfast football derby, where the everyday life of a sports fan can intersect with politics and sectarianism.

It would be naïve to assume the kind of contact that football enables with the 'Other' will lead to reconciliatory interactions between conflicting groups particularly since cordiality is rarely associated with rival football fans. Instead the day-to-day mechanics of club football allow interactions between football fans and organisers that provide, as Davide Sterchele has identified with unified club football in Bosnia-Herzegovina, 'fragments of normalization and de-ethnicization of the everyday life' (Sterchele, 2013: 986). This is not necessarily advocating an integrationist approach to sport in conflict areas. Bairner has demonstrated with his work on the Northern Ireland national team that Catholic footballers are able to 'benefit from the advantages of playing international football with Northern Ireland without necessarily recognizing the legitimacy of the polity which the "national" team represents' (Bairner, 2013: 227). Equally, there are Protestant football fans of clubs other than Linfield who do not support the Northern Ireland national team as they play at Linfield's ground. Integration in this case does not change the fact that many of Belfast's footballers and supporters continue to live apart in the city. The issue that this paper raises is rather than striving for integration, inclusive sporting competition, particularly through club football, can support inter-urban competition with the potential for conflict transformation.

Reflecting on a Glentoran fixture against Donegal Celtic during the Troubles, Ian Ridley concluded that 'the game is not free from its environment, indeed is often a product of it. Even if not a force for good - although it surely was today - it can still

be a welcome release' (Ridley, 1992: 168-169). This reaction describes football's rootedness in place and society but also its capacity to positively channel conflict in cities. The 'welcome release' can be identified as the other side of a coin that accommodates conflicting factions. As an urban phenomenon we see evidence of the resilience of football grounds as remarkably robust city spaces within cities affected by conflict and the reciprocal relationship with clubs and their supporters who are able to resist the challenges presented by living in a divided city in order to engage with intra-urban and inter-communal competition. Conversely, when seen in terms of the urban frontier, Pullan posits that it is the same qualities associated with vibrant city centres that appeal to radical groups, within which we could consider including fanatical football supporters, that also 'provide the urban possibilities for resisting or overcoming the worst excesses of frontiers' (Pullan, 2011: 32). Football in Belfast seems to embody this paradox; it is a resilient interface that is emerging from the shadow of sectarianism, whilst remaining a conduit for the city's communities to play out their differences.

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<sup>1</sup> Football will be used as a shorthand for Association Football or Soccer

<sup>2</sup> In 2013 there were 209 member nations of FIFA, 204 National Olympic Committees and 193 member states of the United Nations.

<sup>3</sup> Statement on football policing costs by Strathclyde Assistant Chief Constable Campbell Corrigan in article by James Cook, 'Cost of policing Old Firm fixtures was almost £2.4m', *BBC News*. Available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-glasgow-west-14251800>

<sup>3</sup> Statement on football policing costs by Strathclyde Assistant Chief Constable Campbell Corrigan in article by James Cook, 'Cost of policing Old Firm fixtures was almost £2.4m', *BBC News*. Available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-glasgow-west-14251800>

<sup>4</sup> Football in the divided and contested city of Jerusalem is fractured and deeply affected by the city's many complex and overlapping borders. Football plays an important but largely separate role for Jerusalemites from the Israeli West and Palestinian East sides of the city. The author has carried out research for a study of segregated urban competition in divided cities and a paper is being developed.

<sup>5</sup> Stadium safety legislation was not deemed necessary in Northern Ireland until 2006 and was weakly implemented until the enforcement of the Safety at Sports Grounds Order in 2009.

<sup>6</sup> A recurrent point made by interviewees during fieldwork interviews in Belfast, August 2012.

<sup>7</sup> The demography of The Village has shifted since the property boom of the late nineties and early noughties with houses being bought or rented by young professionals and students, including many Catholics.

<sup>8</sup> Observed during Conflict in Cities fieldwork.

<sup>9</sup> Windsor Park will continue to be used as both the home of Linfield and the Northern Ireland national team with £25,000,000 of government funds ear-marked for redevelopment of the stadium. This proved a contentious decision with rival clubs. Crusaders FC launched a legal challenge arguing that the financial assistance would unfairly extend Linfield's dominance in local football although an agreement was later reached between the club and the IFA.

<sup>10</sup> Only three senior English football clubs have ceased to exist since 1923 and this was during the Great Depression. Two of the towns that lost clubs had new clubs formed within a few years at the same ground. The economist Stefan Szymanski highlights this remarkable resilience when comparing football



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clubs with the top one hundred companies of approximately the same period where only half of these have survived.

<sup>11</sup> The ferocity of the attacks was attributed to inadequate policing by the Royal Ulster Constabulary and Linfield's failure to segregate supporters from players.

<sup>12</sup> Observed during Conflict in Cities fieldwork at the Belfast Celtic Museum on 04.08.2012.

<sup>13</sup> Observed during Conflict in Cities fieldwork at the Belfast Celtic Museum on 04.08.2012.

<sup>14</sup> Religious conflict is synonymous with Belfast but it is a city devoid of actual holy sites whilst Windsor and Celtic Park were given the monikers 'the Shrine' and 'Paradise' that reflect a form of popular sacralisation of these meeting grounds that indicates a level of devotion to institutions not commonly seen in other sites of civil society.

<sup>15</sup> The trail was inaugurated with an open-top bus tour of the 'circles' narrated by an actor playing a young Charlie Tully, one of the club's most celebrated players who was transferred to (Glasgow) Celtic after the 1948 events at Windsor Park. Tully's grave is also commemorated with a plaque and his portrait features in a Belfast Celtic mural on a residential street in the St James area of West Belfast under the edict 'If you know your history'.

<sup>16</sup> A planning debate has surrounded the future of national sports stadia in Northern Ireland with proposals to relocate home football internationals from Windsor Park to a new 'national' sports stadium that would also host Gaelic sports and rugby. Belfast city centre and the site of the Maze prison were considered as options, however the government ultimately decided to fund the redevelopment of existing national sports grounds: Windsor Park, Casement Park GAA stadium and the Ravenhill Rugby Ground.

<sup>17</sup> The former site of Grosvenor park has been replaced by housing.

<sup>18</sup> Observed during Conflict in Cities fieldwork.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* Whilst the sight of Rangers and Celtic shirts does indicate the demography of specific parts of the city, it should be noted that they are also highly visible in Belfast city centre.

<sup>20</sup> There are also pubs and bars that are associated with other football clubs. The Red Devil, a renowned Manchester United bar on the Falls Road, is a notable example.

<sup>21</sup> Lefkos Kyriacou interview with Chairman, Trustee and Public Relations Officer of Donegal Celtic F.S.C., 3 August 2012, Donegal Celtic Park, Belfast.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* (Glasgow) Celtic now use the four-leaf clover as their crest but have previously used both the Celtic cross, used by Donegal Celtic and the harp, used by Belfast Celtic. Although the similarities between Donegal and Belfast Celtic are evident, Donegal Celtic was never conceived as a revival of the Belfast club.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* The cup was the only competition where intermediate and senior clubs could potentially meet although this did not guarantee regular competition.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> For further information on the challenges facing Donegal Celtic in this period: Bairner and Shirlow 2001, 57-59.

<sup>28</sup> Observed during Conflict in Cities fieldwork.

<sup>29</sup> Lefkos Kyriacou interview with Chairman, Trustee and Public Relations Officer of Donegal Celtic F.S.C., 3 August 2012, Donegal Celtic Park, Belfast. A larger hall was constructed in 1984 that could hold a further 800 people and the club believe they could have accommodated an even greater capacity during this period.

<sup>30</sup> Lefkos Kyriacou interview with Caleb Hamman (postgraduate student carrying out ethnographic study of Cliftonville supporters at Queens University Belfast), Belfast City Centre, 3 August 2012. The site of the stadium was originally an orchard owned by a wealthy recluse. The site had a lone house on it that was called Solitude and the ground adopted this name.

<sup>31</sup> Although Cliftonville became a club strongly associated with the nationalist, Catholic community, they could not be denied access to senior football in the manner of Donegal Celtic, having played at Solitude since 1890. Cliftonville still enjoy small elderly following from within the Protestant community

<sup>32</sup> There would be significant security and administrative considerations for the IFA and the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) to manage fixtures involving clubs from the Republic of Ireland visiting Belfast on a regular basis.

<sup>33</sup> In the Irish Premier League, each team plays each other three times and possibly a fourth time at the end of the season depending on league positions. Additional Belfast derbies also take place during cup competitions. The city's most successful clubs, known as the 'Big Two', were Linfield and Belfast Celtic until 1949 with Glentoran, from a predominantly Protestant area of east Belfast becoming Linfield's major rival after Belfast Celtic's departure. Fixtures between Belfast Celtic and Linfield (until 1949), Glentoran and Linfield (present day), Cliftonville and Crusaders (present day) are held over Christmas every year.

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<sup>34</sup> Home fans are often kept in the stadium after the match whilst the away team supporters re-board their coaches, the opposite of how stadia are managed in English football.

<sup>35</sup> At Windsor Park, the protected pathway runs through a leisure centre car park, whilst at Solitude it cuts through an area of terraced housing.

<sup>36</sup> Lefkos Kyriacou interview with Chairman, Trustee and Public Relations Officer of Donegal Celtic F.S.C., 3 August 2012, Donegal Celtic Park, Belfast.

<sup>37</sup> Rule 5.1 on the uses of Association property

<sup>38</sup> Lefkos Kyriacou interview with Chairman, Trustee and Public Relations Officer of Donegal Celtic F.S.C., 3 August 2012, Donegal Celtic Park, Belfast.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.* The wearing of poppies is perceived as a loyalist identifier in Belfast.

<sup>40</sup> The Solitude to Seaview walk is not unique. Cliftonville and Crusaders supporters walk from the town centre to the Oval for games against Glentoran.

<sup>41</sup> Lefkos Kyriacou interview with Caleb Hamman (postgraduate student carrying out ethnographic study of Cliftonville supporters at Queens University Belfast), Belfast City Centre, 3 August 2012.

<sup>42</sup> The 'flag' protesters were a group of Ulster loyalists who held street protests following the decision, in December 2012, by Belfast City Council to limit the days that the Union Flag flies over Belfast City Hall. The disruption of the North Belfast derby was the only example of the group's interaction with sport.

<sup>43</sup> In response to a Freedom of Information Request regarding the cost of policing Irish League football matches, the PSNI stated, in reference to Windsor Park and the Oval during the 2010/11 season that only football matches which have the potential of disorder are policed by PSNI, of these the average cost of policing a match at Windsor Park was £1,711.55.