



## Yellow Space Belfast: negotiations for an open city

Sheridan, D., McKeever, O., Moloney, C., & Patzak-poor, J. (2007). *Yellow Space Belfast: negotiations for an open city*. Building Initiative Belfast.

[Link to publication record in Ulster University Research Portal](#)

### Publication Status:

Published (in print/issue): 01/01/2007

### Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

### General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via Ulster University's Research Portal is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

### Take down policy

The Research Portal is Ulster University's institutional repository that provides access to Ulster's research outputs. Every effort has been made to ensure that content in the Research Portal does not infringe any person's rights, or applicable UK laws. If you discover content in the Research Portal that you believe breaches copyright or violates any law, please contact [pure-support@ulster.ac.uk](mailto:pure-support@ulster.ac.uk).

# Yellow Space

—

## **Yellow Space**

Belfast: negotiations for an open City

—



—

## **Yellow Space**

Belfast: negotiations for an open City

—

# Yellow Space

## Belfast: negotiations for an open City

Published by Building Initiative, 2007  
All rights reserved. No part of this  
publication may be reproduced, stored  
in a retrieval system or transmitted in  
any form or by any means electronic,  
mechanical, photocopying, recording or  
otherwise without prior permission from  
the publisher.

ISBN 13: 978-85923-215-6



### Project Team:

Orla McKeever  
Conor Moloney  
Jürgen Patzak-Poor  
Dougal Sheridan

### Project Collaborator:

Antje Buchholz  
John Duncan  
Mark Hackett  
Michael Matuschka  
Deirdre McMenamin  
Miriam de Búrca

### Graphic Design:

Tonic, Belfast

Building Initiative would like to thank:

Kerstin Mey  
Declan McGonagle  
Tarla McGabhann  
Kyong Park

### Building Initiative

School of Art & Design  
York Street, Belfast BT15 1ED  
W: [www.buildinginitiative.org](http://www.buildinginitiative.org)  
E: [info@buildinginitiative.org](mailto:info@buildinginitiative.org)



'Yellow Space', a travelling installation which was first shown at Belfast Exposed, examines the possibilities for city living in Belfast. Around the world, the colour yellow is often used as a sign for useful or shared objects, for example a phone directory, a taxi, or a post-it note. Yellow is much more potent than the 'passive neutrality' of white, yellow denotes what could be called an 'active neutrality', a common ground created through usefulness. Yellow is the colour of consensus, utility, and access – exactly those qualities we expect to find and enjoy in a city. However these are also the qualities that are most under threat in all contemporary cities, not least Belfast.

Belfast's slow transition from 'troubled' city to 'lived' city is underway. However, the impact of thirty years of civil conflict continues to be felt as much in the current development of the city as it was during times of strife. Governance structures remain highly centralised and locally unaccountable; the development of civil society is inhibited by persistent sectarianism; and the economic life of the region continues to be distorted by state subvention and paramilitary intervention. These conditions are reflected in the formation of the built environment, where large state and corporate actors dominate development, where security mindsets produce fragmented spatial arrangements, and where 'cultural clientelism' opposes the integration of urban institutions and resources. The University of Ulster's advocacy group 'Building Initiative' opposes this politics of identity with a politics of place.

Therefore Building Initiative uses 'yellow space' as a metaphor for the kinds of spaces created by civil enterprise, and hence also for initiatives developed by Building Initiative in Belfast. The exhibition and events of 'Yellow Space' ask: how yellow is Belfast? and: how can Belfast become more yellow?

The series of events around the city in May/June 2006 aimed to catch the imagination with a bold and striking image based on the primary colour yellow. A multi-media exhibition at Belfast Exposed gallery ran in parallel to installations at Royal Avenue, St. George's Market, and Laganside, and provided the setting for a number of workshops and public discussions.

The exhibition aimed to develop public consciousness of urban environmental issues. It presented a critical analysis of development in Belfast since the peace process. A number of successful social, environmental, and construction projects from other cities were documented to explain alternative approaches. The exhibition also included specific initiatives for Belfast developed in partnership with a variety of institutions, groups, and individuals. These included ways to address: the consequences of retail development in the city centre; the problems at interface areas between the two communities; the environmental impact of bonfires; and the low environmental quality of towns and cities generally throughout Northern Ireland. In this way the exhibition demonstrated paths of initiative through which civil enterprise can resume its formative role in the built environment in Northern Ireland.

'Yellow Space' is produced by the Building Initiative team, an architecture group based at the School of Art & Design, University of Ulster, and supported by the National Lottery through the Arts Council of Northern Ireland's Special Initiative on Architecture and the Built Environment.

Building Initiative 2006

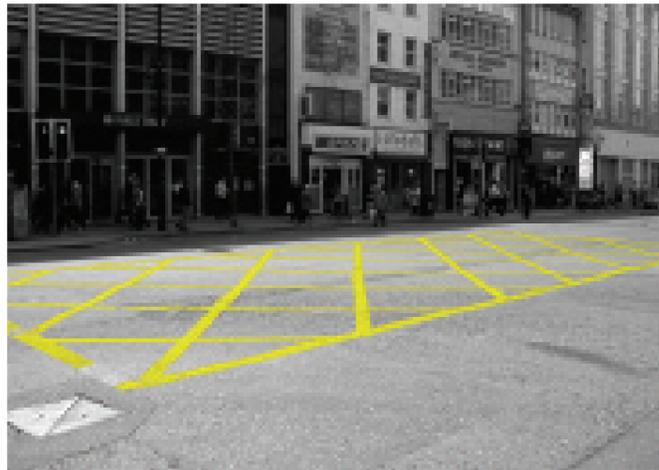
the colour Yellow  
denotes what  
could be called  
an active  
neutrality



# Yellow Space

Previous pages: Yellow Tools and Work Space. Yellow is used as a sign for things that are useful or shared

All around the world, the colour Yellow is used as a sign for things that are particularly useful and for things that it has been agreed to share. Yellow is the colour of consensus, utility, and access. If the colour White can be thought to represent the 'passive' neutrality of surrender, the colour Yellow denotes what could be called an "active neutrality" – a common ground created through usefulness – a Yellow Space. In this city where colour is loaded with meaning - Red, Orange, Green, Blue – could Yellow Space provide a new perspective? What could this mean for the quality of urban life?



More examples of yellow things are yellow taxi, yellow pages, yellow traffic sign, yellow phone box, yellow post box, yellow traffic cone, yellow subway train, yellow bus, yellow skip, yellow number plate, yellow reflector, yellow crane, yellow post-it...



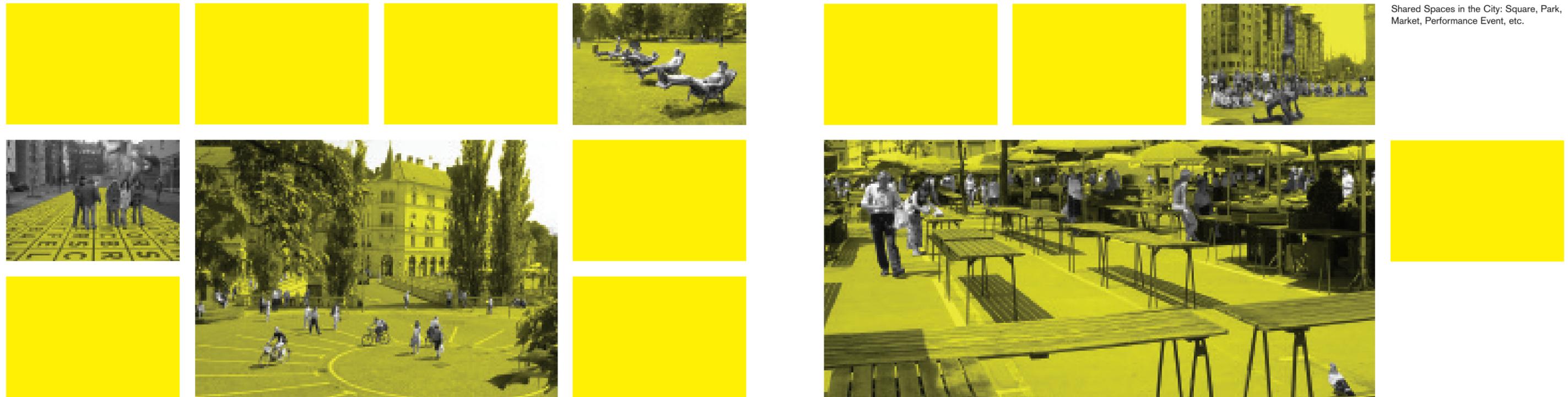
if cities had a  
colour, that  
colour would be  
yellow.



# Yellow is the Colour of Cities

Previous pages: Ljubljana. Sharing and negotiation create the opportunity for the riverbank to be universally accessed and enjoyed.

Urban life depends on sharing. We share the spaces, buildings, and services of the city because we benefit from pooling resources. However, different individuals and groups have different priorities, so there are many things that can only be shared by a continual negotiation of these differences. We agree to maintain and develop the shared resources of the city because they benefit everyone, and because they provide services and opportunities that often could not be provided in any other way. This is the nature of cities. So we could say that if cities had a colour, that colour would be Yellow.



Shared Spaces in the City: Square, Park, Market, Performance Event, etc.

Use of the built environment for the construction of emptiness .



# How Yellow is Belfast?

Previous pages: Unused space beside the river Lagan, Belfast. Lack of good urban design results in defensive and unstimulating environments

How Yellow is Belfast? In fact, many cities are becoming less Yellow. Around the world, the shared spaces and services of cities everywhere are fragmenting and splintering. The inherent diversity of cities is increasingly expressed in terms of exclusivity. Cities are becoming more separated by differences in identity and income, into areas where different norms of behaviour are acceptable, different expressions of identity are welcome, and different standards of service are expected.

of Maysfield Leisure Centre and arson of North Street Arcade. In Belfast this simply adds to the existing segregation of communities and uses the same techniques of separation: physical walls and barriers provided by large infrastructure (motorways, rail lines, rivers) and planning (residential cul-de-sacs, industrial estates and gated office parks) to divide communities by stealth. These techniques in effect use the built environment for the 'construction of emptiness' in the city.

This can be seen on the one hand in the recent development of Laganside and the Victoria Square shopping centre, and on the other, in the recent closure



**Laganside**  
A suburban office park developed on the city centre's most important waterfront site, isolated by trunk roads, railway tracks, viaducts, and the Lagan itself.



**Victoria Square development**  
Due to open in late 2006, this retail centre's main contribution to the diversity of the city will be an extended range of chain retail stores and high-street brands.



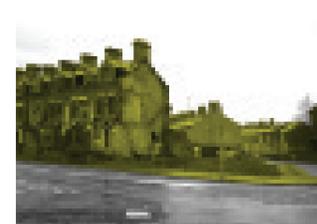
**North Street Arcade**  
This vibrant and colourful addition to the city's retail and social scene was closed in 2005 after almost total destruction in an arson attack.



**Maysfield Leisure Centre**  
Closed in 2005, this former cross-community facility occupied a valuable city centre site adjacent to one of the city's main train stations.



**Westlink Road**  
Infrastructural planning used as a device for community segregation, cutting off the city centre from the surrounding areas.



**An interface area**  
Urban blight through disinvestment: half-demolished houses on a residential street at the interface of Glandore Avenue/Skegoneill, North Belfast

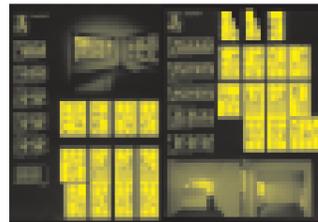
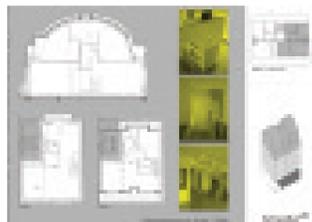
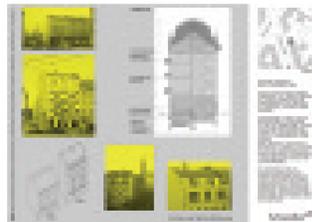
In many places,  
citizens themselves  
are taking the  
initiative.



# Urban Alternatives

Because similar challenges are being faced by most other cities, it is useful to look to other contexts for alternatives to this fragmentation. In many places, citizens themselves are taking the initiative. Through social, cultural, and economic work across the boundaries of identity, income, class, and ethnicity, people are building new 'communities of interest'. They are forging strategic alliances with 'others', not to undermine their community, but to strengthen it. Their projects include securing public spaces for universal use, opening up information technologies for wider access, providing different types of buildings responsive to different needs, decommissioning ideological symbols and spaces, and regenerating failing areas of the city as inclusive and integrated districts.

What they have in common is a type of civil enterprise that creates the kind of places we can think of as Yellow. It is possible to be part of a community, and be a citizen of the wider city. Planners too are catching up with the idea that planning can be 'bottom-up' as well as 'top-down'. People can invent their own practices of 'insurgent citizenship', coming together in new ways, for new reasons, and with new results. Citizens can transcend the urban patchwork of differences, and give shape to their own Yellow city.



**Pulross Area  
Playground Association, Brixton**  
Occupying a valuable wedge of land on the margin of a railway embankment, a broad and unlikely coalition of local people came together to claim the site as a cross-community resource.

**Schwedter Straße 26, Berlin**  
An initiative by a group of architects (BAR), to acquire, modernise and extend the building, which dates from 1870. The project was financed through grants from the city government's urban regeneration programme, self-finance, self-build 'sweat equity' by the architects, and through loans.



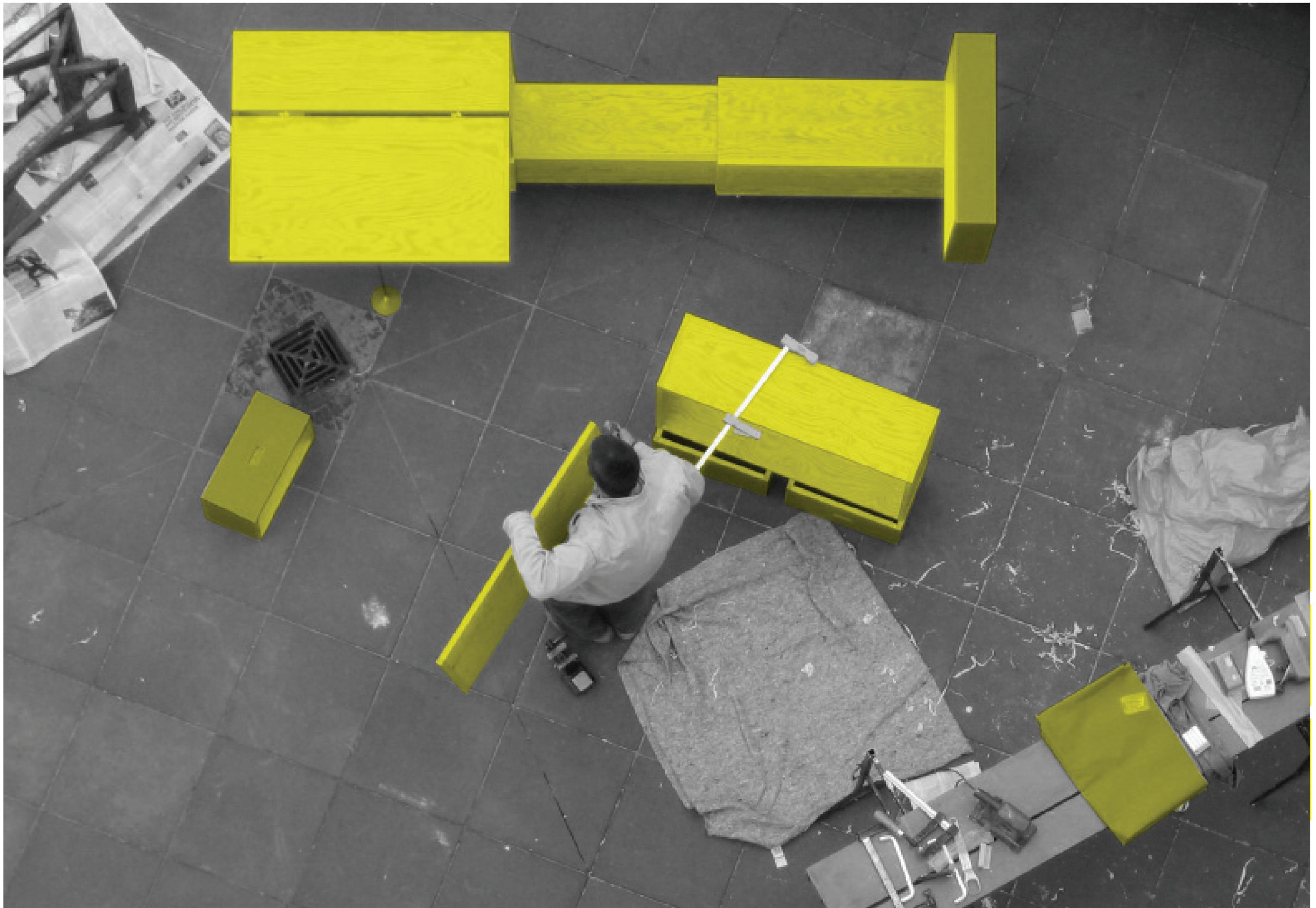
**KraftWerk 1  
Club for Building and Living, Zurich**  
A housing and employment co-op with a difference, where members live in large households of 15-20 people and share childcare, work, building maintenance, cars, and even food and entertainment.

**Smith and Others, San Diego**  
A combined design-property-construction company which has pioneered popular new residential building types, specifications, and arrangements, overlooked by the local real estate market.

**Statue Park Museum, Budapest**  
A unique outdoor museum for 'de-commissioned' statues from the communist era, the local referendums through which items were contributed gave rise to a profound democratic process.

**Borneo Sporenburg, Amsterdam, Netherlands**  
This project demonstrates how large-scale masterplanning need not necessarily produce large-scale architecture for large-scale commercial or corporate clients. Urban designers West 8 developed a regeneration plan for two former wharves in the eastern part of the docklands in Amsterdam. West 8 developed new building types of three-storey terraced houses, repeated in a great variety of dwelling modes by individual architects (from social housing to exclusive apartments), and with maximum variation in architectural design between different buildings.

**Belß/Lüdecke Straße, Berlin**  
Faced with its demolition, the residents of this once failing estate appointed their own architects (Baufrösche, Kassel) and led a regeneration project which successfully rehabilitated not only the buildings, but also the perceptions of the area and of its inhabitants.



# Building Initiative

'Yellow Space' is a concept developed by Building Initiative, a research team based at University of Ulster. The team has been looking at the possibilities for making Belfast more Yellow, and is applying some of the thinking from these examples in the development of real and polemic proposals for Belfast. Each 'building initiative' has taken shape in collaboration or discussion with local partner groups, organizations, and individuals. The intention is to extend the envelope of possibility rather than to impose a set of ideal models. The initiatives range in scope from education and advocacy projects to environmental improvement strategies, and from specific building projects to challenging planning policies. In each case the initiative attempts to engage

with actual conditions and real lives. The aim is to bring to consciousness a set of possibilities about the future of the city, and a range of ideas or ways to imagine how difference can be negotiated in the city. We also invite you to engage with the existing realities of Belfast as you know it, and generate ideas and commitments as to how to make Belfast a more open city. We see the challenges facing Belfast as particular but not unique, and could imagine a Belfast initiative providing stimulus for others in practically any contemporary city.

The Building Initiative project involves two modes of action: instrumental action, through our yellow initiatives; and communicative action, through yellow objects. We

have constructed a yellow object, to represent in a more practical and everyday way, how citizens can take the initiative in appropriating and determining their environment. The object we have constructed is a yellow news-stand which distributes free copies of the yellow press. It also comes apart to become a seating area and table, offering the possibility of temporarily claiming an urban space. It is mobile and will travel to different locations in Belfast, distributing yellow press and engaging with the urban context.



**Belfast consultation**  
The research team consulted widely through focus group, steering committee, and public meetings involving built environment professionals, art practitioners, and local activists. Curators Declan McGonagle, Kerstin Mey, and Kyong Park provided valuable mentoring as the project developed.



**Young Adult workshops**  
A series of creative workshops for homeless young people in short-term shelter accommodation, run in collaboration with Starting Point and the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, were aimed at developing understanding of how shared spaces can be designed and used. Significantly, this most marginalised social group is the only client we have found which entirely integrated members of the two communities.



**Northern Ireland Policy on Architecture and the Built Environment**  
The project team contributed to the Department of Culture, Arts, and Leisure public consultation on this document. The submission simply pointed out that not one reference is made in the draft to what is the single most significant influence on the built environment in Northern Ireland, namely the civil conflict and the associated sectarian identity politics and security regime.



**University of Ulster student project**  
The 2nd year student design project was used as a vehicle (of academic outreach) to increase students understanding and awareness of the importance of active shared public spaces. This involved the study and documentation of one of few examples of such a yellow space in Belfast, St Georges Market and the design of a new public Marketscape beside one of Belfast's underutilised neutral spaces of great potential the River Lagan.



**San Diego research**  
In March 2006 project team member Jürgen Patzak-Poor visited Ted Smith and his associates in San Diego. This practice has been creatively transforming the perception of urbanism in San Diego by demonstrating to lending institutions, the Downtown Redevelopment Agency, and homeowners that their strategy for city living is not only superior in architectural and urbanistic terms but also financially. More recently Ted Smith's commitment has also led to the development of a master course for Architect/Developers at Woodbury University, San Diego.



**"The Urban Ecology of Globalization" A presentation by Kyong Park**  
A self-proclaimed nomadic laboratory, Kyong Park, since 1998, has been traveling to work in different cities that are going through significant transition; from Detroit to East Germany, the Western Balkan and many more. His installations, videos, and urban research projects focus on the cycle and process of the decomposition and reconstitution of cities. Through devouring fresh and old territories, manifesting economic, political and cultural structures and little else. The belief that they can be controlled by designs and plans, either in democratic or totalitarian practices, he believes, is only partly true. Kyong Park presented a number of projects that explored the blurry conditions of Urban Ecology, an emergent field, which was then followed by an open discussion about the relationship between his work and the context of Belfast.

Could it be possible to  
give a new life to these  
contentious political  
symbols?



# Bonfire / Recycling Centre

Previous pages: The monumental form of the tower has obvious aspirations of power and dominance, competing with the chimneystacks, church spires and office blocks of the Belfast skyline.

<p><b>Challenge</b> Dominance of public space by sectarian interests and representations</p> <p><b>Context</b> Poor quality of public space in Belfast, particularly outside the city centre</p> <p>Low level of environmental quality and awareness in general</p> <p><b>Opportunity</b> Current efforts to address environmental and social issues associated with bonfires eg. Belfast City Council's Bonfire Pilot Project</p>	<p><b>Aim</b> To reassess the social value of the bonfire</p> <p>To reinterpret and reimagine the bonfire in a new progressive form</p> <p><b>Initiative</b> Proposal for a new type of public space unique to Belfast: a bonfire/recycling centre</p>
--	--

Unlike most construction, Belfast's urban bonfires are designed to be both a structure and an event. The autonomous production of a built form in the city (usually the exclusive domain of economic or state power), and its climax in pyrotechnics, are a unique and striking combination of Architecture and Theatre. In recent years, there has been a marked increase in the scale and ambition of bonfires. A wide variety of built forms has emerged, including a 'campanile', a Khmer temple, and a version of Norman Foster's "Gherkin".

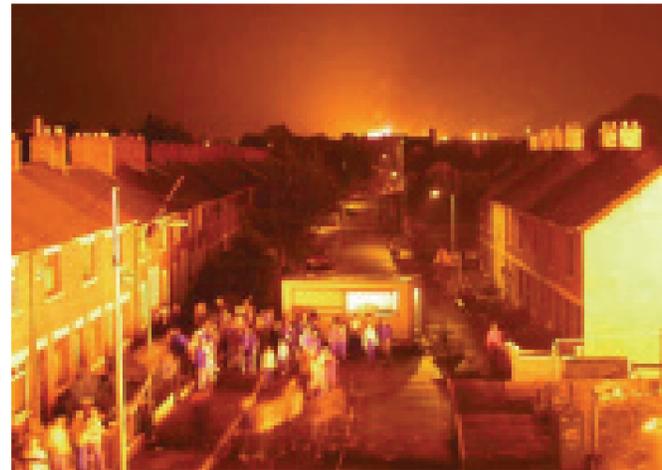
Could it be possible to give a new life to these contentious political symbols? Budapest's Statue Park Museum demonstrates how the meaning of contentious

political artefacts can be transformed through a change of context and a process of negotiation. Cultural expression can be disengaged from political expression. The city bonfire, when ablaze, begins in any case to shed its attached meanings and to become pure urban spectacle.

The bonfire's status as a cultural event is also qualified by concerns about public health and safety: the illegal dumping of waste materials, anti-social behaviour associated with the event, visual amenity, damage to property, and the environmental and health aspects of air pollution and toxic emissions. Parallels can however be found in other cultural contexts such as Pamplona's 'running of the bulls' whereby participants' safety and

issues of animal rights are deferred for the sake of cultural spectacle and tradition.

Events considered controversial, or in some way on the edge of state control, often become legitimised and normalised by incorporation into the city's cultural and administrative apparatus. In the case of Belfast's bonfires, this process of engagement has already begun. The City Council issues Bonfire Advisory leaflets, runs a "Best Kept Bonfire" competition, and recently launched a pilot project to address accessibility and safety issues around bonfires. There is close liaison between Fire Brigade, Police Service, City Council and the community representatives responsible for individual bonfires.



The Tates Avenue bonfire (2004), rising to a height of approximately 20 metres, displayed an accumulated knowledge both of the structural possibilities of the materials, and of the choreography of how they burn.

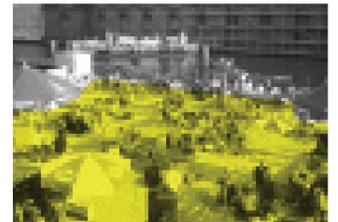
Unlike the other built forms of the city, the bonfires are designed both as structure and event. The production of a built form within the city (normally the exclusive domain of state and fiscal power), and the climax of a pyrotechnic event is an uncanny combination of Architecture and Theatre.

The next day this site is burned down and the sign for the new apartment building is gone.

The inhabitants next to the Tates Bonfire gather around kiosk selling food, and DJ playing music against backdrop of Belfast illuminated by bonfires.



Belfast's Bonfire sites can be placed in broader context by considering other examples where the normal rules and occupancy of urban space are temporally suspended by events that both animate, but also symbolically question and challenge the order of the city.



The Palio of Siena is a combination of ceremony and ritualistic competition, which takes the form of a horse race around the Piazza Del Campo. This involves the dynamic and dangerous spectacle of horses being raced bareback around the perimeter of this tight urban square. The element of danger is made explicit by mattresses, which clad the sides of the square to lessen the chance of injury.

The phenomena of Berlin's urban beaches play out the rituals of beach culture in bizarre contrast to their urban settings at a number of central locations on the banks of the river Spree. The associations of leisure, escape, and hedonism are intensified by the titillating contrast of these sandy expanses against the pompous backdrop of imperial Berlin.

Model of Prototypical Bonfire Recycling centre for Anadale Embankment site. This design was explored to provoke thought without assuming to be a resolved solution. This incorporates a recycling centre into a defined public space capable of hosting large public fires as well as allowing other public activities to develop around recycling such as car boot sales or garage markets. The space would also include children's playground and cheap rentable spaces for workshops, 2nd hand shops etc. to provide local business & employment opportunities. The landscape terraces would create an amphitheatre space suitable for other outdoor events such as theatre, cinema, or concerts. Allowing these locations to be used as public spaces on a more ongoing basis could potentially make them more inclusive.

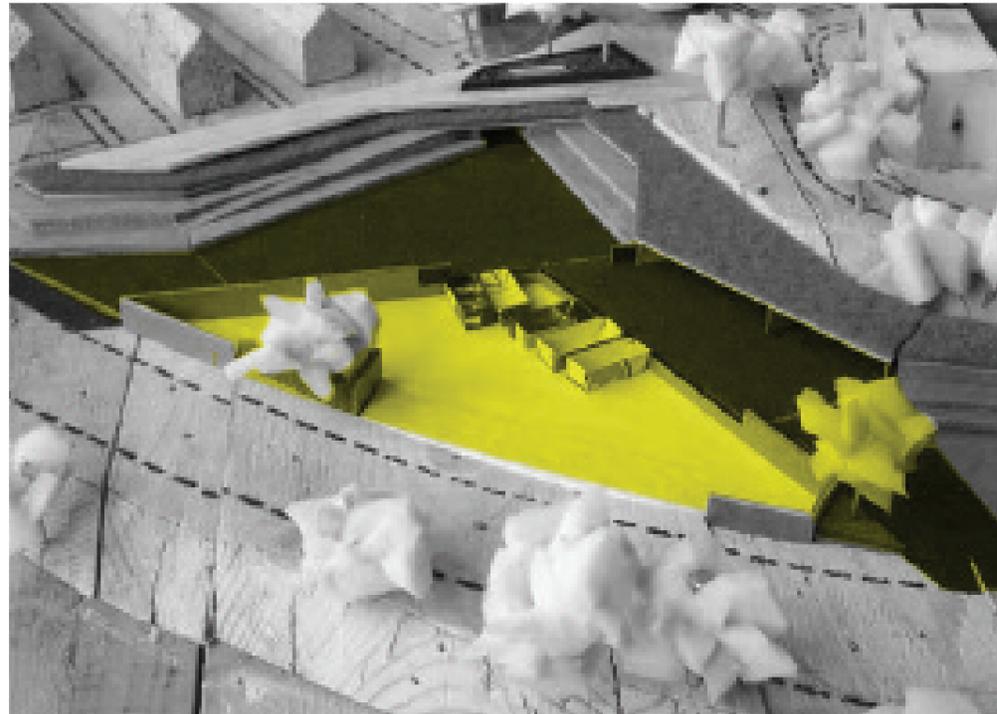
The production of bonfires is evidence of extensive 'grassroots' self-organisation. The level of co-ordination and co-operation required to accumulate, sort, and transform the detritus of the modern city into the urban spectacle that is the bonfires of 'the Twelfth' is a resource unique to Belfast. Many of the bonfires demonstrate an accumulated expertise both of the structural possibilities of materials, and of the choreography of how they burn.

The skills, enthusiasm, and organisational capacity required for bonfire construction are comparable to those required for recycling in general. In recent years, Belfast City Council has opened a number of public access recycling centres. These typically comprise a robust

surface with a large central sunken area to accommodate large containers for the numerous waste categories, with smaller depositing points located around the perimeter. This surface, animated by people bringing, categorising, and depositing their waste items, appears like a formalised version of the activities at bonfire sites where materials were carefully sorted into piles of varying constructional and flammable qualities in the lead-up to bonfire night.



Anadale Embankment bonfire site was chosen as a case study because it is surrounded by a number of different communities and ethnic groups, has a prominent position next to the river, and is utilised as an informal park.



This image shows how a recycling centre could be combined with a defined public space capable of hosting a large public bonfire. This would enable the control of what materials are burnt, and allow their orderly stockpiling. Belfast could develop its own unique sort of public space: a Bonfire-Recycling Centre, a public space based around the activities of gathering, sorting, storing, reusing, and periodically burning urban waste. A place that celebrates and re-enacts the culture of urban bonfires, while enabling it to absorb and embody new meanings, and to open up new perspectives on urban life.



# Civic Square, Civil Space: The Crucial Quarter

Previous pages: Urban Street Festival, Split, Croatia. The most valuable good that a society generates are public spaces be it schools, hospitals or public squares. Throughout the world public spaces are specific to the expression of the people using and occupying them.

<b>Challenge</b> Control of Belfast city centre by corporate and commercial interests	<b>Aim</b> To decommission the securitised city and reconnect its constituent parts
<b>Context</b> Lack of diversity of land use in the city centre as a result of ongoing security concerns	To build normal civil social spaces as a peace dividend for Belfast
Planning policy objectives to further reinforce the retail character of the city centre without a well thought out strategy for public space	<b>Initiative</b> Proposal for the reorganisation of the CastleCourt area with a new civic square for Belfast
<b>Opportunity</b> Consultation Process of Department for Social Development's North-West Quarter Masterplan	Proposal for development with a mix of retail, commercial, cultural, & residential space

Public Realm Strategy recognises the importance of the city centre as a place where it is relatively safe to 'be public', it appears to overlook the importance of this in a city where the disclosure of one's religious, community, and political identity continues to be problematic. Belfast can do more than simply invest in the familiar recipe of improved paving, street furniture, and public art. Shopping malls, car space, and trophy buildings epitomise a no-risk approach to the current production of urban space in Belfast. Government policy conspicuously avoids how civil conflict continues to impact on and be expressed through the built environment. Current and emerging policies on architecture, built environment, and public realm barely mention how profoundly the Troubles have distorted urban places. There is however an alternative to this

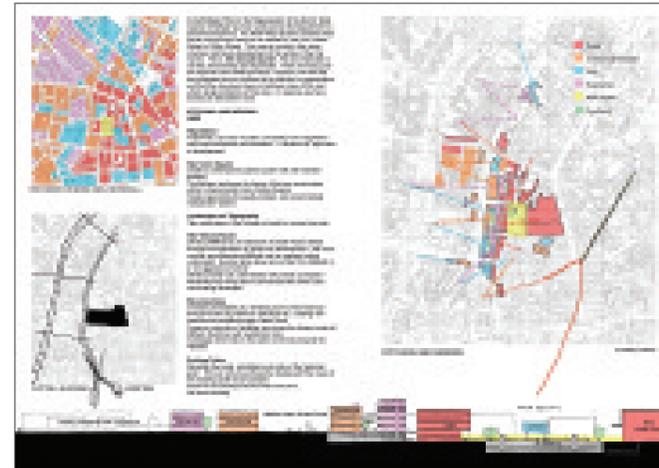
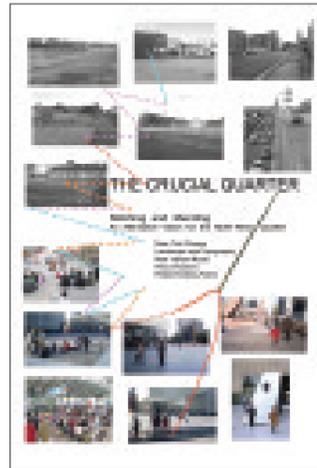
replication of generic, anodyne, and commercial environments from elsewhere. This alternative is civic public space, which is the spatial counterpart of the developing civic public discourse in the city's social and political life. In the same way that Northern Ireland's social and political structures are being gradually dismantled and reconstructed to establish a new consensus, so this needs to be reflected in and reinforced by the reorganisation and redevelopment of its urban structures and infrastructures. How do we recognise a civic public space? It is one where it is safe to be, and one where it is safe to be oneself. Such spaces do exist in Belfast, however this safety is often provided by commercial interest, such as in shopping malls, rather than civic disinterest, such as the open shared street. The test of any new social and political

consensus in Northern Ireland will be the degree to which it can itself underwrite the security of ordinary urban spaces and to which it is in turn fortified by the civil life of these spaces. The key question for Belfast is: where is its leadership on urban environmental issues? 15 years ago the city of Berlin faced related problems in the reunification of its two parts. Strong leadership in this difficult social, political, and environmental process was given by the Stadtforum – literally 'city forum' – which was established with state, institutional, commercial, and community representation, whose role was to the formulate how the city should grow. While the issues in Belfast are somewhat different, Building Initiative proposes a 'Yellow Commission' – to lay the groundwork for an inclusive and civic urban renaissance

What does it mean to 'be public' in Belfast? How public is it safe to be? What things are allowed to be public, and where? Belfast's public spaces are mostly dominated by commercial interests, by traffic circulation, and most subtly, by security concerns. While the city's



The area around and behind the Castlecourt shopping centre is the 'crucial quarter' of the city, as it is the point at which the city centre is disconnected from the inner suburbs. With a 'stitch-and-mend' approach, the proposal aims to reintegrate the city on either side of the Westlink ring road, and provide a new civic space at the historic location of Smithfield Market.



**Smithfield Market**  
Building Initiative's proposal aims to reinstate some of the qualities of the Market, were small local businesses contributed to diversity and activity in the city centre.



Building Initiative's response to the draft masterplan of the regeneration of the North-West Quarter of Belfast produced by the Department of Social Development. The area is crucial to the urban structure and future development of the whole of the city. This is the 'Crucial Quarter'. In response we devised an alternative vision: 'Stitching and Mending' the existing fabric, reconnecting, creating new vibrant routes and using the existing landscape and topography to create a new civic square.

Drawings can be viewed in more detail on the Building Initiative website.

[www.buildinginitiative.org](http://www.buildinginitiative.org)



Use of public square Schouwburgplein in Rotterdam, Netherlands

CAN THE CITY RECOVER A  
SPIRIT AND RESTORE THE  
QUALITY OF URBAN LIFE  
THAT COMES WITH A  
MORE  
INCREMENTAL, INDEPENDENT  
DEVELOPMENT  
OF PROPERTY?



# City Living = Living City

Above: One of the five suggested sites for City Living scheme beside M3 Flyover and Harbour Masters Office

<p><b>Challenge</b> Lack of choice in the residential property market in Belfast Need for a sense of ownership in the city centre</p>	<p><b>Opportunity</b> Availability of many infill development sites of potentially high quality in the city centre</p>
<p><b>Context</b> Excessive segmentation of the residential property market by (income, community, etc.)</p>	<p>Sustainability requirements in current and forthcoming governmental policy on urban development</p>
<p>Impact of buy-to-let investors on the quality and specification of new housing</p>	<p><b>Aim</b> To break the current narrow mould of residential property provision in the city</p>
<p>Suburbanisation as a response to the insecurity of the Troubles</p>	<p>To offer the market a new image and concept for city living</p>
<p>Failure of ongoing regeneration attempts to generate vitality in the city centre</p>	<p>To create a diverse, inclusive, living city</p>
<p>Withdrawal of the state from housing provision</p>	<p><b>Initiative</b> Proposal for a 'pathfinder' scheme to develop a new robust development model for mixed-use, incremental building on "infill" sites in Belfast's city centre</p>

There is little diversity in the housing market in Belfast. Decades of suburbanisation have left the city with poor residential environments. This process has been further intensified by security concerns, which have led to the demolition of many terraced streets, and reconstruction as suburban arrangements of segregated cul-de-sacs.

Recently there has been an increase in the production of larger-scale apartment buildings. This is dominated by the buy-to-let market, producing rental rather than owner-occupier accommodation. Advantage is taken of relatively low specification (and/or low land value when located in interface areas).

The city centre and surrounding areas are meanwhile dominated by large-scale retail and commercial uses. These contribute hugely to the vitality of the city during business hours, however at other times the city is deserted and civic life evaporates. Those who do (and often have no choice but to) live in the rental accommodation provided in the city centre, inhabit empty streets lined with closed shops and offices. This has a direct impact not only on access to local services, but also on the safety of the streets and public spaces.

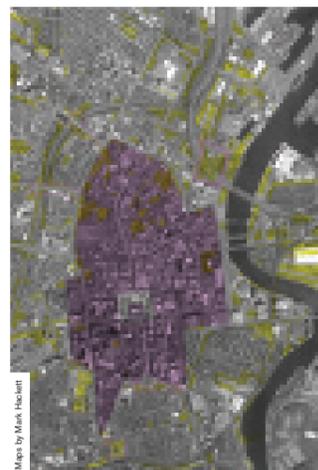
At the same time, there are a large number of empty plots throughout the city centre. Many of these are currently in low-value uses such as surface carparks.

However many are disused and have remained so for many years as a 'hangover' from the Troubles. The persistence of this low-level urban blight contributes to the perception of much of the city centre as unattractive and unliveable. Under current development models, the balance of financial risks (given conventional building types and uses) make many of these sites uneconomic to develop.

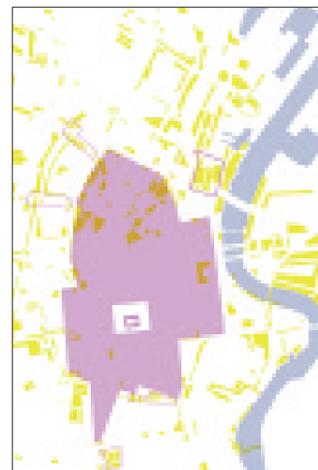


Above: Generic office block development along river Lagan not addressing the river, leaving too many gaps between buildings and lack of ground floor activities, such as shops, restaurants, cafes and so on.

Below: Generic apartment block development in Belfast with garage at ground floor and standard sized apartments leading to high fluctuation of tenants and insecure living conditions.



**Aerial Belfast**  
Showing vacant land and opportunities to fill gaps. (the five City Living sites are marked in magenta)



**Gaps, Rivers and the City Centre**  
Showing the vacant land and the extent of the main intact Belfast city centre core with the City Hall and Donegall Square in the centre



**The Missing City**  
The city gap sites pulled together would make another city centre. This is the 'Missing City' of Belfast.  
  
Should we not fill Belfast up before we consider outside developments and green field sites?



Urban density by Smith & Others as a means to create spatial complexity and mix of occupants.

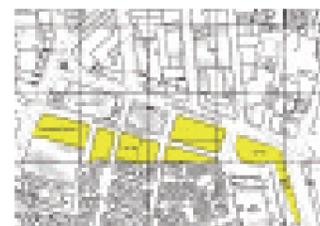
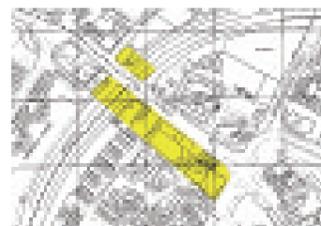


Variation of standard building type master planned by West 8 with built in open spaces such as courtyards, patio, roof gardens for leisure and work. The architecture creates a dialogue between the individuality and difference of building, their occupants and the collective and shared urban space of the street.



This pattern of suburbanisation, residential segregation, and deserted city centres is familiar from other cities where, even without civil unrest, the same 'global' building types and distributions are being produced. In some cities combined architect-developers have tried to 'break the mould' of what is acceptable as financially viable and marketable. Ted Smith's work in San Diego, West 8's master planning for Amsterdam and BAR's work in Berlin, both documented earlier in the exhibition, demonstrate how design and financing alternatives can come up with different solutions which can contribute to the diversity of urban life.

What are the obstacles to providing more diversity in the residential property market in Belfast? By examining the procurement path of buildings it is possible to identify constraints on the specification, design, and location of residential accommodation in the city. Belfast, as a mercantile and productive city, was founded on an 'informed entrepreneurialism'. Can the city recover this spirit and restore the quality of urban life that comes with a more incremental, independent development of property?



**Citizen-Led Urban Regeneration**  
Five Key sites that could make a change in Belfast.



**1. Peters Hill**

As the gateway to the Shankill Road, Peters Hill has had similar problems to Clifton Street. The once fine shopping street of the Shankill Road was blighted by plans for the Belfast Urban Motorway and subsequent re housing schemes. The Westlink does not have slip road here so a strong connection into the proposed North West Quarter Retail development is possible. The rebuilding of the tight street grain would sustain the small Brown Square housing area. These Few blocks are key to the rejuvenation of the Lower Shankill.

**2. Clifton Street**

Clifton Street was once a grand street connecting the Antrim and Crumlin Roads down into the commercial city. The street fabric has disintegrated with the building of the Westlink and the Interface between Carrick Hill and the Lower Shankill area. Although immediately adjacent to the city centre Clifton Street fails to regenerate. The aggressive Westlink slip roads form a barrier to the main pedestrian route to almost all of North Belfast. These slip roads need to be characterised as normal streets giving motorists the signal that they are re- entering the city. The bridge allows the opportunity of two new buildings over the motorway below. The Junction with the Inner Link Road needs to be defined spatially to allow this junction to assume a slower character.

**3. Harbour Masters Office/Corporation Square**

The blocks north of Custom House Square were originally cleared to make way for the M3/Rail link. The area once known as 'Little Italy' is now largely occupied by car parks. To the south Custom House Square is being rekindled as a vibrant square, to the north the Clarendon Docks area is an enclave of recent investment that however is largely accessible only by car. The Harbour Masters building still commands the wide street of Corporation Square, it is still possible to imagine this space. Rebuilding the original grain of the four North-South streets (Corporation St, Tomb St, Steam Mill Lane and Donegall Quay) would strongly connect Clarendon Docks to the Custom House at a pedestrian scale.

**4. Bankmore**

The Bankmore Link Road project was to complete the encirclement of the city centre from its neighbourhoods. With the credibility of this road being severely questioned these empty blocks can now be rebuilt on a medium scale that would not threaten the scale of nearby Donegall Pass area. Ormeau Avenue is characterised as a strong edge to the Linen Quarter and should become a stronger connector to the Gasworks Site. The second phase of the Gasworks site has the opportunity to become more than a politely gated office zone. Additional uses such as housing retail and night-life should be encouraged on key sites near the Gasworks.

**5. Botanic**

These blocks have remained as car parking for years despite the resurgence of the surrounding retail areas of Donegall Pass, Shaftesbury Square and Botanic Avenue. It is important the scale and grain of this group of blocks respects the neighbouring Donegall Pass and Botanic.

These images above show how one of Belfast's many empty sites – in this case Bankmore Street, behind Ormeau Baths Gallery – could be redeveloped as a new mid-scale mixed-use terrace. Individual plots are developed as single dwellings or with combinations of apartments, live/work units, and commercial spaces. This type and scale of building not only demonstrates how the property market offer can be broadened in the city generally, but also impacts in a significant way on the character of the street onto which it fronts. The presence of numerous independent properties, all entered directly from the street, can bring new vitality and diversity to the streets of a living city.

Territories are claimed at specific thresholds or interfaces between districts.



# Territory & Timescale

<p><b>Challenge</b> Territoriality and its expression not only at interfaces between communities but also within communities</p> <p><b>Context</b> Current deadlock over the conventional redevelopment of interface areas between communities</p> <p>Environmental degradation due to security measures, dereliction, &amp; vandalism</p> <p>Inevitable concentration of social deprivation at these marginalised interfaces</p> <p>Duplication of services due to territorial divisions also within communities 'Cultural clientelism' and its impact on public resources which are not deemed partisan</p>	<p>Planning policy objectives to 'build in' the segregation of communities along current lines</p> <p><b>Opportunity</b> Availability of space at interfaces where deprivation is highest &amp; social services a priority</p> <p>Lack of sites in hinterland, where demand for residential property is highest</p> <p><b>Aim</b> To develop a strategy to 'unlock' interface sites and return them to civil utility and/or use</p> <p><b>Initiative</b> Proposal for temporary and long-term uses that reactivity the utility of contested spaces without challenging the territorial boundaries</p>
---	---

There is a long history of residential segregation in Belfast. Territories are claimed at specific thresholds or interfaces between districts. The contested interfaces between communities are physical manifestations of Belfast's civil conflict, and in some cases continue to be the locations of physical violence or intimidation. They are often defined by fear of the expansion of one community into the other. This reflects the consequences of an ongoing and incomplete "sorting process" between the two communities at a regional scale.

Two important planning strategies have been developed by the state to handle conflict at interfaces. "Wedge planning" creates buffer zones by 'wedging in' industrial and commercial land uses or transport arteries.

"Defensible Space" creates defensible localities within communities by removing through-roads. Together, these policies have intensified and 'built-in' segregation not only between communities, but also within communities.

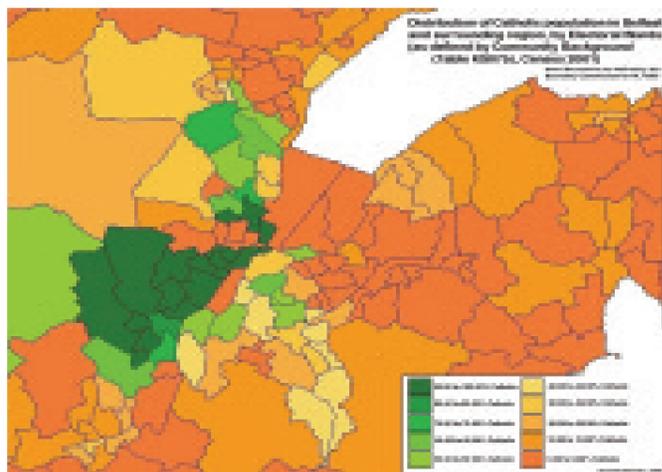
These policies have had an obvious detrimental effect on the urban fabric and environmental quality of Belfast. The personal costs of intimidation and violence are reflected in buildings vacancies, dereliction, and destruction which blight broad swathes along the interfaces of North and West Belfast. Redevelopment by state or market forces follows 'wedge planning' or 'defensible space' principles, which further entrench divisions and remove the opportunity for inhabitants to begin to share the same urban environment or public space.

There is an accepted terminology for different types of development land: "greenfield" denotes sites on existing agricultural land; "brownfield" denotes sites on disused and often degraded industrial land. However, there is no term for sites of contested meaning or territoriality. Building Initiative proposes the term "yellowfield": "Yellow" because caution needs to be exercised, and dangers are implicit, but also, in the case of Belfast, because they are sites of potential utility to both the communities that claim them.

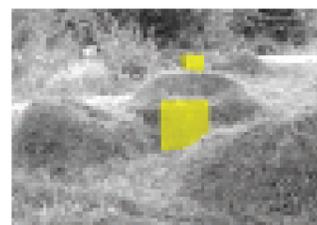
Building Initiative sees the use of temporary structures in the 'yellowfield' sites as a step towards 'de-territorialisation'. Could temporary installations be a strategy for reactivating contested territory?



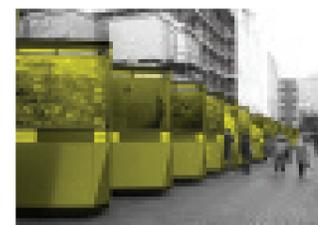
The most recent construction of a peace wall through Alexandra Park, Belfast.



The ongoing and incomplete "sorting process" between the two communities at a regional scale (orange: protestant community, green: catholic community)



Landscape Furniture allowing temporary appropriation of Outdoor Space



Can spaces be identified by an activity rather than as a territory - eg Outdoor cinema



Short-term temporary structures are by their nature dislocated from history, permanence, site, and entrenched social and economic contexts. Their utilitarian nature means that their form is usually a clear physical expression of their purpose. In the context of Belfast's contested territories this could be a positive attribute in that they would not constitute an institutional or territorial 'claim' and would therefore not be perceived as a sustained or permanent threat. Temporary structures can also be the first step to something else, implying an open ended-ness, and providing the seeds for re-growth or repair of the urban fabric and public realm.



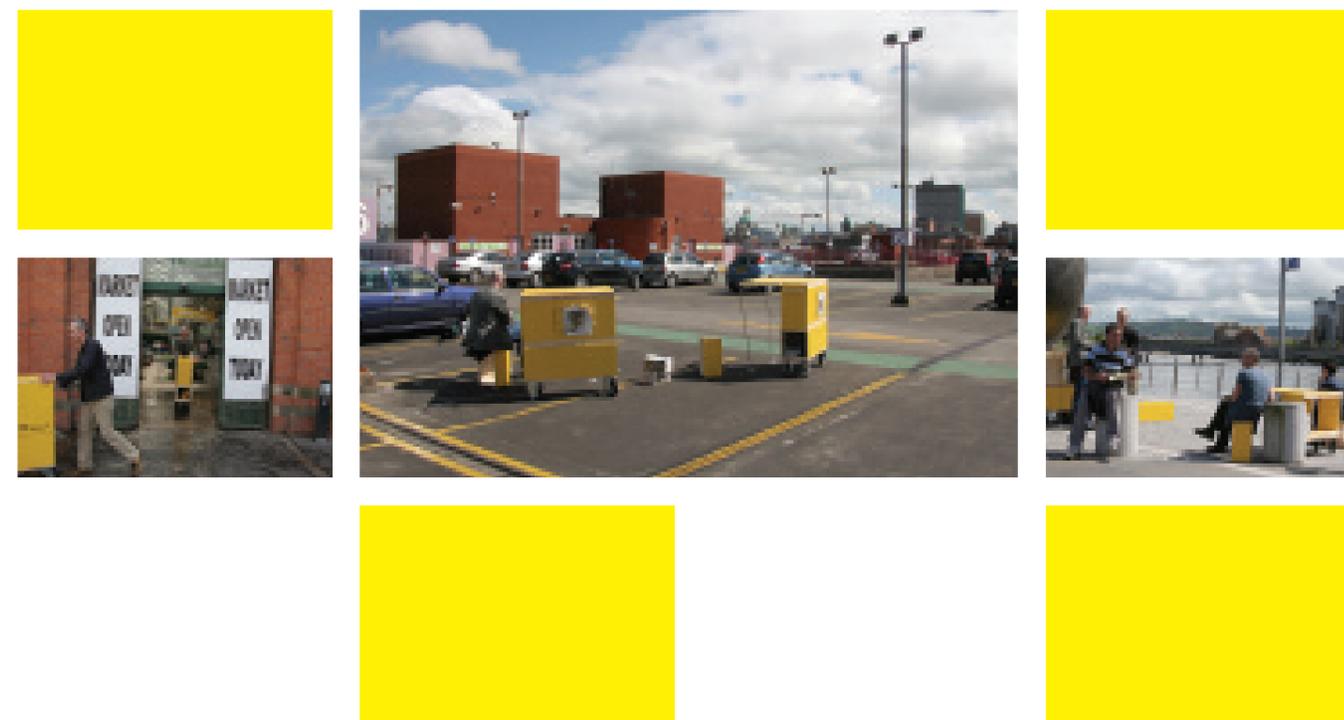
# Project Activities: Communicative Actions

An exhibition concept has been developed that is synonymous with the aims, ethos, and working methods pursued by Building Initiative. It is proposed that the exhibition is comprised of a number of especially constructed "yellow objects" The exhibition artefact focus on a method of engagement with the central issue of civil engagement and enterprise in relation to Belfast's built environment, such as the news stand. The exhibition described and facilitated a two way process of engagement with Belfast by staging as a two part event. Firstly the issues of Belfast were condensed and brought into the gallery space to stimulate thought and discussion about the issues of civil enterprise in Belfast's built environment. Then secondly the yellow exhibition

objects were taken back into the city context in an effort to activity communicate with the public. These 'Communicative Actions' were located at particular sites of individual initiatives such as the original site of the Smithfield Market (The Crucial Quarter) or where the issues being examined most intensely resonate (St Georges Market). This allowed the proposals, investigations or questions identified by initiatives to share the same physical space and be visually linked to the contexts with which they were dealing.



**Yellow Press**  
12,000 free issues were distributed throughout Belfast, commenting on the existing context and potential regeneration strategies within the city.

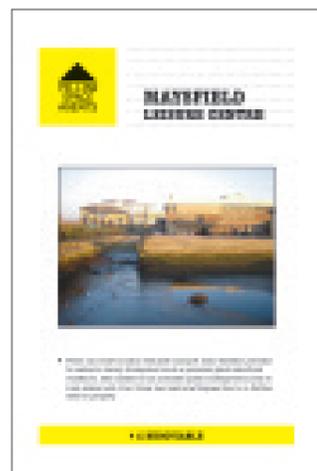


Yellow Space Agents act as a comment on the encroaching developer led market. Using the recognisable format of the estate agents flyer, building initiative selected a number of vulnerable sites and made an alternate commentary on the potential future.



Building Initiative was invited by Urban Drift to participate in the exhibition Talking Cities as part of ENTRY2006 featuring innovative international design. The exhibition included installations, projections, workshops and symposia by internationally based architects, designers, artist, filmmakers and writers from 17 countries. The exhibition reflected a dialogue on contemporary urban conditions. The location for the exhibition was the Zeche Zollverein, a former coal mine in the Ruhr valley whose exceptional industrial architecture, inspired by the Bauhaus, has led to its designation as a UNESCO world heritage site. As part of a large scale transformation on the basis of a master plan drawn up by Rem Koolhaas and OMA, the 5 storey coal washing plant became a unique site for ENTRY2006, an inaugural International Architecture and Design Forum comprising four main exhibitions and a series of events between the 26th August and the 3rd December 2006.

www.talkingcities.net  
www.entry-2006.com



**Maysfield Leisure Centre**  
Prime city centre location with good transport links. Excellent potential for exclusive luxury development such as premium gated waterfront residence.

**Terraces**  
Great investment, buy a whole row. They are all empty just waiting to be flattened.

**North Street Arcade**  
Excellent city centre location and opportunity to extend the city's 'retail pitch'. This property is however in need of extensive renovation.

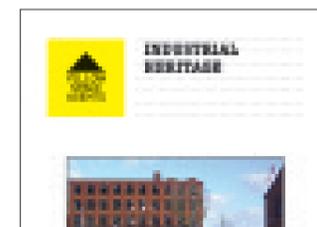
**Laganside**  
Excellent waterside location with high quality landscaping as yet unused.



**Crumlin Road Gaoil**  
Securer site with excellent development potential, close to the cuity centre. Suitable for a mix of uses.

**Interface Area**  
Currently fallow, very secure site. Suitable for urban forestry or other agricultural use. Must be seen to be believed.

**Industrial Heritage**  
Looking for a little historical ambience? We have lots of buildings at risk going cheap.



# Woodvale Park

Woodvale Park, opened in 1888, is a typical Victorian park with bandstand, flowerbed's and mature trees, located in the north west of the Belfast. In 2000 Invest NI planned a new road through the park on its Western edge involving the destruction of many trees and features.

In 2001 'Friends of Woodvale Park' formed to counter the road proposal by Invest NI. The proposal was rejected in 2002 due to large public opposition and an alternative was to be sought. Community Consultations started in 2004 with the Woodvale Park Planning Day, involving members of Belfast City Council, parks department and Friends of Woodvale park, Funding

was secured from 'Awards for all' for a series of events in the park. In the same year Woodvale and Dunville Parks Interreg Project, secured funding from Neighbours of Europe, run in conjunction with Groundwork. 2006 saw the hosting of numerous events within the park including a visit from the 'Neighbours from Europe Program'

Also in 2006 'Friends of Woodvale Park' approached Building Initiative to engage in discussion regarding the potential opportunities of the park. Numerous social issues have been identified within the park. 'Friends of Woodvale Park' want to reclaim the park by providing social activities aimed at the community including young

families and older people. Discussions are ongoing. Building initiative is particularly interested in this project as it demonstrates citizen led urban regeneration.

