

Temporary Permanent

Frankie Quinn published *Interface Images*, his first book of 'peaceline' photography studies 25 years ago. It was the year of the first paramilitary ceasefires in Northern Ireland.

Four years later, the Good Friday Agreement attempted to divert conflict into political process, with patchy success and conspicuous intransigence from many.

On the surface, there has been change. Paramilitary organisations have declared ceasefires. Killings have diminished although by no means ceased. Army watchtowers along the border have been dismantled. Walk into the centre of contemporary Belfast, and you will find a city which has apparently undergone radical progress. Strenuous investment, prestige developments and global brands set the tone for an apparently thriving, even cosmopolitan, modern city. But this is where the new money, the 'peace dividend' congregates. Step beyond the bright lights of regeneration, however, and Belfast's urban geography tells a different and altogether older story.

No commentator can mention Northern Ireland's 'peacelines' without pointing to the irony of the term. The conflict has always, after all, been fertile ground for the use of ironic euphemism - the 'Troubles' being a significant example. The 'peacelines' were born out of the vicious sectarian strife of the late sixties onwards. These began as haphazard barricades thrown up by Catholics and Protestants in defence against sectarian incursions into their areas; the British army, subsequently, added their own. The barricades were formalised as a security measure which was, supposedly (and, again, ironically), temporary. In fact, the interface barriers are the fault-lines that define the tectonics of sectarian division. Twenty years after the Good Friday Agreement there is slow movement on plans to take down the walls by 2023 but in the meantime the remaining walls are being consolidated. There are invisible as well as visible boundaries between Catholic/nationalist and Protestant/unionist areas; psychological as well as physical.

Many who live in interface areas have defended their need for interface barriers in the interest of security, but that security has come at a price. Interface residents face disproportionate social and economic disadvantage. Businesses, understandably, are unwilling to locate at flashpoint areas. Demographic changes, meanwhile, mean that more Protestant housing estates tend to be under-occupied while, in many Catholic areas, housing demand outstrips supply. Issues relating to territoriality underscore ongoing tensions between the need for housing and the need for security.

Unemployment is high in interface areas: 40 per cent in some. In 2001, 88 per cent of Catholic children and 71 per cent of Protestant children in segregated estates were identified as living on or below the poverty line. The economic feel-good factor of the city centre is evidently not making its way along these hardening arteries of dislocation.

For all that the barriers may provide psychological reassurance for inhabitants on both sides; their security value is not absolute. Interface violence is still a fact of life, as is the anxiety of defensive living. Displays of culture and tradition, including parades and associated protests, still prompt escalations in tension and hostility. Perhaps even more lethal is the apathy that regards segregation as indelible.

The images that Frankie Quinn has gathered of the peacelines since early 1994 offer a compelling portrait of continued division. These are not the peacelines that attract the tourists, however. It is the assertive walls, those with murals outlining 'our' and 'their' interpretations of the conflict that bring out the cameras of those attracted to Northern Ireland by our newfound accessibility and 'peacetime prosperity'. And that, too, is ironic. Quinn's peaceline photography is a vital reminder that fifty years after they first appeared there will be no real peace until these barriers, and the sectarian principles underpinning them, can be dismantled.

Gabbi Murphy