Billy's Sailortown stories: Unpacking the dense and compact city through graphic anthropology

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Abstract

Since the 1960s, Belfast has suffered from the predominance of car centred planning. Sailortown, one of its most diverse, active and dense neighbourhoods was destroyed by the urban motorway in the 1970s. The neighbourhood suffered mass demolition and the displacement of over one thousand families and 300 businesses over 5 years. The dense, mixed-use, plot-based urban form disappeared, but the fabric of Sailortown survives in the stories of its old and new residents, recreating the urban forms of the past. Through the StreetSpace project we investigate the fabric of streets and the people that inhabit them. We carefully engage with the physical and spatial form, as well as with the experiences of local residents. We value different approaches to urban morphology and are especially interested in the value of the plot and block. Our contribution to the discussion about urban form and the value of the plot is methodological. By introducing graphic anthropology (Ingold, Lucas, Ramos, Kuchnir) we bring the experiences of people in place to the forefront, exploring the value of the urban fabric in everyday life. In this paper we will present studies of urban form and space, combined with graphic anthropology, of a series of blocks in Sailortown, understood through former resident Billy McIlroy's stories. We would like to present this as a conversation about how the memories of a place can be redrawn to highlight the value of the dense, diverse and compact urban fabric of an erased past.

Keyword: plot based urbanism, graphic anthropology, streets, community, motorways

Introduction

Sailortown in Belfast was a diverse and bustling working-class neighbourhood. Its urban fabric was made of a network of terraced houses, small workshops and large factories framed by streets, alleys and courtyards. This urban form enabled a sense of community discussed by historians, geographers, architects and anthropologists such as Milne (2016), Moran (2016), Vaughan (2015, 2018), Appleyard (1989), Smithson (1957), Jacobs (1961). Even though the value of the humble urban terrace is highlighted and accepted in certain circles, it has been demonised in the past, as cramped and unhealthy. Planning practice and policy, especially in the UK, demolished terraces and replaced them with high rise modernist flats and cul-de-sac semi-detached housing. In 1958, Richard Hoggart referred to terraces as 'street after regular street of shoddily uniform houses (...); mean, squalid, and in a permanent half-fog' (Hoggart 1958, p.58/59). The undermining of the value of this type of urban fabric is still present today, as Whitehand (2007, p.ii04) explains: 'Frequently planners show little appreciation of how the form taken by the urban landscape is connected to the historical grain of the city.' In Sailortown, the neighbourhood fabric was completely

demolished for the construction of the motorway. The media communicated the demolition and redevelopment as the only solutions to poor living conditions, ignoring the fact that by demolishing and displacing the population, the 'place' disappears, as Clossick explains: "A place is not a concept. A place is a concrete thing in a particular location and geography" (Clossick, J. 2017, p.339). Part of this attitude was due to the lack of value placed in the communities that lived in these neighbourhoods. Therefore, we propose using graphic anthropology to investigate in more detail and with more nuance, the way that the fabric of urban terraces enabled relationships and situations. Through the stories of Sailortown's former resident Billy McIlroy, we aim to show how density, permeability and a complex spatial relationship can permeate through the stories and be 'translated' into drawings that contribute to communicating the value of Sailortown and its built fabric.

Background

Here we will discuss the methods used in our investigation.

Urban morphology

Urban morphology explores the relationship between urban form and aspects of human life embedded in it. We are particularly interested in plots and blocks as enablers of social relationships, as explored by Panerai, Castex, Depaule and Samuels (1976), and further unpacked by Porta and Romice (2010) in the ground breaking 'plot-based urbanism'. Francoise Boudon said in 1975 that 'the plot is the smallest common denominator of human settlement where the legal, social, economic elements which form the history of the earth, where experiences of culture and dwelling take place' (Boudon, 1975, p.773). We concur that the form and space of plots and blocks, hold and determine culture and dwelling of people. The transformation of urban blocks is not new, with 19th century's grand plans as clear examples of the destruction of the medieval congested urban fabric and its replacement with homogenised, blocks. But the transformations of the twentieth century were much more radical, with motorways completely defacing urban areas and displacing populations to the fringes of cities (Thyme 1978, Urry 2006, Gunn 2013).

The prominence given to the town plan can sometimes trump the spatial qualities of an area, while the focus on space and form can overlook people's experiences of place. Therefore, we propose to complement the existing form and space methods of analysis of terraced houses, with graphic anthropology. With this approach we aim to explore the value of spatial relationships, of areas that were lost to the Belfast Urban Motorway.

Graphic anthropology

According to anthropologists who use drawing in their practice, the purpose of drawing is to develop the understanding of research (Azevedo and Ramos, 2016, p.144). Grimshaw, Kushnir, Lucas, Taussig and

Geismar agree that drawing should be favoured as a methodological tool in visual ethnography. Geismar further suggests that through the act of drawing one both connects and reconnects with the world, while Taussig explains that: 'Drawing intervenes in the reckoning of reality in ways which writing and photography do not' (Taussig, 2011, p13). With drawing we 'more fully immerse ourselves in the dimensions and the life of the place' (Treib, 2008, p.10).

Methodology

In order to investigate how the historical urban fabric of Sailortown enabled relationships and situations, we spoke to a former resident, Billy McIlroy, who grew up in the area in the 1950s and 60s. After Billy left to join the Merchant Navy, his family were relocated to a nearby housing estate and their home was demolished. After his retirement, Billy continued to be involved in the grassroots work to regenerate Sailortown.

During our conversations, Billy recounted stories as he recognised locations on a 1963 OS map that we provided. The discussions evolved around Billy's former family home on Nelson Street. Through his vivid and humorous stories, we were transported to the Sailortown of his childhood and could imagine the camaraderie and sense of community.

Based on Billy's stories, we produced an axonometric of four urban blocks with many layers of information. Cut-aways add detail to the interiors of buildings as we illustrated sixteen of Billy's anecdotes. These vignettes brought a sense of character and life to the drawing while also aiding our understanding of the relationship between the urban form of Sailortown and Billy's stories.

Figure 1. The final axonometric illustrating Billy's stories. Billy's family home is highlighted in yellow.

The approach of graphic anthropology allowed us to grasp the character of Sailortown by investigating impressions of the urban form. Analysis of Billy's stories gave us an insight into how a young boy viewed the

area where he grew up. However, by using a map to spark memories and anecdotes, the information remained reliable. In tandem with the production of the axonometric, we produced isolated illustrations of the sixteen stories that allowed us to add detail such as furniture, colour and materiality. A diagrammatic plan was then drawn (see Figure 2) to further analyse the area, including: uses, routes and shortcuts, entrances, green space and the size of the blocks and plots.

Results and Discussion

Our analysis into the stories revealed that Sailortown's camaraderie and social cohesion were encouraged by certain features of the urban fabric: *Porosity:* an ordered and connected street network; *Density and Mixed use:* a relatively high density of homes and a close proximity of different uses; and *Mixed tenure:* the ability to house residents of different incomes, from the middle classes to those truly struggling to get by.

Figure 2. Plan analysis into the four blocks after the drawing of the axonometric. Uses, entrances, green space, routes and shortcuts are highlighted.

These urban qualities, particularly the mix of uses, were characteristic of this type of area adjacent to the docks (Milne, G J, 2016) and other working class areas in cities until the 1960s. Oral histories and similar research methods are often dismissed for being nostalgic. We acknowledge that the mass demolition of Sailortown will cause a nostalgic and biased response from former residents. However, these former residents deserve the opportunity to tell their stories and to be listened to. This was not the case in the 1970s. Furthermore, we believe that combining our research into stories with urban morphological methods leads to a more in depth analysis into Sailortown.

Porosity

A porous neighbourhood has an ordered and easily navigable street network, with an ability to travel through shortcuts in the urban blocks. Some of Billy's stories humorously reflect this porosity.

"[Davy, 'The Red Devil'] comes back to the house one night and he couldn't get in the front door so he comes around… and he makes an attempt to climb over the yard wall… to get into his mummy's house. Maggie sees him, opens… her bedroom window, and she shouts, "MRS ENGLISH! THE IRA IS TRYING TO GET OVER YOUR YARD WALL!" So Davy turned around and said, "Shut up you stupid old f***er you!" and fell off the yard wall!"
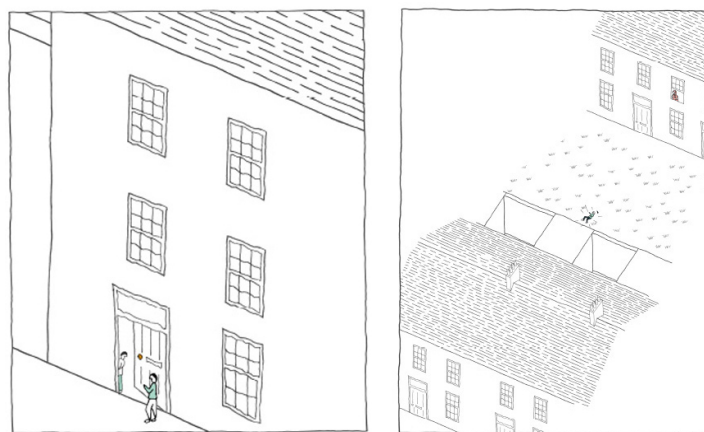

Figure 3. *a- Billy makes some money b- 'The Red Devil'. All illustrations link to our axonometric, see Fig. 1.*

The porosity of the block is colourfully explained by Billy. Even though this is obviously a rose-tinted version of a difficult past, the experience of the tight and porous urban fabric is vividly expressed. Billy pointed out places that we couldn't have deciphered from the historical maps. For example, Davy's escapades climbing into his mother's back yard happened inside an unusual urban block which contained an extra row of terraces called Quinn's Place, where Maggie lived, that had their front doors towards the interior of the block.

Density and Mixed Use

Billy's stories revealed a high density of homes, and a close proximity of different uses.

The following humorous story highlights the reliance that residents had on their neighbours, *"here in Ireland, when we bury our loved ones we leave little things at the grave you know, little statues and stuff like that. So Peter helped himself to a couple of these here wee things… But a week later, [his wife] Lily came to our door and she… said to my mother that strange things were happening around the fireplace where Peter had put the two ornaments. So my mother goes in… and she says, "Right ... where did they come from?" She says, "Peter bought them". My mother says, "No he never. They were lifted off a grave". And she said, "Ohhh what am I going to do Bridget? I'm going to end up in hell!" So, she made Peter take the statues back!".*
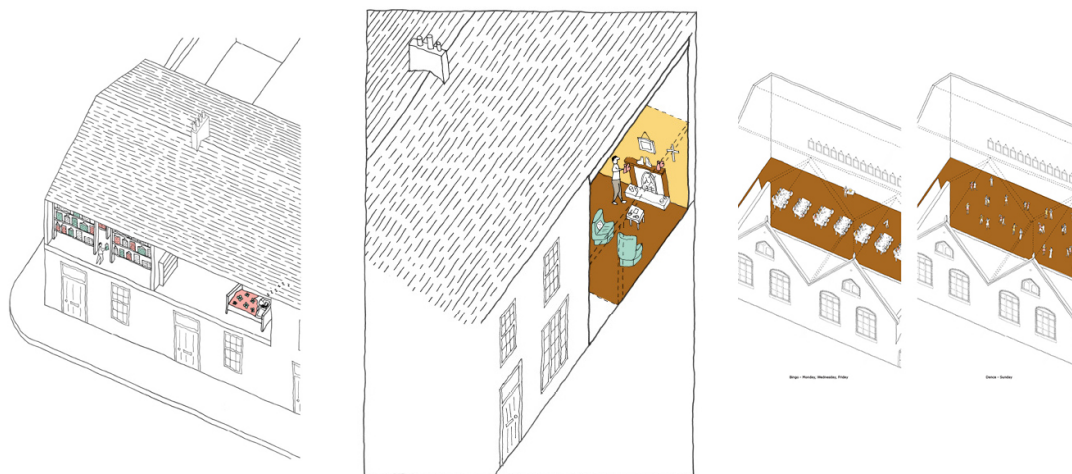
Figure 4. *a-Half of Sailortown gets high b-Paranormal activity c-The many uses of the school. Illustrations link to Fig. 1.*

Billy also introduces us to *"the Campbells, and next door was… a pharmaceutical warehouse. Alan, the second youngest son... got the keys and went in and helped himself to whatever he wanted... And half of Sailortown was high and everybody couldn't f***ing figure it out! He was giving people Valium and everything. "Awk here you are, love, that'll settle you down.""*

The Earl Street School doubled up as a community building, with different uses out of school hours, *"Billy Patterson, he ran the dances in Earl Street School on a Sunday night… I actually managed to get myself a job in there off him for the bingo."* The density of houses and different uses in Sailortown led to a lively environment, with different activities happening at all times of the day. The proximity of front doors facing onto the street created a social atmosphere and encouraged neighbours to help each other when in need. The narrow plots and strong block structure created a uniform system that different uses could occupy within a small area. Porta and Romice highlight that, 'how [a] plot is shaped, its size and geometry, its relationship with the street and the street hierarchy, how it forms up street fronts and eventually urban blocks' can impact 'human activities and urban functions'' (Porta Romice, 2010, p.14).

Mixed tenure

Billy's stories also highlight that Sailortown was home to residents of different incomes, from the middle classes to the most deprived.

"In this corner house [lived] Marianne… She owned a [vegetable] shop on the corner of Earl Street… I used to go to her house often, course she would send me on messages and she had money lying all over the f***ing house. It was in jars, tins… But she was very, very good to the community down in Sailortown."

One of the many pubs in Sailortown was The Bunch of Grapes, *"run by Liam McMahon and his clientele were all the businessmen from around here and that's where they all congregated on a Friday… if someone*

went into the bar that he didn't like, he said, "Get you out of here!"… My father worked for him for quite a while".
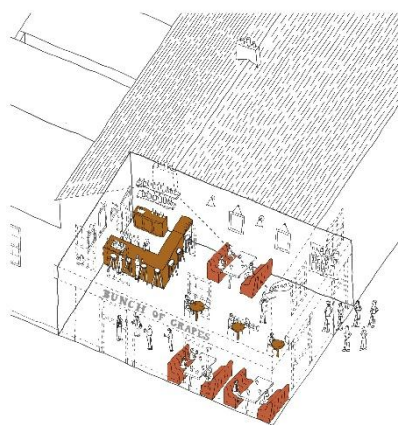

Figure 5. *An illustration of Billy's story about The Bunch of Grapes. All illustrations link to our axonometric, see Fig. 1.*

The ability to house residents with a mix of social and economic backgrounds in one neighbourhood encourages the area's ability to support itself, aiding social mobility and discouraging ghettoisation. A narrow plot structure allows flexibility in the housing types available, with the middle-class residents living in large 3-storey townhouses, while the poorest often having more than one family residing in a smaller 2-storey terrace.

Conclusions

In conclusion, our conversations with Billy McIlroy gave us a deeper understanding of the urban morphology of Sailortown than what we could have ascertained from maps and photographs. Processing his stories through drawing helped us to visualise and analyse the urban characteristics which influenced his anecdotes. Working within the fields of urban morphology and graphic anthropology has allowed our research to become more people-focused. Lucas (2020, p.6) writes that incorporating anthropological and architectural methodologies has "The potential [to create] a more socially informed, engaged and sensitive architecture which responds more directly to people's needs".

We believe that important lessons can be learnt from the historical fabric of Sailortown, particularly the porosity, density, mixed use and mixed tenure. Porta and Romice (2010, p.16) note that, 'streets and street fronts require diversity and adaptability to support urban life; in design terms this implies, very simply, smaller units.' This was evident in the Sailortown of the past. Vaughan writes that, "All social activity leaves spatial traces in the form of recursive patterns" (2007, p.206), but the patterns of the streets which were once filled with life are now unrecognisable and have become part of an entirely different context.

Acknowledgements

We dedicate this paper to Billy McIlroy (RIP) and his family. His stories were inspiring and helped recreate a life in Sailortown that its people will always cherish.

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