

## **Nostalgia for 'HM Divis' and 'HM Rossville': Memories of the everyday in Northern Ireland's high rise flats**

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## **Nostalgia for 'HMP Divis' and 'HMP Rossville': Memories of the everyday in Northern Ireland's high rise flats**

The Divis and Rossville Flats in Derry and Belfast were high-rise housing projects built as part of Terence O'Neill's modernizing 1960s vision for Northern Ireland. They became notorious during the Troubles in Northern Ireland as sites of state and non-state violence, and emblematic of the deprivation and suffering of Catholic communities. Following prolonged campaigns by residents, the flats were demolished in the 1980s and 1990s. Drawing on oral testimonies collected after the near-total demolition of both spaces, this article argues that there are similarities in the cultural memory of both spaces. This is firstly apparent in their evocation of the materiality of the flats, and secondly apparent in their negotiation with the iconic status of Divis and Rossville in relation to the Troubles. Finally, we argue that while both sets of sources mobilize forms of nostalgia to narrate the history of the flats, this nostalgia is differently-inflected across the two sites.

Keywords: Divis Flats, Rossville Flats, the Troubles, materiality, Belfast, Derry, oral history, nostalgia, cultural memory

### **Introduction**

This article considers the usefulness of materiality as a way of thinking about the histories and legacies of the Northern Irish Troubles, a conflict that spanned nearly 30 years between 1968 and 1998 and resulted in more than 3,500 deaths. It takes its first cue from the call for historical analysis that attends to the materiality of cities (Otter 2013, LeCain, 2017). Recently, scholars interested in the afterlives of war have turned their attention to the continued material presence of memorials, institutions or symbols related to it (Waterton 2014, Tolia Kelly *et. al* 2016). This is particularly a feature of Laura McAtackney's work. Her writing on Northern Ireland has concentrated on 'the meaning and treatment of physical remnants of the conflict' and their continued function as 'prominent, if decaying, material presences in both countryside and cityscape' (McAtackney 2014: 319). We are interested in the legacies of one of these 'matters of concern' (Latour 2004), with the proviso that practically all of the structures we discuss here, two high-rise housing estates in Belfast and Derry, have been demolished. Although gone, their absence is conspicuous.

The second cue we are following is one that analyzes the form, circulation and function of memory in 'post-conflict' Northern Ireland as it relates to the materiality of these demolished buildings. Della Dora, considering the relationship between space and memory in postcolonial Alexandria, argues that 'different kinds of nostalgia (inter)act on both geographical imagination and physical landscape' (Dora 2006: 232). Similarly, we will argue here that former residents' memories of the Divis Flats in Belfast and the Rossville Flats in Derry offer a crucial insight into what connects the human and non-human elements of two cities involved in one of the longest low-intensity conflicts in modern history. They also draw attention to what Ann Laura Stoler calls the 'sequestered and displaced histories' (Stoler 2013:13) of imperial ruins, particularly given the way in which these modernising developments of Northern Ireland's 1960s were suffused with rhetoric that echoes that of the 17th century plantation of Ulster (Loughlin 2015: 197).

As discussed in more detail below, this article draws on the memories of former residents of Rossville and Divis Flats, to consider what they reveal about the everyday and embodied experience of conflict in these spaces. In doing so, it asks three sets of questions. Firstly, how is the interconnectedness of the domestic and the private in sectarian logics of violence and surveillance narrated by former residents? This entails attentiveness to what Kevin McSorley and Sarah Maltby call war as 'politics written on and experienced through the thinking, feeling bodies of men and women' (2012: 3), as well as to state practices of targeting and harassment of Northern Ireland's Catholic population.<sup>1</sup> Secondly, how are these experiences and their affective residues understood through the specific material infrastructures of the flats themselves? How did living in the new environment created by the buildings shape the way in which oppression, resistance and violence were expressed? Thirdly, what do these sources tell us about memories of the Troubles? What is revealed by the co-existence of nostalgic evocations of sociality and solidarity with accounts of deprivation and discrimination?

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<sup>1</sup> Although housing shortage primarily affected Catholics (Bollens 2000, Murtagh 2002) it is worth noting here that other high rise flats were built to house a predominantly working-class Protestant population, such as Clarawood in East Belfast and Rathcoole in Newtownabbey. We focus on two developments that housed a majority-Catholic population, partly because of the practices of state targeting discussed above - which disproportionately affected Catholics - and partly because of the iconicity of both Divis and Rossville in post-conflict imaginaries, discussed below.

Both the oral history and the cultural sources we analyze suggest that the non-presence of Divis and Rossville in urban space reverberates in the form of an ambivalent nostalgia vividly attached to the forms of life engendered amidst the flats. This is particularly striking because the redevelopment of these areas was not an attempt to enforce spatial forms of amnesia similar to those that have appeared in post-conflict Belfast (Nagle 2009, Switzer & McDowell 2009), but rather the result of a long-term residents' campaign.

### ***'Dreadful enclosures': Divis and Rossville Flats***

The Divis Flats were planned and built as new housing for the former residents of the Pound Loney, a narrow set of terraced houses in the Lower Falls.. They comprised 13 blocks, seven or eight stories high, and one 19-story block – Divis Tower, which is the final remnant of the project still standing. The first block was opened in May 1968; the final block was demolished in 1993, meaning the flats' existence maps roughly on to the timeline of the Northern Irish Troubles (Page 2017, Roy 2007). Although the old Pound Loney district was represented nostalgically in, for instance, Gerry Adams' memoir of life in West Belfast and in Vincent Dargan's photography, several residents welcomed its demolition, framed at the time as slum clearance (Adams 1993, Dargan 2013). Local nationalist politician Gerry Fitt and Bishop William Philbin both supported the redevelopment, while one resident told the *Belfast Telegraph* the move was the best thing that had ever happened to him and his family (DRA 1986).

Located in Derry's Bogside between Rossville and Fahan Street, the Rossville flats became one of the city's most iconic landmarks during the Northern Ireland Troubles.<sup>2</sup> The flats were built in 1966 by the Northern Ireland Housing Trust and later managed by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) until their phased-out demolition between 1986 and 1989. The three multi-storeyed blocks contained 178 gallery access flats, providing only a small portion of the public housing needed for this particularly overcrowded part of the city where accommodation was often in poor or dangerous condition. As was the case with many other working-class families who were forced to move into an estate whose dimension, without precedent in the North-West, was perceived as aberrant, the plans were not initially welcomed by its prospective dwellers (Ravetz 2001). In fact, Bogside residents formed a Derry Anti-Flats

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<sup>2</sup> Although the city is also called Londonderry or, in a more neutral but formulaic way, Derry-Londonderry, here we have used 'Derry' to reflect the nomenclature preferred by the majority of Rossville flats residents.

Committee in order to stop similar projects in the adjacent area. The detractors, who generally preferred housing development schemes focused around terraced houses – such as the one carried out at the same time in the Creggan estate – were worried that high rise flats could become ‘a tourist attraction for Americans and British who would be brought to see the Catholic people in their ghetto there’ (Derry Journal 1960).<sup>3</sup> Despite this, the construction of the Rossville flats went ahead as the nine-storey flats presented the Unionist-controlled Londonderry Corporation with a compromise formula to keep the Irish Nationalist population within one of Derry’s three electoral wards; thus maintaining the territorial arrangements which allowed the Unionist minority to control a predominantly Catholic city (Glendinning & Muthesius 1994, Ó Dochartaigh 1999). Initially, the amenities available in the flats turned them into markers of distinction. As former resident Charlie McMenamain puts it ‘Rossville Flats was like moving to the lap of luxury’ (BBC, 2010), but this positive outlook would become rarer as the conflict became more entrenched and the conditions of the flat worsened.

Both Rossville and Divis were central to the exercise of state and non-state violence. This included increased levels of harassment and surveillance as the conflict evolved, something which earned both complexes the names of ‘HM Divis’ and ‘HM Prison Rossville’, as well as many deaths. Nine-year-old Patrick Rooney, the first child killed in the Troubles, was killed in the Divis tower during the Northern Ireland riots of August 1969, when the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) fired a machine gun into the flats. In the 1970s, the British Army constructed an observation post on the roof of the highest flat and occupied the top two floors, which they generally accessed by helicopter. Residents were subject to regular harassment, surveillance and house-searches (Page 2017). According to the Divis Residents’ Association (DRA), by 1986, 19 people had been shot dead in the flats, with 14 more shot in close proximity to them (DRA 1986). Two more were killed subsequent to this report. (Sutton, n.d.). Jean McConville, a mother of ten who lived in the St Jude’s Walk block of Divis, was abducted from her home in December 1972 by the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) and ‘disappeared,’ having been accused of being an informer - the location of her body has never been revealed (Keefe 2015). As Graham Dawson has suggested, the McConville case has a particular ‘disruptive potency’ in relation to the politics of time in Northern Ireland, particularly

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<sup>3</sup> The controversies surrounding the building of high-rise flats in Northern Ireland bear some resemblance with those emerging in redevelopment projects in Great Britain but, as Glendinning and Muthesius have argued, decanting was a far more intricate issue in the region due to the sectarian nature of territorial division (1994: 289).

through Gerry Adams' alleged association with the killing, and the continued public memory of her death is one factor in the dominant association of Divis with the conflict (2016: 271).

Rossville has similar associations. The flats were well known for their connection to the events known as Bloody Sunday, the killing of 14 unarmed civilians by soldiers of the Parachute Regiment during an anti-internment march organized by the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association on 30th January 1972 (Walsh 2000). At least 16 other people were injured, including Patrick Broolly, who was hit by a bullet while in the flats. Nine of the victims were shot within a few meters of the complex: in the car park, the forecourt and the rubble and wire barricade on Rossville Street. One of the fatal casualties, Hugh Gilmour, aged 17, lived in the flats. Ten years later, on 16th April 1982, 11-year-old Stephen McConnomy was killed by a plastic bullet fired by security forces positioned in the city walls. The Rossville Flats also provided a venue for non-civilian casualties such as two British soldiers who on 25 November 1973 were shot by members of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) as they guarded the lifts and the stairs leading up to the Army's Observation Post. (Sutton n.d.).

These acts of sudden violence existed alongside the slow or quotidian violence and everyday indignities of living in badly-developed and badly-maintained housing - damp and mould, lack of washing and drying facilities, broken lifts, dirty stairwells, insufficiently-large rubbish chutes. Despite underpinning the history of the conflict, such non-eventful violence 'occurs gradually and out of sight' (Nixon 2011: 2) and is often not recognized as such. In Rossville, the structural problems of the buildings became evident as early as June 1968, two years after the inauguration of the flats, when the Rossville-Lecky Road tenant's association was formed to discuss, among the issues described above and above all the rent increase announced by the Housing Trust that year (Ó Dochartaigh 1999: 637, Ó Catháin 2019: 20). Residents, organising within the Divis Demolition Committee and the Divis Residents Association, were calling for the flats to be demolished and replaced from 1973 - it is notable that much of this organising was led by women (Evason 1991).

Both Divis and Rossville, then, are imbricated in the history of the Troubles, and particularly in the history of the structural sectarianism of the state and the army (McVeigh & Rolston 2007). But they are also a product of the pre-Troubles period, where under the patrician reformist Terence O'Neill the Northern Irish state adopted a newly-technocratic approach to governance (Loughlin 2015). This is the sensibility that is visible, for instance, in the planning

of the new city of Craigavon between 1963 and 1966. (Legg 2018). The initial Divis plan included seven tower blocks rather than just one and would have sprawled across West Belfast (McConville 2017). What is important here is the way in which this modernist approach to development is impossible to disentangle from the securitization and weaponization of space, and the desire to segregate parts of the city (Cunningham 2014: 455, see also Coyles 2017).

### ***Sources and methodology***

The sources we draw on are primarily the memories of the flats' former residents. In the case of Divis, these memories were expressed in oral history interviews conducted by members of the Divis Study Group (henceforth DSG) and published in 1998, although we also draw on some other, earlier publications by the DSG and affiliated organisations; in the case of Rossville, the sources have a more recent and fragmentary origin. Scattered through a couple of publications and local newspapers, they sprung from at least two overlapping oral and community history projects. The fragmentary nature of these sources and, in particular, the limits that the 'secondary' use of oral history material collected by others entails, mean that there are questions we are unable to answer. This is especially the case in terms of thinking about the intersubjective construction of memory narratives within the interviews; all we can access are the snippets available in the published work, rather than the whole transcripts, and our knowledge of the biographical details of interviewees is similarly limited. However, our aim here is not to focus on the dynamics of individual memory and oral history in relation to the flats. Rather, we are interested in forms of collective memory (and nostalgia), connected to the materiality of the no-longer-visible spaces they describe.

Re-using qualitative data in this way can be uncomfortable but also productive (Bornat 2003, Thompson 2000, Gallwey 2013, Knight, Brannen & O'Connell 2015). In her discussion of reusing oral narratives collected by others, Bornat suggests that 'recognising that data is produced within a social and historical context, and that our revisiting is itself a social act, should be part of the repertoire of skills and understandings of the researcher' (2003: 50).

This imperative is especially critical here given that the archive is dispersed across several publications. In terms of Rossville, an early call for former residents to share their memories appeared shortly after the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the flats' demolition but the coordinators only managed to publish their material as late as 2019 (Collins 2019). A parallel project emerged

around the time Derry won its bid to become UK City of Culture in 2013, when 'culture' and the proliferation of heritage projects were seen as positive agents for economic regeneration and, ultimately, post-conflict resolution (Doak 2018).<sup>4</sup> These interviews were part of a wider community history project on different parts of Rossville supported by The National Lottery (Cooper 2012). The publication came out in 2012 with some fragments of the interviews being published in local newspapers in advance - an online BBC article from late 2010 containing fragmentary quotes from Rossville resident Charlie McMenamin ended with an open request for other residents to share their memories, as well as an invitation to attend a future reunion and get involved in a forthcoming exhibition (BBC 2010) that would eventually take place during the 2011 Gasyard Féile.<sup>5</sup>

For Divis, the primary source drawn upon is *Balconies, Brits and Bin Lids: Residents Remember Life in Divis Flats*, an oral history collection published in 1998, edited by Gerry Downes, and published by the DSG. While the connections between the various groups that emerged from Divis in the 1970s and 1980s are unclear, it is apparent that the DSG, like the Divis Residents' Association and the Divis Demolition Committee, were committed to the destruction of the flat and the rehousing of its residents; in an earlier document about structural damp in the buildings they reported that 'the only solution acceptable to 94 per cent of the people of Divis is total demolition' (1982: 2). Bearing this in mind, *Balconies* is an ambivalent intervention in the memory culture around the flats; former residents critique hegemonic media narratives of the flats as synonymous with crime, poverty and violence, while also describing the appalling conditions that made demolition the only acceptable solution.

This is captured in Downes' introduction to some extent, where he says:

Depending on the writer's point of view, Divis has been portrayed as; a fortress, a prison, a republican stronghold, a concrete jungle, a glue sniffers' den, a joyriders' paradise. (DSG: 3)

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<sup>4</sup> The project's compiler declared he hoped the book and the exhibition would 'raise the profile of the area' in order to 'attract even more visitors in the future' and that he had been approached by a production company interested in making a documentary (Duddy 2011).

<sup>5</sup> The Gasyard Féile is an annual community festival of arts and music that takes place in the Brandywell and Bogside areas of Derry since 1993.



In this context, it is clear that one of the threads running through the memories collected in the text is a desire to contest and speak back to these representations of Divis, particularly negative representations. An example of this representation is apparent in Charles Brett's verdict on the flats in *Housing a Divided Community*, an encomium for the NIHE (1986). Brett was a board member of the executive from its launch in 1971, and while he acknowledges some of the organisation's flaws his tone is essentially exculpatory. This is epitomised in his account of Divis, of which he says: 'It is the people who live in the flats themselves that make the difference ... with discipline and thoughtfulness most blocks could be reasonably comfortable' (1986: 43). Expanding on this theme, he adds: 'Living in flats accordingly requires a degree of sophistication considerably greater than living in a street, or a cottage' (Brett 1986: 43). Brett's intervention here is a more-than-usually candid version of the dominant narrative of the flats as synonymous with abjection, in that its condemnation of the residents is explicit rather than implicit.

### *The many faces of loss: a nostalgic interlude*

Our reading of the cultural memory of both flats is particularly attentive to the expression of forms of nostalgia, which animates both sources in different ways. Nostalgia is not understood here as signifying an uncritical or retrogressive desire for the past or for the return of the past. Rather, it is read as a temporal orientation that is used as a technique in composing the narratives that we discuss and a way of negotiating the boundaries between the past and present (Boym 2001, Bayman 2019). Nostalgia is mobilized in a number of different ways in the accounts analyzed below. In some of them, it allows for what Ben Jones in his work on nostalgic lifewriting in post-war Britain calls a 'critique of dominant stigmatizing representations of these neighbourhoods and their inhabitants' (2010: 356). In our material, the memories expressed refuse and critique the portrayal of Divis and Rossville as exemplary of the conflict and as a byword for poverty and deprivation. In others, it allows less for a contestation of dominant discourses and more for an evocation of sociality or solidarity between residents in the flats. This evocation contains an implicit critique of the politics of the present, in which the apparent certainties of the past have been replaced by a more complex set of relations but residents of working-class, Catholic communities in Belfast and Derry still suffer from slow violence and lack of opportunities. Jackie Clarke describes this form of nostalgia well in her work on former factory workers in Moulinex, who 'reassert the value of solidarity in the face of a narrative which gives it no place in the present' (2015: 123). And in

others, particularly in the memories of Divis solicited by the DSG, nostalgia is apparent in the narratives that describe residents' early experiences of the flats. This is a kind of nostalgia for a foreclosed future that did not or was not allowed to happen, as expressed for instance in Lily's description of the amenities on offer in the new building as 'a real luxury' (Smith & Campbell 2017; DSG: 11).

In thinking about the different ways in which nostalgia is expressed within the narratives analyzed here, and in considering the complex and polyvocal effects of different kinds of nostalgic orientation, we are drawing on a growing body of literature unpacking the complexities of nostalgic memories (Cashman 2006, Bryant 2008, Atia & Davies 2010, Field, 2010). However, we are also following Ben Jones' call for historicizing and contextualizing nostalgic texts. This approach is able to explain some of the differences in inflection of nostalgic memories of the flats in Belfast on one hand and the flats in Derry on the other, a difference that we consider in the concluding section. Our initial analysis below will trace some connections between the two sets of memories, firstly in terms of affect and materiality, and secondly in terms of iconicity.

### **The affective materiality of Divis and Rossville**

When in the mid-1980s Derry's Bishop Edward Daly intervened in the debates about whether or not Rossville flats should be demolished, he hinted at the affective qualities of the architecture: '[s]tones, and the way they are used, the design and the imagination with which they are bounded together, can have an impact on the community' (Derry Journal 1983). By capturing the dialectical relationship between the building and its residents, Rev. Daly was referring to the importance of what Anderson has called the 'co-ingredience' of people and place (Anderson 2004). As suggested above, the buildings' design bore the hallmarks of and contributed to a larger history of state violence. 'The way in which those stones were put together on Rossville Street', continued Daly, 'made a considerable contribution and I believe, had a considerable influence in the launching of other stones in that same Rossville Street and its environs in subsequent years' (Derry Journal, 24 November 1983).

Daly's reflections on the importance of infrastructure in the making of politics and the legacies of violence has animated our thinking about both Rossville and Divis. In *Balconies, Brits and*

*Bin-Lids* (as foreshadowed by the volume's evocative title) the way in which interviewees evoke the materiality of the flats is synecdochal and intertextual – that is, isolated parts of the entanglement of space, people and history that form the Divis complex are described in ways that offer an insight into the whole, and elements of the specific, local history of the flat are connected to republican memory culture more broadly (DSG 1998). To some extent this is a function of the structure of the collection, which is chopped into thematic sections, meaning that the narratives available to the reader are necessarily fragmented; but it can also be understood as a way of telling, in which interviewees focus on vivid recollections that work to encapsulate their spatial experiences of the flats. Stairs and lifts feature regularly, as do the rubbish chutes, which were too small and regularly became blocked, and the presence of rubbish more generally – 'Divis was just one big rubbish tip', Thomas remembered (DSG: 27). In Rossville, the bins generate ambivalent responses. Towards the end of the 1970s the constant rioting and the occupation of the army made it really difficult to maintain a sense of order yet, in the initial years, some of the resident's attachment to the modernist promise can be traced in their willingness to carry out maintenance tasks by themselves. Hugh McCauley recalls that when the NIHE 'left some paint behind them...[a]ll the families got together and painted the chute – we even put an off-cut of carpet into the entrance to the chute!' (Cooper 2012: 191). In McCauley's account the building enhances the civic pride of the inhabitants who saw themselves, albeit briefly, as deserving recipients of the welfare state gift. In fact, public housing was seen as a technology that could mediate the Stormont regime's attempt to foster a sense of 'residential pride and responsibility' in order to undermine the legitimacy of its critics (Loughlin 2015: 200).

Maura, remembering the experience of living in the Divis flats with a young family, said: 'I never put any weight on when I lived in the flats. There are seven steps in each wee flight and you have to go up three flights just to get to the first floor' (DSG: 16). Peter said: 'There are seven steps in each flight and there are 13 flights. So you multiply that; and you can carry bags up that, 91 steps, concrete, from the bottom to the top and going round in a circular type of thing ... And the stench is, you know, totally out of this world' (DSG: 16). In both these recollections the enumeration of scale (seven steps in a flight, 13 flights, 91 steps) works as an incantation that conjures the felt experience of the building; this is reinforced through the further incantation of this experience as bodily, through Maura's explicit linking of her body

with the building – ‘I never put any weight on when I lived in the flats’ – and Peter’s memory of the sensory landscape of the staircases – ‘totally out of this world’.<sup>6</sup>

The absence of lights contributed to the fearful sensory landscape of the flats. Maura, again, said:

I was frightened when I was going to the Disco, me and my friend ... It was frightening because sometimes the lights were on and sometimes the lights were not on, and when you were walking up the stairs in the dark, she used to be hanging unto me and I used to be hanging unto her. (DSG: 17)

The richness of luminic tropes in the memories of the residents serves as a reminder of the materiality of the structure as a constituent of their experience (Edensor 2015). Another Divis resident, Artie, noticed similar patterns:

It used to be years ago that the vandals would break the lights or else the soldiers would blacken all the lights out, even on the balconies I’ve seen them coming round with paint and blackening all the lights out and vandals too doing it – breaking the lights. I seen many a time myself going up the stairs in pitch black feeling my way along stairs, groping for the banisters. You were scared of falling down the stairs all the time. Some of the stairs were really steep, concrete, with ten stairs in them. (DSG: 19)

The suggestion that soldiers deliberately broke or painted over the lights in the complex is striking in terms of the weaponisation of the space, where constant state surveillance worked alongside the deliberate disruption of the rhythms and patterns of everyday life for the inhabitants of the flats (Kitson 1971). Both Divis and Rossville were seen by the state as ‘striated spaces’ that ought to be ‘smoothed out’ (Weizman 2012) through constant raids and the military occupation of the roofs. Surveillance entailed the presumption and production of

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<sup>6</sup> The particular sensory landscape afforded by these housing complexes was also noted by the security forces, who felt the need to act with extreme caution when patrolling these flats. In Rossville the shape of the flats contributed to a unique sensory landscape known as the ‘Derry Sound’ which confused the soldiers. As the Saville Inquiry described it, this ‘echoing effect created by the City Walls and adjacent buildings (including the high Rossville Flats) ... could multiply the sound of gunfire and explosions and create false impressions of the direction from which these sounds were coming’ (Bloody Sunday Inquiry 2010: 40).

predictable movements and activities - so the army, for instance, would ask people why they were leaving their flat at a particular time and where they were going to - but actions like breaking the lights in the stairwell are suggestive of the role of unpredictability and shock tactics in 'counter-insurgent' state violence. 'I always felt that their eyes were on you and your children, watching you all the time', said Billy Carlin in relation to the army post on both ends of the U-shaped Rossville flats (in Collins 2019: 76-77). Thus, surveillance also translated into a disruption of the very notion of intimacy inside of the resident's homes. Eileen Collins remembers how '[y]ou always kept your bedroom curtains closed because they could see everything from where they were positioned' (75).

Finally, the materiality of the flats was evoked through the ways in which space acted as a witness to violent events and retained the traces of that witnessing. This is reflected especially strikingly in Lena's story about the 'crying stairs', where the haunting of the specific space of the flats could also be read as a metaphor for the continuing presence of the Troubles in the present. She said:

There was a couple of soldiers killed too. They were killed in Cullingtree, at Cullingtree stairs. They were blew up. They call it the Crying Stairs now. You would hear the children say: 'I'm not going down those Crying Stairs.' The glue-sniffers, now, they stand on the Crying Stairs. On Cullingtree Walk not far from where the other bomb, that killed my young son, was planted. Then other people say they hear things on it, you know. Maybe people walk down and black things fly over them. You hear people say they were taken before their time and they are still there, so the stairs are haunted. Perhaps they might be right. That's what happens when people are taken before their time, because they are somebody's rearing. (DSG: 29)

In Rossville, several interviews speak of the gloomy atmosphere that took hold of the flats in the years prior to demolition. Problems with vermin worsened as families started to move out due to doors and windows being walled up to dissuade squatters. The entrenchment of the conflict did not help. As John McGinley puts it: '[i]t was a daily grind living there in the late '70s and '80s. You'd wake up every morning and see the British Army sitting at your door' (Derry News, 7 March 2011) In *From Columba to Conflict* author Michael Cooper describes the feeling left by the killing of Stephen McConomy near the flats as a 'palpably sickening atmosphere' (2012: 186). Another resident registers a similar affective response to the process

of material and social ruination: 'it was very quiet towards the end, it was getting eerie' (Derry News 7 February 2017).

However, the materiality of these housing estates also allowed for specific forms of resistance to the incursions of the state, and particularly to 'house raids', a consistent tactic employed by the police and army. These raids were 'an almost everyday feature of life' for Catholic communities in the 1970s and 1980s; between 1971 and 1976, some 250,000 house searches were carried out, meaning that 'virtually every Catholic working-class habitation was searched, and many more than once' (Pickering 2000: 54, Newsinger 1995: 88, Helsinki Watch 1991). Many of the narratives we draw on describe the exhausting repetition of these raids and the way in which residents dealt with them.

One former resident, Peter, said:

When they [soldiers] tried to get in, women rattled pot lids off the balconies. Once you heard that everyone started rapping to warn that the Brits were trying to get into the flat. You'd have heard this great din all around the whole complex. You'd have seen a person at every piece of the balcony rattling a lid. You see everywhere else they rattled bin lids but in Divis we had no bins, so it was pots and pans. (DSG: 29)

Others described similar ways in which resisting the violence of the state (and resisting the deliberate refusal of privacy and intimacy this violence entailed, as discussed above) entailed particular techniques in Divis. Lily said:

Well then, the children are ready for them when they come in because, as I said to you earlier, there the chutes and that are very disgusting. So all the children have to do is run to the chutes take whatever dirt they like and they wait until they come under the arches and they throw the lot out, bottles, tins, anything. So they chase the children up. Young boys standing at the corner doing nothing so they have to break them up, they get their helicopter to fly as low as possible. (DSG: 30)

### **The iconicity of the flats - between respectability and resistance**

As the conflict developed from 1968, Divis and Rossville became emblematic of aspects of its violence. Partly because of this enmeshment, partly because of their representation as spaces of deprivation, and partly because of their sheer scale in cities that at this point had very little high-rise architecture, both tower blocks became metonymic with the conflict itself, especially in its urban manifestation. The iconicity of the flats was also picked up by the 'eyes of the state' (Scott 1998). As argued earlier, the failure of O'Neill's reformist endeavours was apparent in the disillusionment produced by the structural shortcomings of Rossville and Divis. The architectural design aimed at securing the consent in deprived areas became the catalyst for subaltern solidarity, a form of life that stood in defiance of state control in that the flats were seen as symbols of republican territoriality (Bollens 2000: 213).

Notwithstanding the forms of eventful and non-eventful violence suffered by the residents of both Divis and Rossville, these estates are distinctive in that they occupy a dazzling position in the local narratives of resistance against state control. This is particularly striking in Derry, where the very materiality of the buildings - the labyrinthine U-shaped arrangement of these 'streets in the sky' allowing easy escape routes and the multiple balconies and windows serving as battlement for observers and petrol bomb throwers - played a key role in the constitution and maintenance of Free Derry (1969-1971), a no-go area for the state security forces, especially during the months following the 'Battle of the Bogside' in August 1969 (Kerr 2013, Lynch 2006, McCann 1974). Proof of the monumental significance of this episode for the local community was the establishment of the 'Free Derry Museum' in 2006 (Crooke 2010) but also the preservation and constant rearticulation of the Free Derry corner (Dawson 2005, Conway, 2010). One story summarizes the gravitational pull of Rossville in Derry's post-conflict memory. Many residents recall a day in the early 1970s when, during a riot, a cooker thrown from one of the flats landed on a RUC Land Rover. Lizzie McGarrigle, for example, remembers a telephone conversation on that day in which she informs a neighbour there had been no casualties other than her father's cooker (Cooper 2012: 180). Local artist Locky Morris created a sculpture entitled 'Flight Of The Cooker', a reproduction of which can be purchased today in a local shop specialising in conflict memorabilia (McDaid 2014).

The iconicity of the flats has continued into the present day, despite (or perhaps as a result of) the demolition of both blocks in the 1980s and 1990s. In the recent Troubles thriller *'71*, for instance, director Yann Demange sets the climactic scenes of the film in a reconstruction of Divis Flats, where the disorientating and nightmarish architecture of the building symbolises

the disorientating and nightmarish vision of Northern Ireland in general, as seen through the Orientalist gaze of the British soldier-protagonist (Demange 2014, Newby & Roulston 2018). In the play *The Bog Couple* (2018) a Protestant and a Catholic man find themselves having to coexist in an apartment in the Rossville flats during the Troubles. While the humorous conflict between these two men represents the tension between two communities, the estate appears as a spatial shorthand for the experience of the conflict in Derry. The memories dissected here are all grappling with this hegemonic image of the flats as metonymic with the Troubles.

This image is shot through with another history which is less related to the conflict itself and more related to the history of state planning and modern architecture in Britain. As Michael Romyn has shown in his analysis of oral histories from the Heygate in South London, tension between individual memories of community and media-driven narratives of blight and decline is characteristic of the contested past of social housing (Romyn 2016). Nostalgia is one form that this tension takes, as the following section outlines.

### **Nostalgia for community**

As we have suggested, residents also expressed forms of nostalgia for the flats, partly in relation to the iconicity we have described above. Paddy, for instance, remembers the situation in the flats during the Loyalist Workers' Strikes.<sup>7</sup> He said:

That was in 1974, when we had no light or heat or electric so the neighbours all got together and made bonfires. We boiled a lot of potatoes and made stew. We made sandwiches. We didn't starve. We used candles for light. You had to wrap yourself up well and go round with a blanket round you. I can't remember just how long it lasted. It was long enough. Everybody pulled together, round this part anyway. Everyone was out doing their bit, gathering sticks and burning them, and the pots and teapots. It was great. Be god! I hope it doesn't happen again. (DSG: 40)

This is a striking memory in its evocation of a community pulling together to deal with a difficult situation. The final clauses are also telling - Paddy suggests the ambivalence of

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<sup>7</sup> The strikes, organised by the Ulster Workers' Council in protest at the proposed Sunningdale peace agreement and in many cases enforced by loyalist paramilitaries, lead to the disruption of Belfast's electricity supply because of walk-outs at the Ballylumford Power Station.



nostalgia, and particularly the important point that it does not entail an uncritical desire for the return of the past wholesale (Cashman 2006).

Sean Dunlevy recalls the way in which in Rossville, the 'great spirit' materialised itself in the synchronisation of everyday rhythms: '[t]he women all kept their homes in pristine conditions and all kept the same routine – they'd hang the washing out at the same time, clean their front doors at the same time, go to the shops at the same time – you could set your watch by them' (Cooper 2012: 188). Some residents go as far as to express their desire to return. Deidre Conaghan, one of the last residents to leave the flats said: 'I would love to go back to the flats if they were still there. It was the place to be. It was a good community and there was always parties and community events and you had a birds' eye view of the riots' (Derrnow 2017). Her nostalgic account is punctuated by the scopic regime afforded by the high-rise flats, which allowed residents like her to witness history as it unfolded. In the telling of these stories there are snippets of critical self-reflexivity. Commenting on the longing for a lost community present in the memories of many of his former neighbours, John Tierney suggests that: '[t]hese memories are stronger than their thoughts about the condition they were living in which couldn't be tolerated in the long term. Nevertheless, it's good to remember the good times and the good neighbours we had; that's what we really miss about the Rossville flats (Cooper 2012: 179)'.

Other memories from the Divis collection focus on more everyday moments; people who were children or adolescents in the flats, in particular, express memories of everyday excitement and fun. Veronica said:

I remember one of the things we used to do if we were bored was to walk round the balconies looking for black bows on the doors and go in to see the corpse. It didn't matter if you knew them or not [...] God love some of those poor people, we must of had them tortured, cos if it was a good corpse we'd go back a couple of times. (DSG: 41)

This evocation of sociality here is comic but also poignant, linking it to folk practices around death and burial that would have persisted in the old Pound Loney.

The proliferation of comic and ironic tropes in the nostalgic narratives of communities affected by urban social change is far from unusual (Yarker 2016: 249). In Northern Ireland the discursive self-representation of romanticized working-class pasts is set against the backdrop of the conflict and further complicated by the existence of long-standing memory traditions (Cashman 2013, O'Connell 2014). The fact that resistance to spatial othering by the state dovetails with 'golden age' narratives is not specific to reminiscences about life in Rossville and Divis. Rather, this ambiguity characterizes many conflict narratives in Northern Ireland (O'Connell 2018). Former Rossville residents met and held exhibitions with photographs and stories about the flats as early as 1998. In 1999, an announcement in the local journal *Fingerpost* included a short call for further material following what they referred to as 'a very successful exhibition' on the Rossville complex. In stating their aim to publish a book, the coordinators explicitly described the type of memory they were looking for: 'The Flats were a focal point during this period' they write, 'but the book will cover "life" in and around the Flats, the lifestyles and humorous stories to do with the residents and their visitors'. (Fingerpost 1999).. This is not only a variation of the old regional saying of 'whatever you say, say nothing' noted by many anthropologists (Finlay 1997, Kelleher 2004, Bryson 2007) but also a testimony to the shifting nature of what constitutes the 'domain of the sayable' (Butler 1997:133, see also Newby, this issue) in post-Good Friday Agreement Northern Ireland, where the perceived need to look ahead and focus on the benign aspects of the past enforces a specific restrictive set of 'cultural scripts' (Roper 2000) delineating what can be circulated in public spaces. The interest in speaking about – but also listening to, for these are ultimately edited by community gatekeepers – the less well known (everyday) 'life' of the flats' residents reminds us of the labour of moral calibration carried out by communities facing a double stigmatization: first as dwellers in a territory targeted by security forces as 'security-threat-communities' (Coyles 2017); and, secondly, as residents of estates whose conditions they are blamed for (Crossley 2017).

In both sets of narratives, the 'affirmative negativity' (Gordillo 2018) operates as nostalgic counter-narratives that reaffirm the residents' respectability (Skeggs 1997, Hanley 2017). Importantly, however, we can identify some variations in the way in which nostalgic tropes are articulated, as these past references stake different contemporary claims (Savage 2010: 117). In Rossville the nostalgic accounts are eager to celebrate the forms of sociality that persisted despite but also, crucially, thanks to the conditions in which such solidarity emerged. In Divis, the desire to critique the bad conditions of the flats in order to resist the spatial and historical

as well as the ideological lenses through which they were rendered as abject subjects by the state is more pronounced. While the Divis narratives were collected during the late 1990s, demolition still fresh in their memory, the vast majority of the Rossville narratives were published between 20 and 25 years after the flats' phased-out dismantling, when the need to contest their othering was less prominent. However, the temporal gap alone does not explain these differences. The vast majority of the recollections of Rossville drawn upon here emerge after the atmosphere of optimism that followed the 2010 announcement of Derry/Londonderry as the first UK City of Culture (Doak 2014). The extent to which the hopeful rhetoric this engendered punctuates these narratives can be seen in the exuberance with which various community-based heritage publications such as *From Columba to Conflict* multiplied in this moment. Although the Bogside, which remains one of Northern Ireland's most impoverished districts, was marginalized in the UK City of Culture cultural agenda, the need to reassert the area's historical identity was felt across the city (Doak 2018: 9).

Attention to the historical conditions indexing these vernacular nostalgias needs to be balanced against a material analysis stressing the importance of the spatial framework (DeSilvey & Edensor 2013, Gordillo 2014, Yarker 2017). The nostalgic inflections discussed here are not simply projected by individuals onto space but arise from their affective everyday engagements with it (Della Dora 2006: 211). The differences in the sheer dimensions of the two housing estates, for example, cannot be overstated; the size of Divis, at least five times bigger than Rossville, makes it harder for former residents to construct a unified narrative or memory about the site.

Additionally, their location within the vernacular landscapes affected their prominence in the narratives of the Troubles. In Belfast, the conflict was spatially more diffuse than in Derry, where the imagined geographies of ethno-sectarian division positioned Rossville, located in the shadow of the City's walls, as one of the main points of access into Irish Nationalist territory. Thus, the flats became the gravitational centre of a Bogside 'pastoral,' not only for the residents of the flats but also the local activists who took advantage of its defensive position (McDowell and Switzer 2011). Before it was occupied by the Army in the early 1970s, the roof of the Rossville flats provided a vantage point for riots and resistance against the RUC (Kerr 2013: 84). Although this is not always explicitly acknowledged in comic stories of the everyday, the nostalgia underpinning the celebration of the community's defiance to state power is only possible in the time after the conflict, where the longing for an event is enmeshed

with the longing for the built environment that mediated such resistance. From the perspective of the present's temporal alterity, the flats operate as the 'home' for a mythologized past (see Bryant 2012). In his foreword to *Free Derry: Protest and Resistance*, Eamon McCann encapsulates the exhilarating enchantment of this period: 'It was the best of times, the time when we were at our best, the closest we came in the decades of smoke and sulphur to the clear high ground of a shared freedom, giving us a glimpse of a future we still hurtle towards' (Kerr 2013: 7). Nostalgia for Rossville thus prefigures a nostalgia for a belonging to history of resistance.

## **Conclusion**

In summary, then, we have argued here that everyday memories of the conflict in Divis and Rossville suggest a new way of thinking about the relationship between materiality and conflict in Northern Ireland. Interesting new work is emerging on material culture and social life in Britain (Wetherell 2020); this article is an initial attempt to think about how these dynamics are different in Northern Ireland in the context of the Troubles.

In doing so, we have argued that these memories (and the cultural objects in which they are collected) speak to a series of questions about state violence and surveillance, about materiality, and about nostalgia. We have suggested that residents understood both the slow violence and the 'exceptional' violence of the flats as existing within the sectarian infrastructure of state planning and counter-insurgency practices during the Troubles; that the memories produced from within this understanding are imbued with and responsive to the materiality of the spaces being remembered; and that, despite the desire to narrate the violences and deprivations of the communities within Divis and Rossville, both sets of residents also mobilise critically nostalgic narratives and approaches in order to open up a space for other kinds of stories about the flats. In the case of Divis, this nostalgia is generally used to critique narratives that indict the residents of the flats as dirty, unrespectable, and so on, thus displacing the blame for the conditions of the space onto those who lived there rather than on to the state - this displacement is what the nostalgia of the residents refuses. In the case of Rossville, this nostalgia also insists upon the co-existence of deprivation and respectability, but it also evokes a landscape of solidarity and resistance that is harder to imagine in the context of 'post-conflict' Northern Ireland. Finally, we have argued that the specific material and historic conditions pertaining to each site are one reason for this difference in articulation.

Despite their differences, the vernacular nostalgias registered in these memories share an ambivalent engagement with the material afterlives of the conflict. This is not simply a longing for return to the demolished flats but 'a particular, selective way of narrating the past that produces such a longing' (Bryant 2008: 404). What is epitomized in the memories of the former residents is not longing for the flats, but a nostalgic dwelling on the forms of sociality characterized by solidarity and inter-dependency that were afforded by such life-in-common.

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