

**Title Page:**

**Appropriating Architecture: Violence, Surveillance and Anxiety in Belfast's Divis Flats**

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**Biography:**

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**Abstract:**

In Belfast in the 1970s and 1980s, a modernist housing scheme became subject to multiple contested appropriations. Built between 1966 and 1972, the Divis Flats became a flashpoint in the violence of the Troubles, and a notorious space of danger, poverty, and decay. The structural and social failings of so many postwar system-built housing schemes were reiterated in Divis, as the rapid material decline of the complex echoed the descent into war in Belfast and Northern Ireland. Competing military and paramilitary strategies of violence refigured the topography of the flats, rendering the balcony walkways, narrow stairs, and lift shafts into an architecture of urban war. The residents viewed the complex as a concrete prison. They campaigned for the complete demolition of the flats, with protests which included attacking the architecture of the flats itself. The competing appropriations of the complex reflect how architecture is remade through use.

## **Appropriating Architecture: Violence, Surveillance and Anxiety in Belfast's Divis Flats**

In 1962 the Northern Ireland government embarked on a slum clearance program for environmentally decaying areas of Belfast. The Pound Loney, an area of the Lower Falls in west Belfast, was designated as one of the first redevelopment areas. The streets of run-down Victorian terraces were to be replaced by a new system-built housing scheme, and what the local authorities described as “the adventure of living in high flats.”<sup>1</sup> The program centered around the Divis Flats complex, which would rehouse people from the Lower Falls in a combination of high-rise towers and inter-connected medium-rise blocks. The design drew heavily on the Park Hill Flats in Sheffield for inspiration. Even before building work had been completed, it was described as “Europe’s youngest slum,” and then “the worst housing in Western Europe.”<sup>2</sup> By the end of 1993, after a sustained campaign by the residents for demolition, all of the medium-rise blocks were gone, and only the tower was left standing.

The flats were commissioned by the Northern Ireland Housing Trust, and designed by Scottish architect Frank Robertson of the John Laing Construction Company between 1966 and 1972.<sup>3</sup> The Divis complex covered a 14-acre site and comprised of 12, seven and eight-story high “sectra” deck-access blocks, and Divis Tower, a 19-story high-rise on the north east edge of the complex. **(Figure 1)** The deck access blocks were connected through balcony walkways that enabled residents to traverse from block to block without encountering any doors or barriers, and without having to go down to ground level. **(Figure 2)** A person could walk from St Jude’s Row in the south west to Whitehall Row in the north east, and anywhere across the complex. The joints between blocks contained the stairs and rubbish chutes. Around 850 flats were designed to house approximately 2,400 people and varied in size from one to six bedrooms.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Graham 1986: 5.

<sup>2</sup> Anson 1986: 18.

<sup>3</sup> Roy 2007: 1.

<sup>4</sup> In 1974 two further medium-rise blocks were added to the west of St Peter’s Cathedral, Sluka 1989: 44.

In the early stages, the scheme was met with a mix of trepidation and optimism about the promises of modern housing. There was a campaign against the development which called for “low rents – not high rise,” but the political protests were focused less on the architecture and more on the spatial politics of the city.<sup>5</sup> Segregation, discrimination, gerrymandered electoral wards, and disputes about the provision of council housing were central to the civil rights movement in Northern Ireland in the 1960s.<sup>6</sup> The Divis scheme was devised and built in this context, and the flats quickly became a symbol of segregated communities, mutual fear and distrust.

The complex officially opened for the first residents in the spring of 1968, but was still under construction when turmoil escalated the following summer. In August and September of 1969, as inter-community violence and intimidation escalated, an estimated 3,750 families in Belfast (83% of whom were from Catholic communities), fled their homes to developing sectarian enclave areas for security.<sup>7</sup> The outsize architecture of Divis became a vernacular “refuge outpost” as families fleeing the violence squatted empty and partially complete flats.<sup>8</sup> It was estimated that shortly after the complex was officially opened, up to 29 per cent of those residing there were squatting.<sup>9</sup> The hundreds of people forced out of their homes recast the planned relocation of Lower Falls residents to the Divis streets in the sky, entrenching the segregation of the population and marking the flats as a republican/Catholic enclave area.<sup>10</sup>

The mass displacements reflected the territoriality of the conflict, but also how violence was directed at the domestic spaces of homes and streets. The flats provided some refuge, but they did not offer insulation from the violence. On the night of August 14, 1969, amid violent

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<sup>5</sup> Graham 1986: 5-7; Anson 1986: 18.

<sup>6</sup> The Northern Ireland Housing Trust was disbanded and replaced by the newly formed Northern Ireland Housing Executive following the Cameron Report in 1969, which investigated discriminatory and politicised housing policies by the Stormont government.

<sup>7</sup> Graham 1986: 8. These were some of the estimated 60,000 people in Belfast who left their homes between 1969 and 1973, Murtagh 2000: 46

<sup>8</sup> Anson 1985: 336.

<sup>9</sup> Graham 1986: 8.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Shirlow and Murtagh 2006; a comparable case study of another development in Belfast, the Unity Flats, is in Murtagh 2000: 65-88.

street battles, armored Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) trucks with mounted Browning machine guns opened fire in the streets and at the months old Divis blocks. An off-duty soldier and a young boy were killed in the complex. Nine year old Patrick Rooney was in his bedroom in the St Brendan's Block when he was shot by a bullet which passed through his window.<sup>11</sup> Two days later the government in Westminster authorized the use of British troops to contain the escalating violence.<sup>12</sup> The introduction of British soldiers at first halted what appeared to be an inexorable descent into civil war, but in the following years the militarization of Northern Ireland became increasingly total and violence an everyday occurrence. This was a war where people were routinely killed in their houses, on their doorsteps, in their cars, and in their local pubs. The battlegrounds were ordinary civilian spaces and buildings, which were remade through practices of violence and the experience of conflict.

### **The Divis Flats as a “Stage” for Conflicts**

The Divis Flats became one of the civilian spaces most strongly identified with violence and conflict in Belfast. The practices of the security services and paramilitaries transformed the complex's covered walkways, blind corners, closed lift shafts, and dark narrow staircases into a distinctive architecture of urban war. While competing actors attempted to gain power over the building and its inhabitants, there was a parallel conflict between the residents and the housing authorities. The residents campaigned for the demolition of the complex, and at one point resorted to attacking the interiors of empty flats in protest at their living conditions. These different conflicts were all closely tied to the architecture and prompt questions about the interactions between the building and its users.

Hilde Heynen has categorized the three main conceptualizations of the relationship between “spatial and social constellations” as receptor, instrument and stage. Crudely put, the

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<sup>11</sup> The RUC was the police force in Northern Ireland which was dominated by the Loyalist/Protestant community. Considered a highly sectarian force during the Troubles, it was disbanded and reconstructed as the Police Service of Northern Ireland as part of the peace process.

<sup>12</sup> Wichert 1999: 111f.

receptor approach understands space as an embodiment or articulation of social relations and practices, with little influence over the actions of human agents. The notion of “space as instrument,” however, considers space as a powerful instigator of social and behavioral changes. The “space as stage” model integrates elements of each of these. It recognizes how spatial parameters contribute to the production and reproduction of social realities, but avoids any claims of outright determinism. The stage is produced by social forces, but just as a stage makes particular actions and interactions possible or impossible for the actors in a play, so “the spatial structure of buildings, neighborhoods and towns accommodates and frames social transformations.”<sup>13</sup> This conceptualization allows for a more nuanced treatment that observes the power of space, but envisions tensions and ongoing processes of re-appropriation.

A case study of the Divis complex can reveal how a building framed social practices, but also how those practices reshaped the building, giving its architectural features and spatial patterns new meanings and uses. The particular conditions in Belfast meant that a building could be utterly transformed by strategies of violence, surveillance, and intimidation. A close analysis of these transformations can help to develop the notion of the stage by highlighting both how spatial structure “frames social transformations” and how the building gained a multiplicity of uses and meanings as a result of the actions of its users. The architecture’s deep entanglement with the competing practices of soldiers, police, paramilitaries, and the residents, illustrates the extent to which the stage and the actors cannot be treated entirely separately, and must be held in relation.<sup>14</sup> In order to examine the influence of the architectural stage on these competing practices, it is necessary to deal with notions of use and users in architecture.

Work in architectural theory has attempted to more clearly understand how the user is constructed in architectural knowledge, and the extent to which architectural objects are subject to transformation through use, and the experiences of users.<sup>15</sup> The Divis Flats, a structure that

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<sup>13</sup> Heynen 2013: 344, 346, 349, 343.

<sup>14</sup> This is an element of the “relational history of architecture” posited by Cupers, Cupers 2013: 2.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Hill ed 1999 [1998]; Cupers ed 2013.

became the stage for multidimensional contests about the control of space and the politics of everyday life, reveals some of the many potentialities inherent within an architectural object to change, and be changed. To witness these doubled transformations of a building and its users, it is necessary to draw on the experiences and reflections of those who occupied the building, as well as analyzing the social practices that appropriated the architecture in various ways. This is what Kenny Cupers describes as the “complex lifeworld” of a building, a topic that has remained under-explored in architectural discourse.<sup>16</sup> To best observe the “lifeworld” of the building, the methodology draws on Kim Dovey’s analytical triad of spatial structure, discourse analysis, and phenomenology.<sup>17</sup> The main focus is on the everyday experiences of those who lived in the flats, and the phenomenology of violence and intimidation in the building. The users of Divis were not only the residents of the building, and it follows that the notion of use should be extended to include the various actors who interacted with the building, or the entire cast who populated the stage.

Social history sources, including reports and pamphlets published by the Residents Association, local resident newsletters, and oral history accounts, highlight how experiences of conflict were mediated by the built environment. These testimonies offer a partial view, but one that was situated on the walkways of the complex and the stage of the conflict. From this vantage point, the transformation of the design features into an architecture of alienation, depression and ever-present danger, can be better observed. This approach challenges traditional means of architectural representation, which tend to depict empty buildings, whose meanings are determined by form rather than by use.<sup>18</sup> Experiential accounts of the building are supplemented by a more limited analysis of the linear spatial structure of the complex and the representations of the architecture as a prison. The majority of the images used are from reports and publications produced by the residents in the period. These images reflect both the

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<sup>16</sup> Cupers 2013: 1.

<sup>17</sup> Dovey 1999: 2f.

<sup>18</sup> Hill 1999a [1998]: 145

residents' perception of the architecture and the way in which they decided to present it to a wider public.

### **Access, Anxiety and Vulnerability**

In Divis, the appropriations of architecture occurred in a judicial and political context in which the private space of homes, and the people residing there, were permanently accessible to the security forces. In August 1971, under the Special Powers Act, the Northern Ireland Parliament introduced internment, imprisonment without trial.<sup>19</sup> On the first day 342 people, all from republican/Catholic communities, were arrested and taken to detention camps. This prompted an upsurge of violence in which an estimated 7,000 people, mostly Catholics, fled their homes. Just as they had in 1969, hundreds of those displaced in west Belfast squatted in Divis.<sup>20</sup> In response to these events, residents built barricades around Catholic areas in an attempt to control access to urban spaces, which were being ever more completely shaped into distinct sectarian zones.<sup>21</sup> The contests over space were repeated in microcosm in Divis throughout the seventies and eighties, where the competing efforts of residents and security forces to control access to the flats was in part a question of dealing with the design. The architectural features of the flats gained new uses when security services tailored their operations to the complex's spatial pattern.

It was a planning and architectural decision to have no physical restrictions to access the Divis blocks. There were no secure gates or barriers in a plan informed by an imagination of smooth topologies, openness, and a belief that clear lines of sight and movement would facilitate a community atmosphere to replicate the old Pound Loney streets. When the flats were used, however, these features were refigured into an architecture of vulnerability.<sup>22</sup> The open

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. Dickinson 1995: 63-66; Donohue 1998: 1089-1120.

<sup>20</sup> The numbers of squatted continue to grow to a reported peak of 6,000 people in 1977, Graham 1986: 8.

<sup>21</sup> Mulholland 2002: 77.

<sup>22</sup> Physical barriers and restricted access are key points in Oscar Newman's ideas about 'defensible space', cf. Newman 1972.



access to the balcony walkways was coupled with poor sound insulation, and given the pervasive threat of violence, loud unknown footsteps were a cause of anxiety for residents.<sup>23</sup> The experience of intimidation was compounded by the building's structural defects, such as gaps in party walls and improperly sealed flats. These gaps were also colonized by cockroaches and rats, doubling the sense of invasiveness and insecurity felt by the residents.<sup>24</sup>

Disquiet about the potential dangers on the balconies was heightened at night when the walkways were often left completely dark. Anecdotally, soldiers regularly smashed the lights, partly to harass the residents, and partly to lower the chances of them being visible to potential paramilitary snipers.<sup>25</sup> The structure made soldiers vulnerable to snipers, but by breaking the lights they could materially alter the building, and change the relationship between competing users and the building. This simple action created new darkened spaces, which both reduced the vulnerability of soldiers, and heightened anxiety amongst the residents. In community newsletters there were regular stories and warnings about the dangers of being on the balconies at night. In one such report, in which a man "had to run for his life when he saw ten or twelve men with sticks at the end of St Brendan's block," residents were urged to "be on their guard and be careful approaching anyone. "Remember," it concluded, "it could be a matter of life or death."<sup>26</sup> The only times that access to the blocks was controlled was when the entrances were barricaded by the residents, or, more frequently, blocked off by the army during mass house searches.

The same emergency legislation that enabled internment permitted house searches without warrants. Between 1973 and 1976 there were around a quarter of a million house searches carried out by police and security forces in Northern Ireland, the majority of which were conducted in so-called republican stronghold communities such as Divis.<sup>27</sup> For residents,

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<sup>23</sup> A report on the flats by ASSIST Architects in 1983 noted the poorly constructed access decks with insufficient noise insulation.

<sup>24</sup> Graham 1986: 14.

<sup>25</sup> Downes, ed 1998: 17.

<sup>26</sup> "Loyalist Threat", *Divis Bulletin* 1985: 4.

<sup>27</sup> Ferriter 2004: 630.

these searches were intimidation and harassment, and an assertion by the security forces that they could contain population groups and enter their private domestic space. The “seal and search” operations carried out in Divis in the mid-1970s utilized the layout of the complex and its system of entry and exit points. The Army would block off the entries and exits to the blocks to create a population captive in their streets in the sky, and then conduct the house searches, which residents referred to as “raids.”<sup>28</sup> Recalling one such “seal and search” “raid,” a resident wrote:

it was early in the morning and I seen them coming in. [...] I seen jeeps and all driving in but it didn't dawn on me at first that they were coming in, in force. It was like something you'd see in a picture about Vietnam or some of these places. They had blocked every entrance to the flats and all the jeeps were down below. I looked over the balcony and seen them down at Christian Place. They had Milford blocked off and then they started to occupy all the balconies.<sup>29</sup>

“Seal and search” practices made residents feel vulnerable: “even inside your flat,” “never knowing when they might kick your door in some night.”<sup>30</sup> In these “raids” the security forces were able to use the design against the residents. The combination of high walkways and limited exits meant that, by covering these key points, the space could be controlled and the residents contained. The positioning of soldiers and jeeps on the stairs and lifts made the entrances into impassable check-points and the balcony walkways into cordoned off space, which could then be progressively occupied. **(Figure 3)** The practices of the security services enacted this transformation, but the complex's linear spatial structure facilitated it.

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<sup>28</sup> Sluka 1989: 193.

<sup>29</sup> Downes, ed. 1998: 31.

<sup>30</sup> Sluka 1989: 146, 282.

The rows of flats, lined up along walkways only enterable at single points at either side, meant that the pathways through the building could be relatively easily controlled. Dovey writes that, in a spatial program, the degree of “control” one cell has in a plan is determined by the extent to which one must move through it in order to access the rest of the plan.<sup>31</sup> With a linear plan such as this, the occupation of the stairways enabled strong control over the spaces of the walkways and flats. As soldiers moved down the walkways, residents were contained by flats on one side and a sheer drop on the other. The physical limits of the architecture were exploited and incorporated into the practices of the security services. The stage was an influential frame, but it was the users’ actions within it that created meanings and functions unimagined by the architect.

The security services’ technique of commanding limited entrance and exit points to control space and the movement of residents was repeated on a micro scale with the complex’s drying tower. The three-story central drying tower meant for shared use by the residents was built instead of providing full space and facilities to dry washing inside individual flats. There was no way to see into the tower from outside, and no controlled access to it. The residents were unable to easily keep an eye on their washing and ultimately the tower was not used for its original purpose. It did, however, become appropriated for other practices that made use of the opacity of the tower and its structure.

In a period of particularly high tensions, the army occupied the tower and remade it into a temporary detainment centre.<sup>32</sup> People were rounded up and then kept within the tower while their identities were checked. The corralling together of residents within the tower made use of a feature of the complex that had failed in its original purpose, but demonstrated that users, in this case the security services, were able to give this feature new utilities. By controlling the access

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<sup>31</sup> Dovey 1999: 22.

<sup>32</sup> This occurred shortly after Operation Motorman, a major operation carried out by the British Army on 31 July 1972 involving thousands of soldiers, tanks and bulldozers, to break through barricades and regain access to “no-go areas” in towns across Northern Ireland.

to the ground level people could be contained, and by bringing groups to one secured space they could be controlled and processed more easily.

The obscured interior of the tower, and its uselessness for drying clothes, contributed to a second appropriation. It became a haven for drinking and glue sniffing, and much like the darkened corners of balconies and stairways, residents saw it as an architectural feature which facilitated undesirable behavior. At the insistence of the Residents Association the tower was bricked up in 1973, and then demolished in 1985.<sup>33</sup> Different social practices changed the function of the drying tower, but the tower's structure enabled these practices to develop in particular ways. The movements of the actors were regulated by the physical frame of the stage, but the doubled transformation of the drying tower into a holding cell, and then a drinking den, demonstrates that the architecture could be used for different purposes rather than determining a specific behavior. In both instances, however, the security services and the glue sniffers seemed to turn the architecture against the rest of its users. The residents' response was to reclaim ownership of the space, and ultimately demolish it.

### **Concrete Prison and High-Rise Panopticon**

Forced relocation during street violence, internment, house searches, and the occupation of residential space by the army, provided a lens through which Divis was experienced by the residents. Divis became one of many enclave communities, but it had a distinct dual identity of fortress and prison, which was produced in relation to its architecture. Amid worsening violence and militarization, the phenomenological transformation of the complex into what residents derided as a "concrete prison" and a "dreadful enclosure" took a firm hold.<sup>34</sup> In a 1977 BBC television program, made by the Divis Residents Association, the representation of the flats as a prison was explicit and continuous. The program was titled *Internment in Divis*, and it cast the complex as a domestic version of the internment camps. At one point, as the film pans across

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<sup>33</sup> Downes, ed. 1998: 37.

<sup>34</sup> Divis Residents Association 1986: 13.

damp gloomy walkways lined with closed doors, the narration describes “people trapped in their cells, the access like a catwalk in prison.”<sup>35</sup> As the camera slowly proceeds down the balcony, the viewer is given the impression of a prison guard on patrol.

The residents’ comparisons of the flats to a prison focused on the linearity of the spatial pattern, but they also expressed feelings of being simultaneously isolated and deprived of privacy. The residents’ representations of the flats recall the practices and theories of prison architecture analyzed by Robin Evans and Michel Foucault.<sup>36</sup> Evans wrote that, according to the penal reformers of eighteenth century England, prisoners would be “delivered from their dungeons and reeking wards [...] into a measured, regulated, silent world, dominated by an architecture of inescapable relationships.”<sup>37</sup> **(Figure 4)** The residents of Divis, transferred from decrepit brick terraces into an architecture defined by its regularity and fixed spatial pattern, monitored and patrolled by soldiers (and at times by paramilitaries), would perhaps have recognized the transition into modernity Evans describes. The “architecture of inescapable relationships” in reformist prisons was designed to facilitate or demand particular responses from the inhabitants. In Divis, such relationships developed in the context of the broader conflict and the militarization of the complex and the city, but the architecture helped shape their nature and exacerbate their effects. Perhaps the most striking appropriation of civilian architecture occurred in the mid-1970s, when the 19-story Divis Tower was transformed into a panoptic observation post.

Divis Tower stands over two hundred feet tall with a vantage point over the complex, and the entire Lower Falls area. A surveillance post that began as a heap of sandbags on the roof became more and more advanced, and more and more permanent. A fortified concrete structure was built on top of the tower, cameras were installed and trained down onto the flats, while the top two floors of the tower were cleared of residents and used as accommodation for soldiers.

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<sup>35</sup> BBC 1977.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Evans 2010 [1982]; Foucault 1977 [1975].

<sup>37</sup> Evans 2010 [1982] 93.

(Figure 5) The soldiers were resupplied by a helicopter which hovered over the roof of the tower, making the building shake. What the architect imagined as a symbol of a modern and progressive city was turned against the residents and remade as an urban watchtower, a dystopian monument of a failed vision of the future. The picture of a military helicopter suspended above the tower was used on materials published by the Residents Association, and acted as a symbol of the subjection of the residents and the militarization of space. It instantly highlighted the panoptic power of the tower and its position dominating the spatial pattern of the complex. (Figure 6)

The passive invasiveness of this architecture of surveillance exposed the biopolitical vulnerability of the residents. One resident described the feeling of “being under constant guard 24 hours a day. I don’t mean watching you 24 hours a day – but there’s a presence – that’s the way Divis flats is. There’s a presence and you know you’re being watched, not as individuals but as a group.”<sup>38</sup> This was not just an effect of the tower, but also the spatial organization of the blocks, where the windows and walkways looked out across one another. The sense of constant observation and the vulnerability of the captive residents were heightened further when soldiers pasted photographs of residents, taken from the tower, onto the windows of flats below. The commentary on this story in the community newsletter, the *Divis Bulletin*, remarked that the photographs were “a grim reminder that big brother is always watching.”<sup>39</sup>

Foucault wrote that the primary effect of the Panopticon was to induce “a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power.”<sup>40</sup> The testimony that reported a constant “presence” in Divis demonstrates how the surveillance post acted upon residents. That is not to say that the building had a definite and distinct agency, but that its material properties gained the power to impact on people’s lives through specific practices and uses. If a defining function of panoptic architectural mechanisms is the removal of

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<sup>38</sup> Downes, ed. 1998: 34.

<sup>39</sup> “Tower Harassment”, *Divis Bulletin* 1986: 7.

<sup>40</sup> Foucault 1977 [1975]: 201.

power from those who live within its boundaries, and its simultaneous concentration in a permanently visible but permanently unverifiable singular authority, then the repurposed Divis Tower can be said to have produced a similar effect to Bentham's tower.<sup>41</sup> The futuristic luxuries of a city in the sky, and the panoramic bird's eye views imagined by the architect, were rendered into a dystopian tool of surveillance and control.<sup>42</sup>

The residents found themselves within an architectural complex that provided the organization of space necessary for their observation. The tower did not stand in the centre of the complex with the blocks wrapped around as in Bentham's vision, but it was remade into an element of a spatial mechanism of surveillance and intimidation, simply by the addition of cameras and security personnel. Alongside the surveillance post, this mechanism included the flats' cellular structure, the patrolled balconies, the thin dividing walls, and the windows which stared out across the complex. Evans observed that the coupling of the individualized space of the cell and the "generalized connective space of the galleries," was a feature of prison architecture that was later echoed in housing.<sup>43</sup> The spatial pattern of the Divis Flats meant that people were isolated in their flats and their outside space was reduced to a channel. The linearity of the plan enabled circulation to be controlled and monitored in this way, but it required the practices of the security services to enact and enforce this transformation.

The designation of the walkways as contested areas, to be patrolled and monitored, was reinforced by practices of paramilitaries which challenged the control of the security services, but only reinforced the militarization of civilian space. Paramilitaries killed patrolling soldiers on the walkways, at the lifts, and on the stairs. They were bombed, ambushed and shot by snipers hidden in the complex. The flats had a profound impact on the soldiers who patrolled them, as well as the people who lived there. Speaking in a subsequent television interview, one soldier recalled of Divis, "everything around you is a death trap. There's corners which can be

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<sup>41</sup> Evans 2010 [1982]: 46; Foucault 1977 [1975]: 201.

<sup>42</sup> Graham 1986: 11.

<sup>43</sup> Evans 2010 [1982]: 406, 404.

hidden booby-traps, bombs. Every window looks onto you, which could have a gunman there, which you wouldn't see unless the shot rang out."<sup>44</sup> The building was an intimidating and dangerous place for soldiers, partly because of the ways its design was utilized by paramilitaries. The anonymous windows and dark corners that caused anxiety amongst residents, provoked comparable responses by soldiers. In July 1973, a booby-trap bomb, concealed in an old mattress left beside a lift shaft, killed two soldiers and injured a woman in the area, as well as damaging many near-by flats.<sup>45</sup> This bombing, like the death of Patrick Rooney, so early in the life of the complex, left an indelible mark on the residents as well as the soldiers.

For some of the residents, the site of the bombing became haunted by the deaths. The stairs where the soldiers were killed became known as the "Crying Stairs." The memory of violent deaths haunted the residents, who were confronted with the same relentless uncompromising architecture, visibly marked and scarred by bombs and bullets. One resident wrote:

You would hear the children say 'I'm not going down those Crying Stairs.' [...] 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.<sup>46</sup>

The stairs were architecturally unremarkable, but their location in a dark corner, surrounded by thick concrete and where excess rubbish piled up, made it an opportune site for a booby-trap bomb. The way the paramilitaries who placed the bomb saw the space gave it a particular meaning and use. The deaths and the memory of the bomb subsequently gave the

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<sup>44</sup> John McGarrick interview. In Yorkshire Television 1987.

<sup>45</sup> Sutton Index of Deaths from the Conflict in Ireland; Sluka 1989: 53f.

<sup>46</sup> Downes, ed. 1998: 29.



space a new meaning again, and projected this vulnerability and anxiety onto the other identical stairways. There were darkened and rubble-strewn corners across the complex. **(Figure 7)** The paramilitaries offered a parallel use of the architecture that mirrored the practices of violence and intimidation of the security services, using the connective spaces as traps. In 1982, a bomb concealed in a drainpipe on Cullingtree Walk by Irish National Liberation Army (INLA) paramilitaries exploded and killed two young boys from the flats, injuring five more and three soldiers.<sup>47</sup> Violent confrontations yards outside people's front doors demonstrate how the conflict reached into every area of life, and how attempts to assert control over space often involved trying to exploit architectural features and use the building against others. In contrast to the drama of shootings, bombings, raids, and disappearances, the architecture of the complex remained blank and featureless. Its grey facades and crumbling concrete became a signifier of the hopelessness and sense of imprisonment expressed by the residents.

### **The Campaign to Demolish Divis Flats**

The pervading possibility of bombs being hidden in architectural fittings was a dramatic version of the lingering threats of asbestos, damp and infestations.<sup>48</sup> The material decay of the flats was coupled with their bleak and impassive appearance. The residents did not describe this stage for social life as a passive backdrop, but said that the visible decay of the building was projected onto them and internalized. One resident wrote how the "empty, worthless look" of unoccupied flats was transferred to the rest of the complex, and then to the outlook of the residents themselves.<sup>49</sup> The Residents Association often used images of rubble and debris in their publications to articulate the sense of decay in and around the complex. **(Figure 8)** The sense of entrapment and containment recurred throughout the residents' responses to life in the flats, and was central to the campaign for the flats to be demolished. The demolition campaign highlights

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<sup>47</sup> Beresford 1982: 2.

<sup>48</sup> For an analysis of the mental and physical health problems in Divis cf. Blackman, Tim / Eileen Evason / Martin Melaugh, Roberta Woods, eds 1987.

<sup>49</sup> No Place For a Dog, 4.

that, while the architecture provided physical limits to action and had a profound emotional impact on the residents, new forms of action and protest were able to develop within it.

The campaign for the demolition of the flats began in 1973; one year after the main complex was completed. It continued until 1986 when the Housing Executive relented and agreed to the demolition of all the seven and eight-story blocks. The desire for demolition was shaped by a variety of factors including structural defects, violence, and social problems, but the Residents Association stressed that the defining cause was the “feeling of hopelessness, of being trapped in Divis.”<sup>50</sup> The residents had struggled for control of their environment, bricking up the entrances to the drying tower, erecting barricades to keep out the security services, and hanging sheets over the balconies to obscure them from the surveillance post in the tower.<sup>51</sup> But they remained subject to military and paramilitary actions, as well as what they described as the “harshness” and “brutality” of the architecture itself, its “barren walkways” and the “endless view of concrete anonymous windows.”<sup>52</sup> **(Figure 9)**

The residents who made *Internment in Divis* concluded that the architecture “isolated people, took away their dignity, and forced them to live in filthy conditions.” In the “special circumstances of west Belfast, people are trapped” and “this only increases the spiral downwards.” The special circumstances were the violence and conflict, which made a bad situation worse, rather than creating it. The architectural failings intensified social problems, which were then overlain with violence. In these living conditions, the film states, “people lose faith in themselves, see no hope for the future.” Concerns about the impact on children were reiterated again and again by the residents.

The blankness of the concrete play areas offered little stimulation to the children of the complex, who were juxtaposed against the architecture in images used by the residents. **(Figure 9)** One local headmaster claimed that the imaginations of the children of Divis were being

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<sup>50</sup> Divis Residents Association 1986: 6.

<sup>51</sup> Downes, ed. 1998: 30f.

<sup>52</sup> Divis Residents Association 1986: 15, 3.

restricted by their numbing and oppressive environment.<sup>53</sup> This sense of hopelessness was perhaps also reflected in the high levels of prescription tranquilizers used by residents. One health survey in 1987 recorded that 56% of women and 36% of men in the complex were suffering from mental health problems.<sup>54</sup> There was a saying in the flats that articulated this feeling, “From Hell there is no redemption, and from Divis there is no transfer.”

The featureless and unyielding architecture mirrored what Brendan Murtagh has described as the “rigid bureaucratic structures and technical policy systems” of the housing authorities in Northern Ireland. He dismisses the simplistic visions of planners working as tools of the security services, which abounded in work written in the heat of the conflict, instead arguing that in the search for legitimacy and political neutrality “highly contentious areas of policy, such as housing, were rapidly depoliticized and techno-rational processes were accorded priority.” In the officials’ search for legitimacy through techno-rationalism, however, policy-makers seemed unable to engage with the material facts of everyday life. As Murtagh put it, “poverty, ghettoization, residual demographic communities and constant fear makes the concept of problem-solving, rational analysis and plan building seem remote and irrelevant.”<sup>55</sup> This remoteness left the residents increasingly alienated both from the building and from traditional modes of political protest.

The Divis Demolition Committee (DDC) was formed in 1979 by residents driven by what they described as “sheer frustration and desperation.”<sup>56</sup> It aimed to put the plight of the residents back onto the political agenda, and adopted militant tactics that highlighted the intense hostility felt towards the flats. The DDC used a variety of methods to protest against the flats and the living conditions, including releasing rats in the offices of the Housing Executive to re-stage an element of daily life in Divis. Their feelings were perhaps most powerfully articulated when they began to attack the architecture of the flats. When a flat became vacant members of

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<sup>53</sup> BBC 1977.

<sup>54</sup> Blackman et al 1987: 22.

<sup>55</sup> Murtagh 2000: 168.

<sup>56</sup> Divis Residents Association 1986: 11.

the DDC made the flat uninhabitable, effectively destroying it from the inside. They would take the windows and doors out of their frames, break the frames, pull out bathroom and electrical fittings, and knock through partition walls. As Sean Stitt of the Committee said at the time, “We can say to the Housing Executive, that if they don’t demolish Divis, the people of Divis Flats will certainly demolish it.”<sup>57</sup>

The campaign was uncompromising and controversial, but it did highlight the problems of the residents, especially after the RUC raided the DDC’s offices. Three members of the Committee were arrested and held at Belfast’s infamous Castlereagh Interrogation Centre for three days before being charged with criminal damage. The discourse of imprisonment, which became a significant element of the identity and experience of the conflict in Northern Ireland, was central to the representations of the residents’ situation and actions. One commentator writing in *Building Design* said, “the prisoners attempted to destroy the prison and were arrested for their pains.”<sup>58</sup> The Committee members pleaded guilty, but used their day in court to speak out about their living conditions. The Judge only imposed a nominal fine and condemned the flats saying, “It is terrible that, in 1981, I have to sit in a court in Northern Ireland and listen to such a state of affairs. Something should be done about Divis, and soon.”<sup>59</sup>

The tactics of the Committee cast light on the everyday living conditions in Divis, but they also represented another attempt to directly reshape the architecture by its users. The flats were a stage for liberating practices of protest, just as they were for the oppressive practices of the security services and paramilitaries. These conflicting uses exposed the cracks in the architectural structure that mediated everyday life, and the potential for actors to alter the stage. In a city and environment saturated by violence and devoid of faith in the future, the DDC’s actions remade the interior of the flats into political spaces precisely through their destruction.

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<sup>57</sup> Sean Stitt interview. In Yorkshire Television 1987.

<sup>58</sup> Anson 1986: 19.

<sup>59</sup> Divis Residents Association 1986: 11.

These were radical actions; but they were at least in part a dramatization and reiteration of the violence and decay that the flats had long signified.

In 1984 the Housing Executive partially acquiesced, ordering five of the blocks to be demolished. In 1986, after sustained pressure, and a high profile exhibition on the flats held at the Town and Country Planning Association in London, the demolition policy was extended to all the blocks apart from the tower. The structure which the British media described as a “godsend to snipers and bombers” was finally condemned.<sup>60</sup> In October 1993 the last of the blocks was demolished and only the high-rise tower remained, the top floors of which continued to be used as a highly contentious army surveillance post until 2005.

### **Conclusion**

The multiple appropriations of the Divis Flats demonstrate how an architectural structure can be subjected to a broader range of uses and occupations than an architect could ever envisage. The walkways became prison “catwalks”, darkened stairwells sites for booby-trap bombs, the windows and rooftops vantage points for snipers, and a drying tower a temporary holding cell. A high-rise was remade into a surveillance post that watched and recorded the lives of the residents, while a helicopter buzzed overhead. The architecture made these practices possible, but it was the users’ appropriations of the complex which revealed these new functions, and the conflict in Belfast that provoked them. Lewis Mumford wrote that the spatial structure of a city, like a well-designed stage-set, “intensifies and underlines the gestures of the actors and the action of a play.”<sup>61</sup> The architectural stage of Divis exemplified the larger conflict in the city and country, where communities were segregated and contained, and violence was an ever-present threat. For the users of the building, however, the architecture did not merely reflect the conflict; it framed their experience of it.

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<sup>60</sup> Rodwell 1986: 4.

<sup>61</sup> Mumford 2015 [1996] [1937]: 112.

A history of the building from the vantage point of its users, of the architecture from within, illustrates how social transformations happen in relation to their environment, while not losing sight of the people that enact those transformations. The stage provided the structure within which life was lived, but it did not determine the forms of life that developed within it, and in relation to it. The architecture changed the practices and outlook of its users, as the users changed the utilities and meanings of the architecture. This contingency is what Thomas Gieryn describes as the “double reality of buildings,” namely their capacity to structure agency, but never reach beyond “potential restructuring by human agents.”<sup>62</sup>

The Divis case illustrates that the restructuring can be both oppressive, as with the “seal and search” operations, panoptic observation post, and booby-trap bombs, as well as liberating, as with the willed destruction of the flats by the DDC. The multiplicity of uses suggests that, despite its rigid linear structure, the architecture displayed certain pliability under the weight of conflicting social practices. These contrasting practices demonstrate the ongoing possibility of remaking space and resisting domination, even if that involves dismantling the architectural structure itself. The story of Divis suggests that social practices deny space instrumental power, but it also reveals the immediacy with which architecture can be rendered into a tool of control. The threshold between an architectural vision of the future, and the lived reality of a dystopian one, proved acutely fragile.

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<sup>62</sup> Gieryn 2002: 41.

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**Illustrations:**

Figure 1. Aerial view of the Divis Flats complex and Divis Tower. Picture credit: National Museums Northern Ireland.

Figure 2. Plan of the completed complex

Figure 3. View down the walkway, from Graham, Donald. 1986. *The Divis Report: Set Them Free*. Belfast: Divis Residents Association: 48.

Figure 4. View of the Community Centre and the Farset Block, from Graham, Donald. 1986. *The Divis Report: Set Them Free*. Belfast: Divis Residents Association

Figure 5. The observation post, from Graham, Donald. 1986. *The Divis Report: Set Them Free*. Belfast: Divis Residents Association: 62

Figure 6. Image of helicopter resupplying Divis Tower surveillance post, from Graham, Donald. 1986. *The Divis Report: Set Them Free*. Belfast: Divis Residents Association: 66.

Figure 7. A darkened stairway in the Divis Flats, from Graham, Donald. 1986. *The Divis Report: Set Them Free*. Belfast: Divis Residents Association: 30.

Figure 8. Debris and decay in the complex, from Divis Residents Association. 1986. *The Dreadful Enclosure*. Belfast.

Figure 9. Blank anonymous facades, from Graham, Donald. 1986. *The Divis Report: Set Them Free*. Belfast: Divis Residents Association: 16.

Figure 10. Children playing in a barren environment, from Divis Community Arts Project. 1982.

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Divis Flats, Belfast. Belfast: 7.