Stitching a Divided City

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Sometimes the quilts were white for weddings, the design made up of stitches and the shadows cast by stitches. And the quilts for funerals? How do you sew the night?


It’s over 23 years since the Good Friday Agreement marked an ending of sorts to the long period of conflict in Northern Ireland often referred to as “the Troubles.” As far as the wider world is concerned, the place is now at peace. The reality is more complicated. Our peace is an imperfectly healed and troublesome wound. The scars are both psychic and literal at an individual and societal level. In the city of Belfast, the divisions are still apparent in the make-up of neighborhoods, in the way communities self-segregate along religious-political lines and in people’s innate understanding of where they belong—or do not belong.

The Belfast Mobility Project (https://belfastmobilityproject.org/index.html) was a 3-year (2015–2018) mixed methods study, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). The project team was drawn from The Open University, the Institute for Conflict Resolution, the University of Manchester, Queen’s University Belfast, Lancaster University and the University of Cape Town. The project team recruited 520 volunteers in North and West Belfast (the parts of the city that suffered a disproportionate number of deaths and injuries during the conflict) and asked them to download location trackers on their mobile phones. Their movements were recorded over a period of 2 weeks in order to find out how freely the participants moved about the city, which areas were shared or neutral, and which were resolutely single identity. Among the
outputs of this part of the project were a series of color-coded maps, which displayed the results in visual format. It was one of these maps that inspired my “Belfast Quilt” project. I was struck by the visual impact of the map, where the familiar geography of my home city was transformed into a colorful abstract of pink and blue dots—each dot representing one of the Belfast Mobility Project participants. It was uncomfortable to think that the ugliness of division could be translated into a thing of beauty (Figure 1).

I’m a creative writer who also works with textiles, sometimes combining the two media in the form of narrative textiles, so I could see the opportunity to use the map as the basis for a quilt—a linen quilt. In the nineteenth and early twentieth century linen production was one of Belfast’s key industries, so making the quilt from old Irish linen would mean that the very medium from which it was constructed would also be part of the story it told. I already had dozens of old linen sheets, given to me by a friend who was clearing her late mother’s house. These sheets were stiff with starch, immaculately pressed and folded, but exuding the musty smell that suggested long years forgotten in the back of an airing cupboard.

Because the Belfast Mobility Project is about divided communities, I was determined that the making of the quilt should be something that brought people together, and that the end product would be the handiwork of stitchers from all over Belfast. With the support of the Being Human festival—the UK’s annual festival of the humanities—myself and my colleagues from the Open University in Belfast organized a communal sewing event that took place at Belfast’s Ulster Museum in late November 2019.

To prepare for the event I used pixilation software to convert the map into a simple quilt design.
dyed old linen bed sheets in the various colors that we’d need: blue to signify Protestants/Unionists/Loyalists (PUL), pink for Catholics/Nationalists/Republicans (CNR), yellow for politically/religiously unaligned, and dark gray for the arterial routes that were picked out on the original map. I then cut out the 870 10 × 10 cm squares that would be needed to complete the quilt top. I was keen that the event would be welcoming to complete novices, so I broke the design down into manageable sections of nine squares (3 × 3) which would allow each participant to work on their own section. We would hand-stitch the squares together, so all that was needed was a needle and thread (Figures 2 and 3).
Figure 3
Stitching the quilt together.

Figure 4
The finished quilt.
On the day itself we had thirty women and girls in attendance, with an age range between 5 and 81. There were several pairs of mothers and daughters, and a number of “new” citizens of Belfast, from Iran, Spain and the USA. As we worked on hand-piecing the quilt together we had a series of pauses where we introduced guided discussion points, encouraging participants to share their textile memories. They talked about clothes they particularly remembered, from childhood Sunday best to the regalia of teenage rebellion. Many of the women had family connections to the linen industry, and recalled grandfathers and grandmothers who had worked in the mills and associated trades. Eventually we brought the conversation to our sense of belonging or not belonging in certain parts of the city.

It was a joyous event, alive with generosity, conversation and laughter. The more experienced stitchers helped the novices, and the different generations shared their memories and knowledge. There’s something so powerful about communal making, where we as individuals focus on our own stitches while feeling supported and nurtured by the shared endeavor. In many ways it exemplified how belonging can be achieved, which seemed to answer some of the questions raised by the Belfast Mobility Project itself.

We did not manage to get the quilt top completed at the event, so I continued to piece it together myself afterwards. This took me some months, and by the time I was done the UK’s first Covid lockdown was in place and this delayed the final part of the process. Eventually, as lockdown eased, the quilt top went for long-arm quilting, and it was—at last—finished (Figure 4).

My original plan for the quilt was that it would be displayed in a range of places around Belfast, such as civic buildings, libraries, community centers and shopping centers, creating opportunities for further conversations about the city and how we all feel about our place in it. The various Covid lockdowns of 2020 and 2021 have delayed this, but I’m optimistic that in the coming months and years more people will be able to encounter the quilt in real life, and see for themselves the beautiful handiwork of the thirty volunteers who came together on a rainy morning in Belfast to stitch their city together.

References