Change Stories

Belfast, Northern Ireland

Belfast is the post-industrial and post-peace agreement capital of Northern Ireland. This illustrated guide tells the story of community-based political campaigning and action to improve quality of life for all Belfast residents with a particular emphasis on the role of housing and the built environment.

Meet Our Guide, Rachel

Rachel is a Belfast resident, community organizer, and teacher. She raised her family in a housing development in an inner city neighborhood in North Belfast deprived of many basic services and divided by walls between Catholic and Protestant communities.

Rachel now campaigns with Participation and the Practice of Rights (PPR) to advocate for the community-centered development of vacant public land.

Welcome to Belfast!

Rachel's neighborhood

Belfast has a long history as an **industrial center** marked by **colonial** and **ethno-national conflict**.

The conflict is rooted in the complex and contentious history of British colonialism in Ireland and has led to contested territorial claims between the following two groups:

1 **Protestant, Unionist, and Loyalist** who consider themselves **British** and are loyal to the **British monarchy.**

2 **Catholic, Nationalist and Republican** who consider themselves **Irish** and aspire to a **united Ireland.**

Colonization of Northern Ireland
17th Century
The Ulster plantation is established by **Protestant Unionist** settlers from Britain in order to gain control over rebellious Ulster, a province in the north of the predominantly **Catholic Nationalist** region.

Founding of Belfast
1603
Town of Belfast is founded under leadership of Sir Arthur Chichester (Baron of Ulster from 1613). The **Protestant Unionist** population increases and gains more political control of the area.
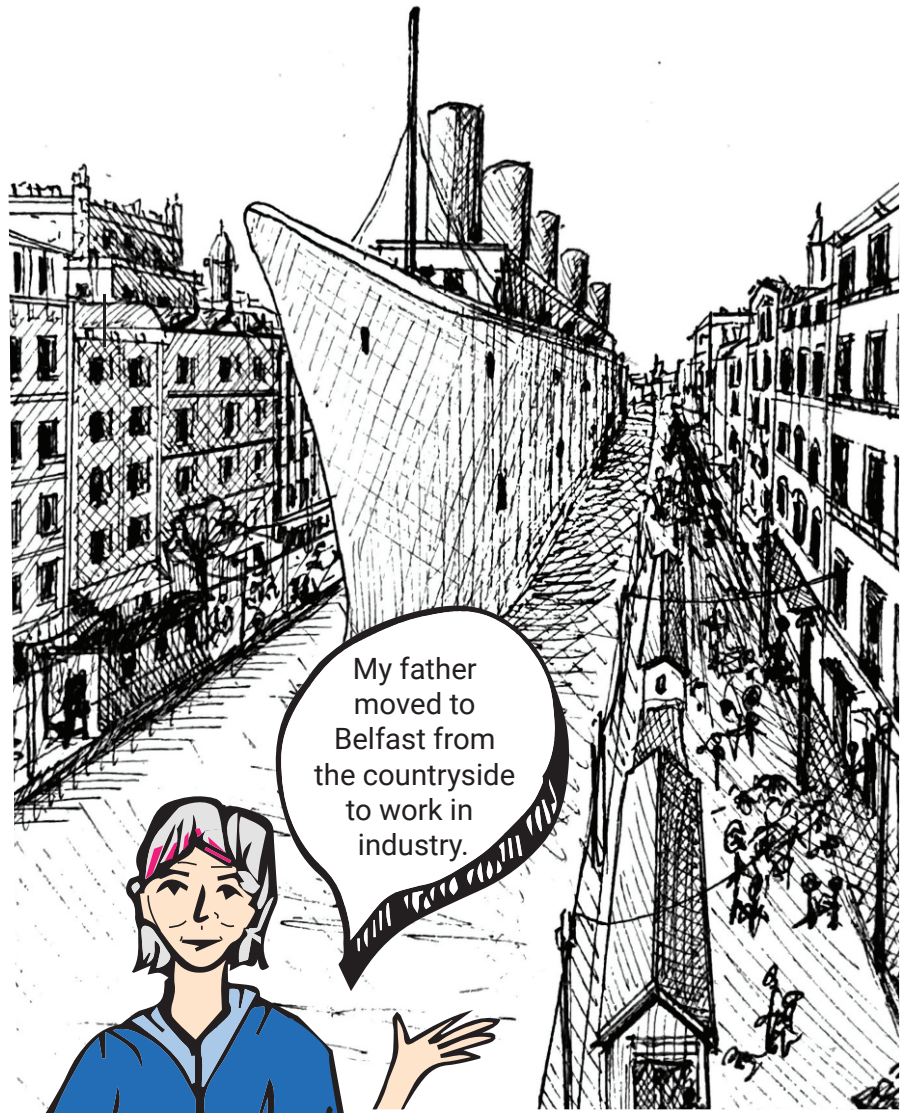
Industrial Center
1900s
Belfast became an **industrial powerhouse** at the turn-of-the-century, with shipbuilding and linen as its largest industries. The **Catholic Nationalist** population increases as people move to the city in search of work.

> My father moved to Belfast from the countryside to work in industry.

The Belfast port was a center of commerce for the region

Titanic
1912
The Titanic, at the time the world's largest ship, launched from Belfast's port.

Partition
1922
Partition of Ireland following independence of the Irish free state (in the south) **leading to civil war and ongoing conflict.**

Economic Decline
1930s-1960s
Poverty and tension increase between **Protestant Unionist** and **Catholic Nationalist** communities due to the **state's discriminatory practices.**

Pre-Troubles (-1972)   *The Troubles (1972-1998)*   *Post-Troubles (1998-Present)*

Regional, Spatial and Transport Plans for Belfast
1963
An effort to 'demagnetise' the city center and manage **Catholic Nationalist-Protestant Unionist** tension, the plans lay the foundation for **physical barriers to further segregate the city**, such as the Matthew Plan that prioritized car-centric design.

Protest in central Belfast

Civil Rights Movement
1968
The late 1960s saw the emergence of a student-driven civil rights movement in Northern Ireland, demanding equal rights and an end to discrimination against the **Catholic Nationalist** minority in:

Housing   *Employment*   *Education*

British Military Presence
1969
Civil rights protests were met with violence from **Protestant Unionist** groups and the British Army, leading to **widespread unrest and rioting.** The deployment of the British Army to Northern Ireland marked the beginning of a **prolonged military presence**.
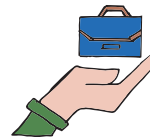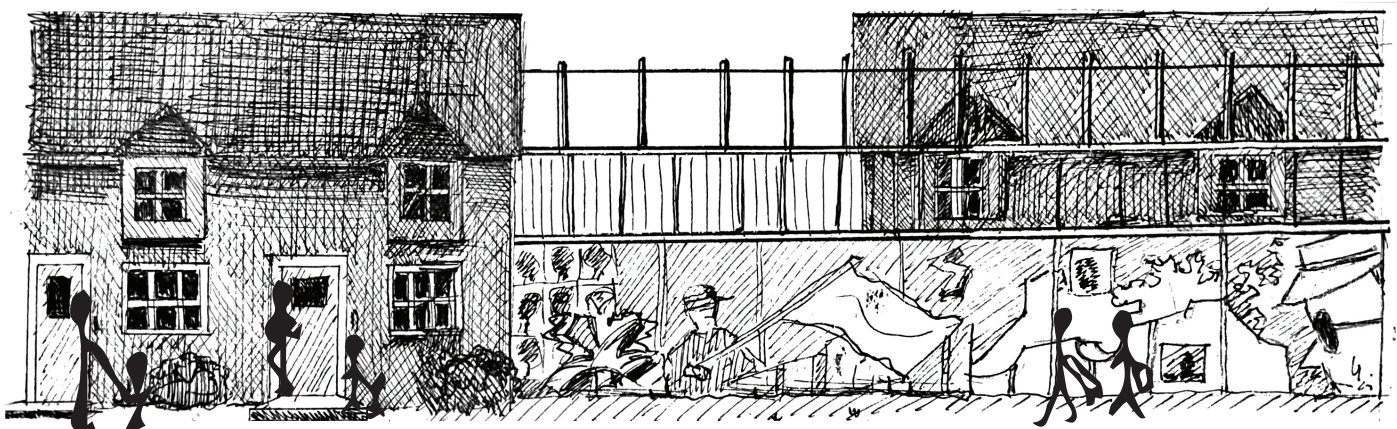
First Peace Wall Erected
1969
To manage conflict, the government started to build peace walls between **Catholic Nationalist** and **Protestant Unionist** communities.

Peace walls in Belfast

Pre-Troubles (-1972)   *The Troubles (1972-1998)*   *Post-Troubles (1998-Present)*

Belfast experienced a period of violent conflict called **'The Troubles'** that had big impacts on the **built environment**.

The conflict between **Protestant Unionist** and **Catholic Nationalist** intensified in the 1960s, sparking **The Troubles**, a 30-year period of violent conflict that led to more than 3,500 deaths and had **significant effects on quality of life and the built environment**. Belfast, a city of 350,000, continues to feel the **lasting impact** of this conflict.

Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) Formed
1971
NIHE takes housing responsibility from local councils to provide a 'fair' system of housing allocation, however **state-sponsored segregation still persists.**

Bloody Sunday
1972
Intensification of the conflict following the **murder of 14 unarmed civilians** by the British army during the civil rights march in Derry.

Direct Rule from the UK
1972
In effort to manage sectarian conflict, Westminster (the seat of power for the UK) **suspended local administration decision-making** and **resource allocation**. This resulted in diminished power of local institutions leaving many issues unresolved and has not been fully restored to this day.

Social housing construction
1996
80,000 new units of social housing were built by 1996, **90% of which are predominantly one religious identity** (**Catholic Nationalist** or **Protestant Unionist**). However there was a concurrent net loss of 12,000 units from 1974 - present day.

Construction of Peace Walls
1969-2007
To manage conflict the government built physical barriers between **Protestant Unionist** and **Catholic Nationalist** communities.

Motorway Completed
*1987*
An inner-urban motorway was constructed and **further segregated the city**.

Suburbanization
1980s
Conflict and municipal policy resulted in a **55% loss of Protestant Unionist** population in the city centre.
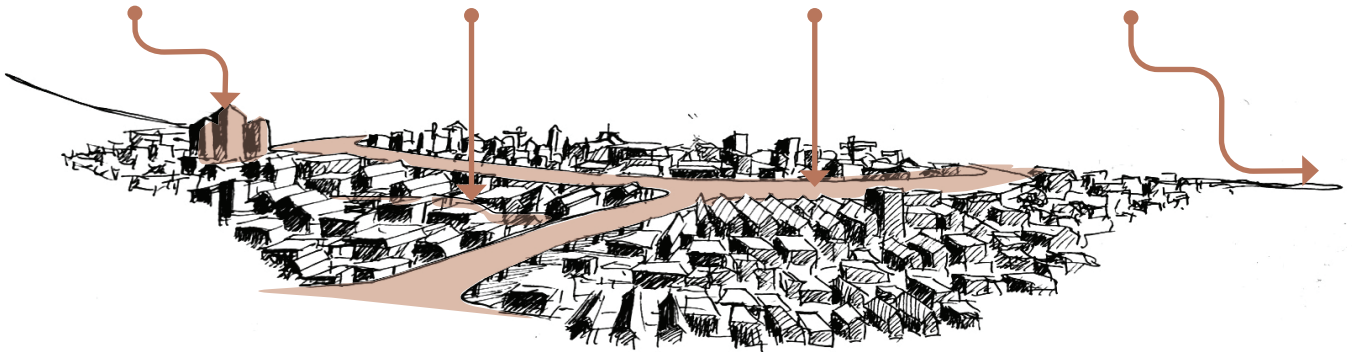
Physical barriers and inadequate municipal action resulted in segregated communities and poverty, altering the urban landscape which affected the social, cultural, and spatial realities of the residents.
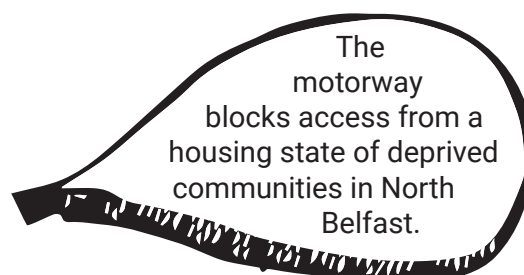
The motorway blocks access from a housing state of deprived communities in North Belfast.

Pre-Troubles (-1972)   *The Troubles (1972-1998)*   *Post-Troubles (1998-Present)*

The dominant narrative is that Belfast is achieving **peace through prosperity** and is an international model for **conflict resolution.**

Belfast's **neoliberal model of development** results in a 'twin-speed' city - while post-Troubles Belfast is **becoming wealthier**, people from marginalized communities are **being left behind.**
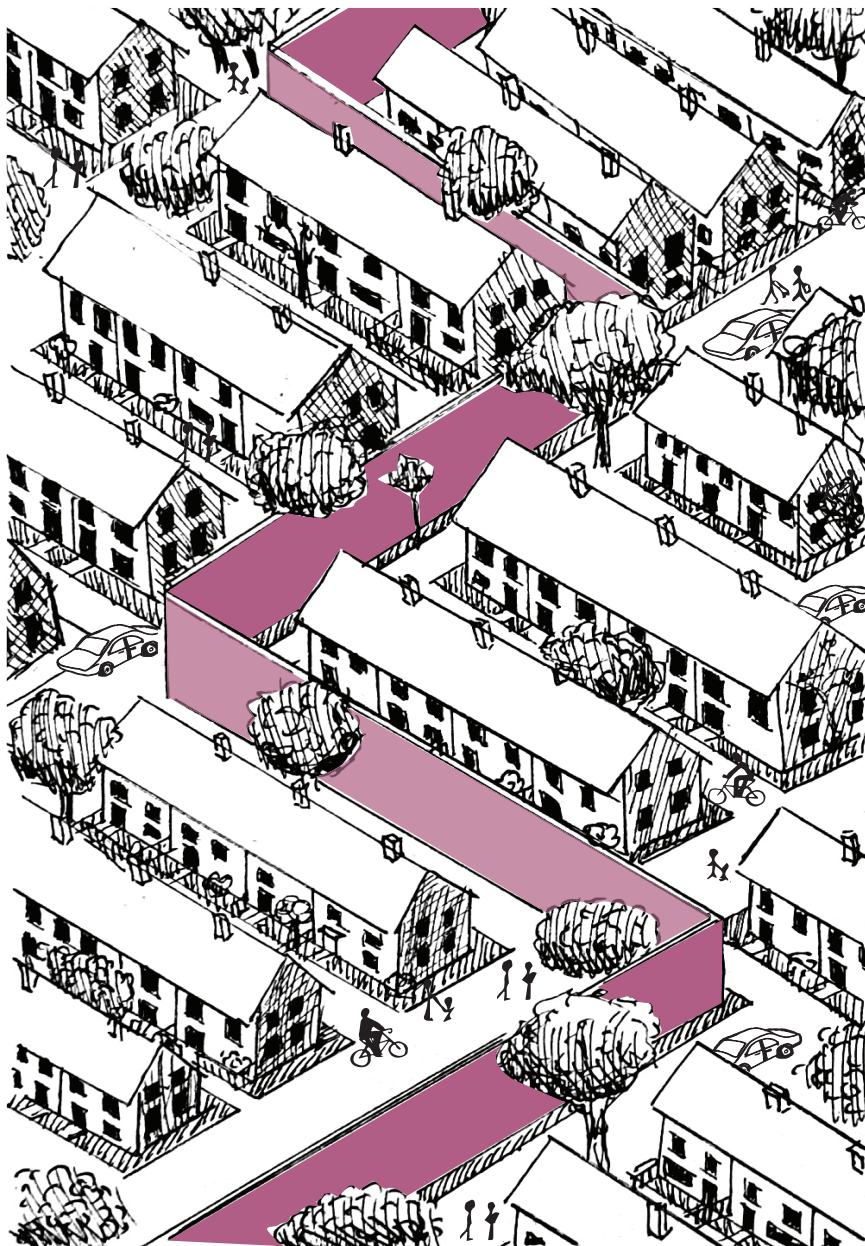
Good Friday Agreement
1998
The peace agreement is signed, marking the end of The Troubles, but the governing body Northern Ireland Assembly (NI) had many periods of suspension, **reducing an already weak local municipal power** which had lasting effects on urban planning efforts.

Participation and the Practice of Rights (PPR)
2006
PPR was founded as a local, non-sectarian NGO to lead a range of economic, social and environmental justice campaigns, using **human rights as tool for change**.

Titanic Museum
2009
Tourism site that attracts visibility but is part of pattern of investing in the city center, not the more vulnerable periphery. It has been the site of **numerous protests for poor allocation of municipal efforts**.

Municipal Planning
2015
The Belfast city government **revives urban planning powers**, but there is limited power for regeneration. Public policy focuses on **peace-building and good relations**, which can have the effect of **maintaining the status quo**, sometimes by legitimizing concepts and actors which should be **challenged** such as **single-identity neighbourhoods**.

Belfast Agenda
2017
A government document that established the need for 66,000 people to live in Belfast city centre. Most of the housing development in the area has produced small rental apartments or student housing, which **doesn't address those in most need**. This includes the Belfast Local Development Plan, a planning framework to implement the Agenda.

*Peace walls continue to separate communities to this day. **The last peace wall was constructed in 2007, almost a decade after the Good Friday Agreement was signed.***

Pre-Troubles (-1972)   *The Troubles (1972-1998)*   *Post-Troubles (1998-Present)*

However, the counter-narrative voiced by community groups is that Belfast's urban development is **not meeting the needs** of marginalized communities.

Belfast has a substantial housing shortage, which disproportionately impacts low-income, racially minoritized **Catholic Nationalists**.

In modern-day Belfast, deprivation and segregation are still correlated, with working-class areas being the most disadvantaged and segregated.

Housing Need

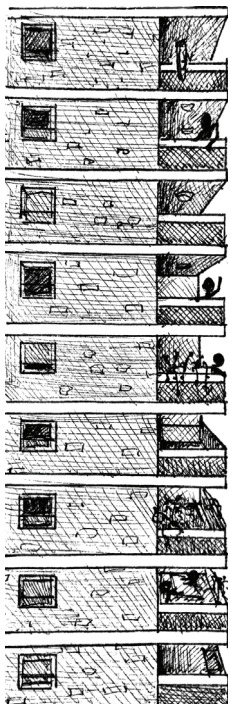**690** Households in housing need (2015)

1,328 Households in housing need (2022)

Poverty (2021)

13% Poverty Rate in Belfast

30% Youth poverty rate in segregated areas of Belfast

Segregation (2015)

94% of social housing is segregated by ethnonational identity and 80% of housing need is in predominantly **Catholic Nationalist** areas

Social housing

Religious inequality continues to be a feature in social housing building and allocation.

Community organizers play an important role filling gaps in advocating for equitable development.

The policy mindset reinforces rather than challenges the idea of segregation in the city.

Maeve
Social housing resident and Community Organizer

Laura
Academic and Community Organizer

Sara
Student and Community Organizer

Take Back the City
2020
A coalition of architects, community organizers, and academics that formed to **develop sustainable solutions** to Belfast's housing crisis including mapping vacant city-owned land to develop in a more equitable way.

Let's take a deeper look at what local community groups are working on!

Pre-Troubles (-1972)   *The Troubles (1972-1998)*   *Post-Troubles (1998-Present)*

A strong **ecosystem of community-based organizations** has put into practice initiatives that address communities' needs and promote **peace and social cohesion.**

While Belfast City Council still has limited planning and development powers and maintains **peace through prosperity and separation of the** Catholic Nationalist and Protestant Unionist communities, a strong **community-based and NGO sector** that addresses development gaps.
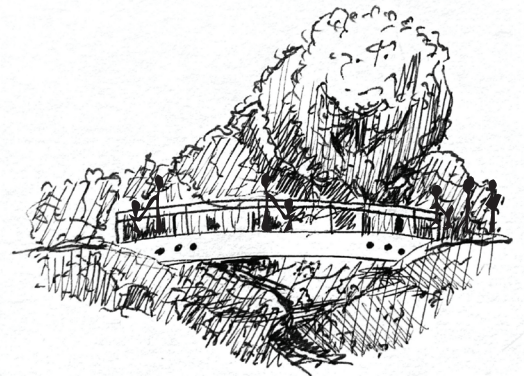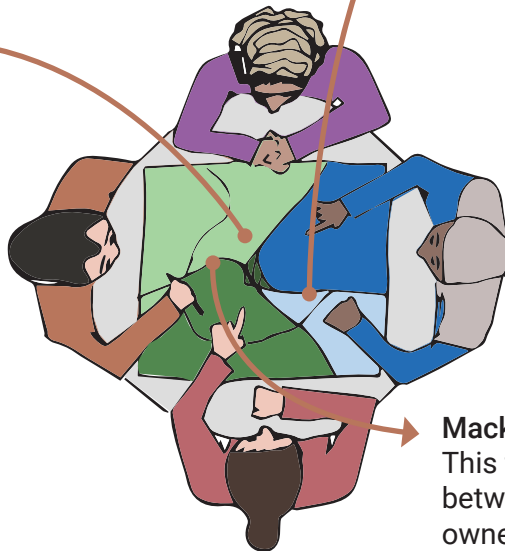

Pedestrian bridge at Connswater Greenway

> Across the city, various groups have campaigned for housing and against gentrification.

Connswater Community Greenway

9 km linear park through East Belfast that addresses multiple challenges experienced by the local communities:
- Reduces flood risk
- Created public spaces, pedestrian and cycle routes supporting active travel
- Connects communities

The project was led by EastSide Partnership and Groundswell Consortium and was financially supported by National Lottery Fund and Belfast City Council.

Grow
Grow works with communities to improve mental and physical health & wellbeing and to reduce social isolation through community gardening and connection to nature. Grow combats the isolation of marginalized groups through safe, shared, socially inclusive community gardening spaces across Belfast.

Mackie's Site
This first-of-its-kind masterplan proposes between 500-750 homes at the publicly-owned Mackie's 13 hectare site in West Belfast, an area that currently experiences the highest level of homelessness and housing need in Northern Ireland as well as some of the most severe forms of inequality. The plan is a partnership between PPR, Take Back the City and Queen's University.

A Grow garden

Mackie's site masterplan

Belfast is famous for being the city that **successfully transitioned** from **war** to **peace and prosperity,** but the crucial role of **community groups** and **unresolved challenges** of this change are **underrepresented** in the official story.

CHANGE STORIES

Change Stories is an international research partnership that aims to **spark dialogue and learning** through storytelling about **sustainable urban development.**


The project's vision is to **shift the paradigm of how we tell stories** about successful **urban change & who tells them,** leading cities to develop deeply contextual solutions that support **health, sustainability, equity & wellbeing.**

Three case study cities demonstrate sustainable urban development that meet the needs of marginalized groups. Using **participatory and ethnographic methods** we are exploring these "**change stories**" and the context in which the transformation occurred.

Belo Horizonte
Brazil

The Belo Horizonte case explores trajectories towards guaranteeing food and nutritional security, analyzing the interactions between urban governance and social mobilization in the development, maintenance and expansion of food security policies in the city.
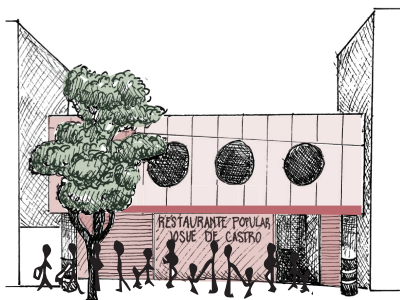
A "People's Restaurant" in Belo Horizonte

Bogotá
Colombia

The Bogotá case explores a public care system, which operates mainly through *Manzanas del Cuidado* (Care Blocks) and asks how, in a patriarchal culture, the needs of unpaid female caregivers receive resource priority.
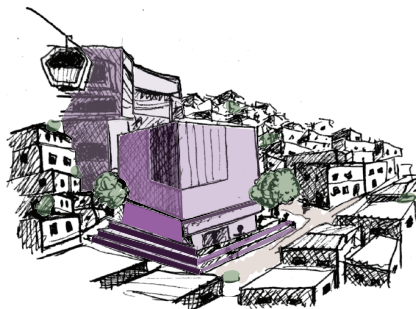
A "Care Block" in Bogotá

Belfast
Northern Ireland

The Belfast case focuses on housing and asks how, in the context of recent sectarianism and segregation, have communities in Belfast been successful at bringing about significant change for marginalized residents, despite low input from government.
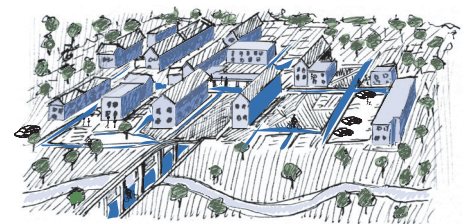
Plan for social housing in Belfast

Connect with us!

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We are thankful to the community-based organizations we collaborate with and our interviewees from local social movements, civil society, and Belfast city hall for their experiences and the invaluable information they shared with us.

Partners

Get to know the project!