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the material culture of a Belfast suburb

Ursula Burke & Daniel Jewesbury

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with an essay by Colin Graham

Belfast Exposed Photography

## A Misplaced Eden

COLIN GRAHAM

Kevin slumped back in his seat, eyes closed ... He was driving them to one of the suburbs. The houses changed from terraced to small semi-detached with no gardens, and then to slightly larger ones with gardens and hedges and gates.

Mr Blake turned off the main road and stopped in a quiet street.

'This is my house,' he said, indicating one with a white gate and a laburnum tree overhanging the pavement. 'You can come in and sit in peace.'<sup>1</sup>

Kevin and Sadie were the iconic children of the Troubles. When they needed a neutral place in the Belfast split by the 'barricades' they went to Cave Hill or Ballyholme – for them, places which were empty of human geography. When they needed intervention to save them from the cruel dichotomies of Joan Lingard's Belfast, after Kevin was given a going over

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<sup>1</sup> Joan Lingard, *Across the Barricades* (London: Penguin, 1972), p. 93.

on the Lagan towpath, then there was only one place in the city where a genuine Good Samaritan could live. So Mr Blake, open-minded teacher, takes Kevin and Sadie to his home. And that home had to be somewhere between the Lisburn Road and the Malone Road.

Kevin and Sadie climb the circles to Belfast's heaven; the houses get bigger, the greenery increases, and finally they are in a place of peace. They return to an Eden they have never known. Mr Blake, uncomplex, sinless and decent, is the opposite of the tempting, Satanic sophistry of the city. His bourgeois haven offers protection from the evils of working-class Belfast. Temporarily, this Belfast Adam and Eve are allowed back into the garden of their collective past.

When Kevin and Sadie travel in Mr Blake's car, it's not just a journey through the urban, then suburban, then hyper-suburban spaces of Belfast. It's a journey through the city's time, and a journey undertaken during the time when the city couldn't place itself in history. This sliver of South Belfast, so hard to put a comprehensive name to, is Kevin and Sadie's

anachronistic site of an alternative Ulster. Neither convincingly an old Belfast nor realistically a model for a future Belfast, its apartness is the possibility of an impossible life. 'It's easier if you're middle-class', says Sadie. And with this realisation Kevin and Sadie are already on their way out of Eden.

The Lisburn Road and the residential areas which cling to it along its east side have, of course, long been the epitome of Belfast's bourgeois culture, a thin ideology which spreads its pervasive and dominant influence over the entire city. The specific concentration in this one area of respectability, wealth and living 'properly' is a reproach to the rest of the city, demanding to be imitated or detested. In its hint that living a 'non-sectarian' life is a pleasure granted by prosperity, the area silently preached the most devastating moralism that Belfast could overhear. For some this was a hubris which was too much to bear. Maurice Goldring, writing in 1991, was offended enough to kill off this bourgeois putrefaction. In doing so he was perhaps prescient, if overstated, in his announcement of the

coming death of Belfast's ultimate secluded class arbour and its place as apex for the city's intellect:

In Belfast [the] liberal intelligentsia, concentrated in the south of the city, along the Malone and Lisburn Roads, no longer knows what the people think. Protected but weakened by their privileges, they no longer deserve to lead the country.<sup>2</sup>

When Goldring wrote this, the first stirrings of a new Belfast to come were already apparent. When that transformed Belfast came, after the ceasefires and the Agreement, it left the Lisburn Road trailing in its wake, a faded snapshot in the city's family album. Still, Goldring's is a perspective on the 'intelligentsia' which could only be expressed by one of the intelligentsia. For those living their lives through the determinations of the city's esoteric boundaries, the Lisburn Road marks the spaces of their local identity.

<sup>2</sup> Maurice Goldring, *Belfast: From Loyalty to Rebellion* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1991), p. 139.

Laurie, from the working-class Village area to the west, puts it simply enough:

The Village is 100 percent Loyalist and Unionist. The other border of the Village is the Lisburn Road, which is a long road with lots of fancy shops at the top end ...<sup>3</sup>

For the Village, the Lisburn Road is an economic border, just as the University area is an educationally-inflected class barrier, and the railway line and motorway physical barriers. What's beyond that border may be the world of fancy shops, and is a world away. But, however many times we might stab its cadaver, the Lisburn Road will continue to have a role in giving Belfast its sense of itself.

The neutral middle class can afford to be aloof. The North's well-to-

<sup>3</sup> Laurie, 'Life in the Village' in Kate Fearon and Amanda Verlaque (eds), *Lurgan Champagne and Other Stories* (London: Livewire, 2001), p. 37.

do have managed to come through the conflict completely unscathed: they live in pleasant residential suburbs that see no rioting; they are not arrested or raided; they suffer no casualties.<sup>4</sup>

It's easy to sympathise with Ronan Bennett's irritation at the role of the middle classes in the Troubles. But then, as Richard Kirkland points out, whatever the spurious truth of this idea that the middle classes were entirely sheltered from the violence of the last four decades, Bennett's fury is not particularly about class privilege. Bennett hates the middle classes of the North because he regards them as 'not even any good at being middle class'.<sup>5</sup> Like Goldring's obituary for the Lisburn Road intellectuals, Bennett's vitriol at their snooty elevation wilfully ignores how the places like the Lisburn Road and Malone are simply at the centre of the spider's

<sup>4</sup> Ronan Bennett, 'Don't Mention the War' in David Miller (ed.), *Rethinking Northern Ireland* (London: Longman, 1998), p. 199.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Kirkland, *Identity Parades: Northern Irish Culture and Dissident Subjects* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2002), p. 5.

web of ideas by which everyday life in the city has functioned for many years: church-going, obeying the law, consumerism, fashion, local parks, being house-proud, having a trim garden. The Lisburn Road is only a place apart if the 'real' Belfast is a house perpetually being raided by the Brits. If someone shopping for a new pair of shoes is as real an event as any other in Belfast life, then the Lisburn Road is the typification and rarefication of Belfast, not an aberration.

In this set of images by Daniel Jewesbury and Ursula Burke the singularity and the intense Belfast typicality of the Lisburn Road and its people is on show. And being on show or being hidden are the two modes by which the area binds together its residential and commercial functions. There is an extreme contrast between the foreclosure of private space and the scopic nature of the commercial strip which runs along the west side of the road. This yin and yang of home and shopping is made whole through lifestyle, as if being at home were to close your eyes, while to promenade on the Lisburn Road is to look at and be seen. Interior space

is hidden away behind the discretion of horticultural screens, commercial space is the process of exaggerating a desire to be looked at – window displays are widening, like the eyes looking in on them. Obsessed with looking, the Lisburn Road cries out to be photographed. Jewesbury and Burke have captured it with an empathy which refuses to be content with an anthropological irony. Instead they take us close to the visually claustrophobic world of this paranoid spectacle.

The homes of the streets, avenues, roads and parks off the Lisburn Road shield themselves with verdure. Their lines of sight have an ideal height which begins with a hedge at around eye-level, and pushes the pedestrian gaze towards the upper windows, the roof, the trees. So ground-floor interiors are hidden away as places of secret interiority where life remains a mystery, while the outsider looks up in wonder to the bedroom and the stars. The garden is less a leisure space than a place that prevents being seen, a kind of *cordon sanitaire*, and the dense, matted hedges have a depth which mesmerises the eye for the very reason that they refuse to

let a gaze pass through them. As with the choking rhododendrons that spread throughout these gardens, the intention is to suck in the light from the footpath, darkening the border so that no gaze can penetrate beyond the edges of the mortgaged space. This severe use of nature is a curiously anti-Edenic form of gardening, the opposite of pleasure, borne out of an intense need for privacy. The definition of privacy then is one not only of enclosure but of kind of post-Victorian encasement, of a protection around a sensitive core.

This manic inwardness was once released in the gentle and reassuring seepage from private to public facilitated by the magical Kennedy & Wolfenden Antiques, which sat, appropriately, on the residential side of the road. Selling the unwanted objects which seemed to flow from the houses up the hill behind it, Kennedy & Wolfenden was a kind of ideological portal that allowed for the release of a pent-up privacy under strain, and it facilitated a trickle away of the old. Now, on the other side of the road, objects are straining to make the journey in the opposite direction. The

architecture of the western side of the Lisburn Road has become as intent on catching the passing eye as the houses on the eastern side of the road are keen to avert it.

The shops which Laurie calls 'fancy', and which string out along the road in a hopeful commercial promenade, are, obviously, selling speciality and exclusivity. To get into Kennedy & Wolfenden the customer had to ring a bell, a sure if crude method of filtering the clientele. More subtle is the collective effect of these shops without reference, in a world of chain stores. To have the nerve to enter them, to feel you can be drawn in, is to become, *de facto*, the kind of customer they want. It is possible to stand on the Lisburn Road, at the end of Windsor Park and look down at Linfield's ground, and then the motorway, Milltown cemetery, West Belfast. And then glance at the restaurants and shops yards away from you. How often can they intermingle? How often does one person move wholly, easily from one into the next? They are kept apart by an invisible yet seemingly unbreakable force, a kind of physical law of class which is a thread joining

one part of the city to the next, while functioning, literally, as a sectarian, that is a sectioning, device.

The Lisburn Road's shops have their own mystically self-endorsing way of ensuring that those who cross their threshold become their customers, and Jewesbury and Burke show how these breeds of specialised businesses, like species on the Galapagos, adapt to the tiniest change in their surroundings. Sensing perhaps that the Belfast beyond the Lisburn Road has, in the past few years, found its way to bring in new forms of bourgeois life not signified by the Lisburn Road itself, there has arisen a new vernacular architecture. It is one in which the utter privacy of the homes on the east side of the road is thrown into reverse. The foreclosed gaze is made wide-eyed, brought close to the window, overwhelmed with interior luxury. It is an architectural form in which the desires of the small business entrepreneur are enthusiastically reflected by the architect, straining to break out, not of the spatial but the temporal confines of the red-brick houses behind every shop – because, while they have space



enough, there is in this architecture a visible terror that the outlines of another, older age, itself a *faux* version of grander houses, will be the death knell to the contemporary which each of these businesses strives for. So windows are becoming larger and larger, as if to let in air and light, to ward off suffocation. Front window frames expand to the size of the original house, and their materials imply that they have shaken off the legacy of red-brick and sash window.

Yet this is all surface bluster. Whatever new form is taken on, they will all retain the basic shape and shadow of a Belfast house. This is not only a matter of planning regulation. It's vital for the propriety of these businesses, which must never get too big, which must never get too ambitious, and which must, because of their species specificity, never try to colonise next door.

In the midst of this denial and reassertion of the Belfast origins of shops selling designer drama, there are signs of the collapse of the style of bourgeois life which holds the two sides of the road together. This

is best seen in a shift of style which is primarily registered by height. In one of the images in the 'Archive' we look into the window of a furniture shop. For sale are a chair, in blue and gold, and a coffee table. The two are incompatible. And they are made so by the apartment phenomenon which has arrived in Belfast, as in every other city in the Western world. Apartment living has radically changed the visual environment of bourgeois life, simply by reducing the height of the domestic interior. Apartment ceilings are low enough to have created furniture which sinks towards to the floor in imitation; the coffee table, the centre-piece of the bourgeois space, shortens itself in apartment living. In our shop window this is registered not only in the incongruity of two styles of furniture but in the very size of the window itself. So the large square window which has become popular on the reconditioned shop fronts is, in the vertical collapse of this domestic landscape, radically high. There is now a tension between these two bourgeois centres of gravity. It is the tension between two ways of living out the same ideal, between two times, between two

physical spaces, and it means that to sell to the Belfast middle classes, there are two possible furnitures – that of the old red-brick house, or that of the new apartment. In our shop here, the coffee-coloured coffee tables are barely lifting off the ground at all; their dull matt colours need to breathe in a domestic space with other dull matt colours, with sofas that sit you just below knee level. And yet in the midst of this banal and unconvincingly second-hand minimalist aesthetic, is the garishness of an armchair which carries the ghostly vestiges of the Road and the houses across the Road at the height of their compromised grandeur. The chair's vivid blue is from a lost furniture history, a no-place of style, but the shape, the pattern are the spectral outlines of a way of living, just as the height of the rooftops and the Road itself is marked forever with the architecture and history of its class origins.

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In its string of shopping possibilities, the Lisburn Road looks like it was made for a showy kind of shopping. If we are tempted to think of it as a

place for the Belfast *flâneur* then it places severe restrictions on *flânerie*. There are no labyrinths to get lost in, no space for sustained daydreams. There are crowds, or at least, people, to see. Jewesbury and Burke see them close-up, and sometimes see with the eyes of a shopper, lured by the glitzy window and the immaculate display of luxury. As with the nineteenth-century photography of, for example, Hippolyte Jouvin, it seems that the urban spectacle of commerce, promenade and consumption wants to be photographed. Walking the streets, captured for the future, the Lisburn Road is falling into the past. If there's one aspect of the *flâneur* that the Lisburn Road reminds us of in these images it's the knowledge that 'in the course of *flânerie*, far-off times and places interpenetrate the landscape and the present moment'.<sup>6</sup> There is a Belfast which is painfully passing in these images, drifting off into the past since its role as exclusive class icon has been surpassed by a city in which the 'non-sectarian' has taken a

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<sup>6</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Mass. & London: Belknap, 2002), p. 419.

conceptual backseat and where middle-classness is no longer indigenously produced.

It is right that this exhibition should be thought of as an archive. The Lisburn Road is not dying, but its function is changing. During the Troubles it was the elevated centre of the city's conscience. It reminded us that there was a normal Belfast, though it never told us how to achieve it. And its normality was cruelly high for the city's aspirations. Everyone could despise the 'sagging tennis-net/ On a spongy lawn beside a dripping shrubbery',<sup>7</sup> but nobody could despise it with quite the fervour of the intellectual who could pretend to live intellectually in the city. For the rest of the city, like an Eden, this was a dream of a lost present tense and a reminder of our sinfulness. The nature of class in Northern Ireland, and especially Belfast, in the post-industrial years has meant that many in the city watched the traditional class structure collapse around them, and

<sup>7</sup> Louis MacNeice, from 'Autumn Journal' in *Collected Poems* (London: Faber, 1987), p. 133.

found themselves swept along by the eddies of new currents, all of which tended towards the whirlpool of bourgeoisification. While thousands were left behind, the tendencies were set in place – pale versions of the faded and unimpressive grandeur of the Lisburn Road, in shopping and living, sprang up everywhere. But the tide has now swept past this point leaving only a residue behind. The new bourgeois housing is, in one peculiar form, the apartment, but more commonly the private estate, which mimics little other than other private estates. An enclosed mall culture of shopping has replaced the idiosyncrasy of small and exclusive shops. The Lisburn Road and Malone, once a hated epitome, is now an anachronism. It is a quaint version of a future Belfast that was never going to happen. In slipping into this archive, we should not think it has fallen into obsolescence. Because it had a role to play, however perverse, however aloof, in the past identity of the city and so, in its present tense state, it will be central to the memories which make the many dystopias of Belfast's future.

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