**"Friendly encounters reduce the risk of radicalisation"**

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A wall separating a Catholic from a Protestant community in Belfast. A logo of the Amal militia spray-painted on a wall in Beirut. Or a police station right next to a mosque in Amsterdam. These are all signs of perceived or real polarisation in today’s urban world. Both shocked and fascinated by what he had seen in the city while working in Belfast, Ralf Brand, lecturer at the University of Manchester, initiated a research project on the interrelation between the urban environment and societal polarisation. Exploring the local situation in Belfast, Beirut, Berlin and Amsterdam, he found that polarisation and radicalisation can have a significant impact on the built environment and vice versa. What to do with that knowledge?

Why did you start this research project?

"During my stay at Queens University in Belfast, I started to look behind the scenes of the conflict between the Catholic and the Protestant communities, and the way the conflict is manifested in the built environment. I was both shocked and fascinated by what I saw and thought that it might be interesting to compare Belfast’s situation with other cities. I was especially interested in comparing the situations from my particular angle of architecture and design. I therefore applied for a grant from the British Economic and Social Research Council, which had just launched a new round of the funding programme 'New Security Challenges'. Some perceived it as geared to prevent violent extremism from the Muslim world. I understood this purpose but did not want to fall for the cliché target. That’s why I chose my case studies with some Muslim dimension, but not only. In Amsterdam and Beirut the Muslim element was clear, but in Belfast I researched a Christian conflict and in Berlin my focus was neo-Nazi radicalisation."

In your research you aimed to identify how polarisation becomes physically imprinted in cities. What did you find out?

"All the cities we studied showed physical signs of social polarisation, such as walls, gates or symbols. But in each city these signs were different. You often need local knowledge to decipher them. For example, someone who doesn’t know the logo of a certain militia in Beirut, would walk past it and not recognise it. But the people in Beirut, they know exactly what that logo means: this is our territory, keep out!"

However, you can also go rather wrong in your interpretation. In the neighbourhood we researched in Amsterdam – Slotervaart – there is a police station next to a mosque. The police station looks heavily fortified, with only few windows on the ground floor facing the mosque. If you are slightly paranoid, you could see this as an architectural way of surveillance, so the police can see what is happening around the mosque. However, the police officers told me that was not the case. Nevertheless, the fact that there are rumours on the ground amongst the people in Slotervaart does indicate something I think…"

Does the physical environment also have an effect on polarisation and radicalisation?

"Yes, it does. For example, as a response to certain atrocities committed by local teenagers in Belfast, two different bus stops were needed within 150 meters of each other; one for Catholics and one for Protestants. The fact that there are two bus stops has, of course, an impact on social relations. People don’t even get the chance to meet each other, they are literally divided. The urban environment can therefore solidify existing problems, and the longevity of this issue is particularly important. If you build a wall, it might stand there for a hundred years. Even if the social conditions improves, you still can’t have a neighbourly chat with someone from the other side of the wall. In other words, some things are easily changeable, such as graffiti. But it is much more difficult to take down a wall or change the layout of a city.

Are there any other ways in which the city may ‘encourage’ polarisation?

"Yes, according to the so-called isolation hypothesis a lack of contact amongst people results in polarisation, stereotyping and may further deteriorate into radicalisation. If that is the case, we might say that segregation is dangerous, especially if there is a correlation between economic and ethnic conditions. This correlation is based on the fact that immigrants can often not afford to settle in the richer neighbourhoods. Segregation occurs not because it is planned, but because the market dictates a certain sorting of people in space. It is not a malign segregation, but it can have a very detrimental effect that may lead to radicalisation.

Slotervaart in Amsterdam, for example, is becoming increasingly gentrified, which angers some people in the neighbourhood. Another interesting effect can be observed among children of immigrant families who hang around in
public spaces in Slotervaart. Immigrant families often have more children than average European families. In Amsterdam houses were designed for two to three children, not for four or more. As a consequence of this limitation of living space, teenagers spend more time outside and on the street. Some local residents perceive their presence as threatening or annoying.

In Beirut you see a similar demographic development. In the district of Dahieh (South of Beirut, Hezbollah stronghold) the Shi‘a community is expanding due to natural demographic growth. Some inhabitants in adjacent neighbourhoods perceive this as a form of encroachment.

This is also happening in Belfast. Catholics tend to have more children than Protestants, but a vacant lot in a Protestant area can’t be used for people living in densely populated Catholic estates. From a rational planning perspective it would be logical to move these people to the vacant houses in Protestant areas, but this is an anathema for a significant section of the Protestant community. They would be afraid that this is the first step towards the takeover of their traditional neighbourhoods – the thin end of the wedge”

Can we then conclude that it is very difficult to design-out radicalisation?

“You can't even design-out all kinds of crime, let alone radicalisation. Evidence shows that opportunistic crime can be tackled through material interventions. However, radicalisation, especially the violent extremist form, is almost by definition premeditated, and thus far from opportunistic. Better illumination or street bollards are therefore not going to stop a terrorist.

But of course, there is also an opportunistic element to polarisation. In Belfast, for example, teenagers tend to get drunk on Friday evenings and then start fighting each other. Especially in the media these kinds of incidents get an ethnic or religious undertone. The headlines may report about a row between Protestants and Catholics even though the event had nothing to do with religion, but rather with drunkenness and boredom. And alcohol abuse is a type of behaviour you can do something about.”

What are the main similarities and differences between the four cities you researched when it comes to their patterns of radicalisation?

“You can definitely see similarities. Both Beirut and Belfast seem to be the long-standing poster children of conflict, whereas Amsterdam and Berlin are characterised by more recent problems. You might think that is the main overarching pattern, but it is just one of many ways how the cake can be sliced. There are also similarities, in other dimensions, between Amsterdam and Beirut, Belfast and Berlin or Berlin and Beirut. The latter two do not have fences, gates or walls to separate people – but for quite different reasons.

In one particular sense, Berlin is the most unique case, I think. Most people in Beirut, Belfast and Amsterdam agree that in the most ideal situation people would get along and become friendly neighbours. However, in Berlin nobody says neo-Nazis should get along with Vietnamese immigrants. They simply want the neo-Nazi ideology to disappear. In the mainstream opinion, the very existence of the far-right ideology is illegitimate and therefore neo-Nazis having a drink with Turkish immigrants would miss the point.”

The results of this research project are presented in various academic publications, a final report and in an exhibition. Why did you decide to have such an exhibition?

“We wanted to reach out to the general public to stimulate debate and get feedback. Therefore we commissioned two artists from Vienna to create an exhibition. So far, the exhibition has only been shown in Belfast, but the reactions were very good. According to the venue that hosted the exhibition it was the best-visited event of the year. Also the media coverage from the BBC, the Irish Post and others was very positive. The exhibition is now touring to all other case study cities, plus Manchester; this was part of the original plan. In addition we have received invitations from several other cities and will show the exhibition in Exeter and London and potentially elsewhere.

How can policy makers and practitioners use the results of this research project?

“One of the key conclusions of this project is that contact and shared space are very important. Cities need places where people can meet and mingle. It would be unrealistic, as a first step, to expect formerly warring factions to hug each other. But it is rather the ordinary that brings people together, such as gardening, playing or shopping. In Berlin, there are ‘intercultural gardens’ where people from all backgrounds can grow vegetables and fruits together. In Belfast, a common retail space has been created where both Protestants and Catholics can send their mail, do their shopping and sip a coffee. Most of the positive, friendly encounters that we identified in this project were designed with a very strong participatory
element. The design process was essential. There is a big difference in the way people adopt communal places depending on who is the main provider. If it is the state or the city government, the success of a place very much depends on whether people perceive the state as neutral and fair. The private sector can work effectively as well. In Beirut, for example, a private company developed the Beirut Mall where people from different backgrounds come to shop. This is the positive aspect of money's "colour-blindness". And while profit-driven development can generate new shared spaces for people from different ethnic / political background it often creates new boundaries between the affluent and the poor; the gated community effect.

In the end, the grassroots level is the most effective in my opinion, because it applies a participatory design process. In some cases, such as the very successful case of the Belfast Stewartstown Road Regeneration Project, it took years for people to get together. But in the long term, I do think it is the most effective. Of course, the content of the design is important as well. It might not be the magic recipe to creating shared spaces, but it must definitely not be overlooked.

The exhibition of the project 'The Urban Environment: mirror and mediator of radicalisation' will run in the following cities:

Beirut - Opening 1 April 2010
Berlin - Opening late May
London - Opening 6 July
Amsterdam - date to be confirmed

EUKN, Simone Pekelsma

Links
- Click here for more information about the research project and its results
- Click here to visit the research project's exhibition website
- Click here to watch a YouTube video on the exhibition launch in Belfast
- Special issue Journal of Urban Technology on 'The Architecture of War and Peace'

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