Manifesto for ‘spirit of place’: the expressive value of signage on Belfast’s arterial routes in representing wider environmental and societal themes

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Commercial signage has a greater presence than any other type of sign in the built environment of cities, conveying a rich tapestry of semiotic codes. While designers are concerned with good practice, invoking semiotic principles, independent retailers with no formal training often create vibrant local signage. Interpreters of signs decode visual information according to their abilities, experiences and needs, but are likely to recognise familiar cultural codes. Signage located within communities, in order to be productive, must speculate the probability of adequately communicating with those who will purchase goods or services, most likely people living nearby. Consequently, commercial signage is often representative of informal community relations, with the spoken language of place gaining physical form through letterforms and cultural connotations expressed through colour and other associated codes. This paper examines signage in the built environment of Belfast’s arterial routes. Photographs demonstrate how local signs, when devoid of civic intervention, can provide a rich resource for interpreting socio-economic, cultural and, in a divided city like Belfast, political underpinnings of place, communicating the true ‘spirit of place’.

Keywords: Belfast, expressive values, signage, built environment, societal theme, spirit of place

La signalétique commerciale qui expose sa riche tapisserie de codes sémiotiques dans l’environnement urbain a une plus grande présence que tous les autres types de signes. Alors que les designers respectent les bonnes pratiques fondées sur les principes sémiotiques, les commerçants indépendants qui n’ont pas de formation dans ce domaine créent souvent des signes locaux très dynamiques. Les interprètes de ces signes décodent les informations visuelles à partir de leurs compétences, de leurs expériences et de leurs besoins, et ils sont généralement capables de reconnaître ces codes culturels familiers. Afin d’être efficaces, ces signes situés à l’intérieur des communautés parient sur la probabilité de communiquer adéquatement avec les clients qui achèteront des biens ou des services, clients qui sont très probablement du voisinage. En conséquence, cette signalétique commerciale est souvent à l’image des relations communautaires informelles, telles que la langue parlée dans le quartier qui se matérialise dans la forme des lettres et les connotations culturelles qui s’expriment par les couleurs et les autres codes associés. Cet article examine la signalétique dans l’environnement bâti des artères de Belfast. Les photographies démontrent comment les signes locaux qui ne font pas l’objet d’une intervention de la municipalité peuvent fournir une riche ressource pour interpréter les fondements socioéconomiques, culturels et même politique, dans une ville divisée comme Belfast, qui communiquent le véritable « esprit du lieu ».

Mots-clés: Belfast, valeurs expresses, signalisation, environnement bâti, thème sociétal, esprit du lieu.
Urban environments are as much a product of their inhabitants as of the work of planners and architects. Nowhere is this more evident than in a divided, historical and highly visible city such as Belfast, a social production, constantly changing and adapting according to the actions and interventions of generations of builders and inhabitants. While aging and patina of the built environment reflect the passing of time, man-made marks, signage, letterforms, graffiti, murals and tags, are expressions of underlying culture, and culture, in Belfast, is deeply ingrained in society, often, in the built environment of communities, designating the territorial nature of place. Commercial signage may be considered as noisy, loud and chaotic and, left alone, without intervention, it is, it should be, its function is not necessarily to please. Signs are not generally erected en-masse, so often reflect both the time of their creation and vision of individual creators. This organic emergence of aggregates of signs naturally creates a streetscape without neatness or order. As such, signs have become contradictions in a contemporary society where local government agendas advocate visual order. Rebel signs, refusing to conform, are now, like our built heritage, under threat. Just as older traditional buildings are being bulldozed and replaced with postmodern edifices, signage traditional to place, even in the city’s communities, is being replaced in an effort to ‘update’ urban environments. The city centre has already been largely neutralised, only in streets removed from the commercial thoroughfare do vestigial disorderly. On the city’s arterial routes, unappealing to the tourist trade, commercial signage often still presents a rich tapestry of semiotic codes expressing local dialogues and prevalent cultural ideologies.
As the language of place in community spaces is represented on signage, in an eclectic array of letterforms, the interpreter is presented with a rich palette of semiotic resources for interpretation, dependent on his or her understanding of cultural codes. Where authenticity is sacrificed for ‘newness’, worn for ‘shiny’ and letterforms replaced with those ‘in fashion’ to express local dialogues, these codes may become absent. At a time when the city centre has become appeasing to wider global narratives community urban environments are now being neutralised, local voices muted, underlying culture silenced. In a still divided Belfast local narratives on signage are not just relevant to place, but crucial to inform as to whether a person has strayed into ‘unsafe’ territory of ‘one’ or the ‘other’ of the city’s polarised and segregated community groups.

Over the past six years research on signage in Belfast has evidenced that not only is the city segregated, divided by walls and interfaces, signage has become segregated, also reflecting wider societal themes. Photographs from field studies of the city centre and surrounding arterial routes in this paper display factors impacting on appearance, location and construct of signs in response to underlying societal themes. In contrast to the culturally neutral and rebranded city centre, in interface areas of arterial routes ‘personal meaning retains the potential to undermine efforts to induce historical amnesia’; murals, graffiti, flags and flagging of related messages reinforce the territorial nature of place.

Belfast is still ‘divided into mutually suspicious Catholic and Protestant districts’. The former sees tricolour flags, or flagging of these colours, on lampposts, kerb-stones and even signage, the latter reflects this, but with colours of the Union Jack. Observations of cultural codes on signage, graffiti, tags and other graphic marks on arterial routes allow this paper to explore their role in establishing what is now a gradually disappearing ‘spirit of place’ of Belfast.

**Initiatives impacting on the appearance and location of Belfast’s signs**

Since the outbreak of Belfast’s civil unrest in 1969, planning initiatives have resulted in physical divisions designed to deal with socio-political-religious divisions. ‘Peace walls’ were erected at interface areas in the city, “where cultural differences could meet each other, if not hampered by intervening bricks, mortar and fencing”. The walls, located in communities of arterial routes, range in length from a few hundred metres to over 5 km and can be up to 7.6 metres in height. A 2011 report by the Belfast Interface Project, carried out by the Institute for Conflict Research, to identify and classify known security barriers and asso-

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ciated forms of defensive architecture in residential areas of Belfast located 99 different security barriers and forms of defensive architecture in the city. Communities, built environments, signage and location of signs on arterial routes reflect the impact of segregation by these walls. (Fig. 6, 7, 8) A further extension of the physicality of peace walls are transport initiatives over the past 40 years, which have further redefined the urban landscape of the city. The 1978 Review of Transport Strategy recommended the “construction of a high-grade motorway link (the Westlink) running to the North and West of the city centre and ‘conjoined through part of its length’.” Transport objectives were met with the additional security benefit of “... a moat, cutting off the city centre from Catholic and Protestant Housing areas.” (Fig. 9)

Arterial routes once walkable to the city centre, with continuous commercial activity, have been fractured by supporting structures for and intervention of high-speed roads. These have exacerbated socio-economic isolation of communities and created vast urban wastelands in the city. The impact of both walls and roads can be observed on the location and types of signage in these communities.

Fig. 2 Mural, Falls Road, Belfast


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Fig. 3 Paramilitary mural Newtownards Road

Fig. 4 Irish flag (Tricolour) beside peace wall interface on Bryson Street, Newtownards Road
Fig. 5 Flagging the colours of Union Jack flag, on Newtownards Road

Fig. 6 Perhaps the most famous peace wall in Belfast is this on Cupar Way, West Belfast
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Fig. 7 Peace Wall Lepper Street, North Belfast

Fig. 8 A close-up view of the Bryson Street Peace Wall, East Belfast
Fig. 9 Photographic composite showing how major roadways have fractured the city. Clifton Street.
Recent interventions have aimed to rectify the marked visual and economic decline on Belfast’s arterial routes, replacing disorderly signage with mass-produced signs in receipt of civic approval. Such intervention poses a challenge to the ability of commercial signage to be honestly representative of place, particularly when place specific coding systems are disposed of. While such intervention is a worldwide phenomenon, only fairly recently has it occurred in Belfast. Changes to signage are as significant in altering perceptions of the city as those to the built environment, resulting in how ‘sense of place’ is perceived. The outcome has been an undermining of the narrative of place in a number of ways. Cultural codes on commercial signs are being eroded in a built environment being updated by local council, resulting in ‘cultural neutralisation of place. This highly visible city, being rapidly reimagined for the 21st Century, consists of people proud of their culture, history, communities, ideologies and myths, all of which are represented on signage.

Codes and relays of codes on Belfast signage

Belfast’s arterial route signage typically uses devices, to include alphabetic and language codes, understood by people living in nearby communities; colour and cultural codes reinforce these messages. The encoding methods of more primal signs in interface areas may be easily understood by one with local or societal knowledge, but perhaps not the visitor and in Belfast being able to recognise cultural codes can be a determining factor for personal safety. Cultural codes expressed in letterforms and colours enable the interpreter to be informed on the authentic character of place, yet aesthetically pleasing manufactured signage, is often created using fashionable letterforms and colours. Where such intervention has occurred codes are often absent, leaving the interpreter without valuable information as to the sort of place they are in.

Commercial signage extends in usefulness beyond its obvious function, to denote goods or services available, providing other visual cues beneficial to society. It contains words ‘that convey information about the world we live in’ here, Belfast, Therapeutic Value of Signage on Belfast’s Arterial Routes in Representing Wider Environmental and Societal Themes

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8 Barthes, R. & Heath, S. (1977:54) Image, Music, Text, London: Fontana Press. Barthes defines the ‘obvious’ as ‘that which presents itself quite naturally to the mind’. Beyond the obvious function of the commercial sign – to inform the user of the type of business to which it refers, on the denotative level, or first level of signification – there is additional valuable knowledge potentially to be extracted. This additional knowledge may be examined as part of the second layer of meaning, the connotative meaning, the layer of the broader concepts, ideas and values, which the signs ‘stand for’. Although to say there are two layers is misleading, as the dissection of the sign in order to extract meanings is a relay, a process for which the definitive end is elusive and with infinite possibilities dependent on the reader’s knowledge, experience, or cultural background.  
and reveals the socio-economic and political concerns of the city’s people. Indexed by place words are expressed in letterforms to manifest locally spoken dialogues and informal community relations, embellished by colours often representative of local ideologies. Signage specific to place speaks to the sort of place it is, informing us of our whereabouts and, whether through location, words, letterforms, colour palettes, even illumination, guides us to safety and affordances of place. Erosion of culturally specific coding neutralises the ability of signage to reliably and honestly inform on this character of place and in a still divided Belfast these codes are vital.

**Impact of future Belfast initiatives on the built environment and signage**

In post-conflict Belfast inward investment has seen dramatic alterations to the built environment of the city centre, resulting in alterations to society itself. Architectural heritage groups and other conservationist bodies lobby fervently to retain some of the city’s core architecture, once Georgian, then Victorian, with few of the former style remaining and ever-declining examples of the latter. The post-modern vision for Belfast by city planners has not been emotional or nostalgic, instead aiming to “forget” the city’s ‘troubled’ past. As part of the Belfast Urban Area Plan to promote the ‘cultural normality of Belfast’ there was a ‘new city centre

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10 Jacobs, J. (1992:36) *The Death And Life Of Great American Cities*. Vintage Books Edition edn, New York: Random House, Inc. Jacobs takes an anthropological interest in how the city is used by people and observes how shops and therefore signage assist in creating safe neighbourhoods, drawing people to the pavements. Where there are people there are sets of eyes, aided at night by the illumination of signage, where there are eyes there is surveillance to discourage crime.

11 Rykwert, J. (2000:6–7) *The Seduction Of Place: The City In The Twentieth-First Century*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson. Rykwert writes that ‘a town or city can never be quite passive, and because there is constant interaction between society and the urban fabric, we cannot tinker with our cities without making some adjustments to society as well – or vice versa’.


13 Patton, M. & Ulster Architectural Heritage Society (1993:vii), *Central Belfast: an historical gazetteer*. Belfast: Ulster Architectural Heritage Society. Patton writes ‘Belfast is not a museum piece like some cities; in their haste its Victorian merchants trampled over the remains of their Georgian predecessors, and in its turn our own generation has treated its 19th century heritage with as little respect’.

14 The ‘Troubles’ started in the late 1960s, lasting to the signing of the Belfast Agreement, in 1998.

local plan based almost exclusively on image\textsuperscript{16} The city's core has been redrawn as a tourist destination designed to attract a portion of global economic spend. The once Victorian industrial streets of the city are now an architectural composite; postmodern structures fracture the at one time almost constant red brick and sandstone landscape. Encroaching modernity, economic pressures and global initiatives threaten eradication of local authenticity in both buildings and signage. In communities of Belfast's arterial routes commercial signage represents a 'kind of mental layout of the census data',\textsuperscript{17} and can present an honest representation of society and place. Global brands, at one time absent in Belfast, now dominate the city centre. A new dedicated 'Disneyfied'\textsuperscript{18} shopping centre, Victoria Square, creates the ideal faux environment in which to shop or eat. In response to modernisation and gentrification of the city centre, homogeneous signage represents global brands, each one manufactured to corporate specifications with significant design intervention. This city rebranding has erased, to a significant degree, the ability of both buildings and signage to be uniquely representative of Belfast. Adam warns that 'one of the key issues in the modern world is that all places are starting to look the same...eventually that starts to take away the identity of individual cities'. Of the Victoria Square shopping centre, he says 'It's good architecture, but it could be anywhere...there's nothing that tells me I am in Belfast'.\textsuperscript{19} Identical signs to those in Belfast can be seen nationally or globally, on the streets of Manchester, London, Liverpool, or further afield in Paris, New York; Apple, Gap, House of Fraser, Starbucks, Debenhams, McDonald’s. (\textbf{Fig. 10, 11})

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{16} ibid.; 46.
\item \textsuperscript{18} Erterp, H., (2009:269). Chaos Or Homogenization? The Role Of Shop Signs In Transforming Urban Fabric In Beyolu, Istanbul. Visual Communication 2009 8: 263 http://vcj.sagepub.com/content/8/3/263, (accessed 25/09/2011), explain disneyfication as 'a neologism taken from the name of the Walt Disney company to describe what some see as the way in which the principles of Disney theme parks are spreading throughout our societies'.
\end{itemize}
Fig. 10 Reimaged Belfast attracting global brands, Apple, Victoria Square, Belfast city centre

Fig. 11 House of Fraser Victoria Square, Belfast city centre
Cultural connotations on signage in the built environment of arterial routes

Belfast’s arterial routes tell a story of commercial signs contradictory to that of the city centre. Named ‘arterial’ as they run from the country towards a city centre located on the shores of Belfast Lough, these are the location of the city’s communities, a ‘series of villages’ self-contained from the city centre due to the fracturing by roads and interfaces which isolate them from the core city and communities from each other, an enforced separation often reflected on signage. The routes are architecturally similar, with their roots established in the boom years of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In response to “a significant explosion of both the linen industry and shipbuilding”, a need arose for housing for workers in the city’s factories and mills. These red-orange brick houses, designed for Victorian workers, have, through time, adapted to become commercial premises, sometimes with architectural modifications, sometimes without. Where architectural modifications have taken place signs may be positioned on dedicated fascia boards, though typically commercial signage is positioned where the core architecture affords, between the ground floor and upstairs windows, or around the circumference of bay windows. While the architecture of each route may be somewhat indistinguishable from that of its counterparts the society of each is very different and, evidenced on signage, this creates uniqueness. (Fig. 12-15)

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22 Belfast’s population grew from just under 20,000 at the beginning of the nineteenth century to around 350,000 by 1901 mainly due to the inward migration of former agrarian workers to the city, necessitating the building of homes.

23 Larkham, P.J. (1996:173) Conservation And The City. London: Routledge. Larkham suggests that “the increased frequency of changes to signs, facades and interiors is due to changing commercial pressures and subtle variations to demand”.
Fig. 12 Buildings and commercial signage on Belfast’s Antrim Road

Fig. 13 Buildings and commercial signage on Belfast’s Falls Road

Fig. 14 Buildings and commercial signage on Belfast’s Newtownards Road
Where city centre signs respond to complex and well established design narratives those on arterial routes are created by local stakeholders, often with modest aspirations. Signage generally does not show significant design intervention, it’s appearance dictated according to local economic factors and influences. Participation of many commissioners, makers and creators of signage, has created a chaotic look to these red brick streets. Shops and businesses take the form of continual, if sometimes broken, rows of commercial activity. On the Antrim, Falls and Newtownards Roads, commercial premises on the main commuter route provide an economic front to the communities located to their rear. Commercial signage dominates where traffic passes regularly and commuters and local shoppers provide activity, attracted by businesses, cafes, restaurants and public service facilities. Behind the main routes, social housing estates are rich with visual messages that are cultural in origin and nature. Commercial signage tapers off on approach to interface areas, until, at interfaces, commercial activity and signs are absent, replaced by graffiti, murals and flags. This dispersal, isolation and segregation of signage reflect societal divisions exacerbated by planning initiatives designed to address these divisions. This results in a fractured semiotic landscape representing dominant hegemonic groups and local ideologies. (Fig. 16–17)
On arterial routes signage expresses local commercial agendas, reflecting in the types of goods sold. Language on signage mimics informal community relations, often using colloquialisms and humour understood by those living nearby and reflecting political and cultural affiliations. Letterforms are unsophisticated, often favouring sans-serifs, in alignment with modest economic aspirations and outlooks. The signs rarely demonstrate significant design intervention and Letterforms tend to be thematic on route, once used they appear to be favoured by shop-owners influenced by what may be observed on surrounding signs. Often commercial signs remain static, some becoming landmarks; often long standing in the communities they serve they may be considered a part of the community. Signs choose, as an integral part of their message, to be represented by the name of the owner,
reinforcing a sense of belonging and encouraging locals to state the owners name when relating the name of the shop to which they refer. Instead of saying ‘I’m away to the shop’ people might say ‘I’m away to Jimmy’s’, with meaning understood. While the signs indicate most obviously, on a denotative level, types of goods or services available, the ‘affordances’24 of place, on a broader scale, through observation of relays25 or secondary levels of signification within the artefact, much more information can be interpreted. They can also be used as locatory devices as they form effective place markers due to their high visibility, through scale and colour, if not letterforms and materials. In Belfast the usually primary colour palettes and materials of construction are in stark contrast to the red brick of buildings, enhancing their potential as significant place markers. Unlike the city centre, rarely are signs on arterial routes deliberately targeting tourist spend, with West Belfast and the Falls Road an exception. This de-facto cultural quarter26 has, in recent years, been rebranded to accentuate its ‘Irishness27 and forms a popular destination for sightseeing tours28. While such tours tend towards observations of murals and myths of place these are underpinned by the duality of language and totemic colour palettes; signs play a role in creating the sense of place. Rarely is signage on arterial routes constructed of expensive materials, usually plastic, wood, or vinyl, reflecting the limited economic means of communities. The sorts of goods sold generally respond to basic community needs. On each route the encoding methods relate to signage location – signage would be at odds with the environment if superimposed in a location specific to an alternate sociocultural group. (Fig18-25)

24 Gibson, J. (1979:127) The Ecological Approach To Visual Perception. Boston etc; London: Houghton Mifflin. ‘The affordances of the environment are what it offers to the animal, what it provides or furnishes’. Gibson admits to having made the word up. It’s function, is ‘to imply the complementarity of the animal and the environment’.

25 Barthes, R. & Heath, S. (1977:33–34) Image, Music, Text. London: Fontana Press. Barthes questions ‘How does meaning get into the image? Where does it end? And if it ends what is there beyond?’ From the code from which the language is established, the linguistic code, through to the code of the message itself, what it denotes, then to other codes present, connotative codes. There is a starting point, for interpretation of the sign, which may likely, although not necessarily be the language (as this is dependent upon the reader or interpreter), and then a relay of semiotic messages beyond this which may be interpreted, although the end point, or exhaustion of possibilities of interpretation is an unknown destination.

26 Neill and Schedler describe how ‘Catholic West Belfast, for example, without official planning, is arguably the most distinctive de facto cultural quarter in the city. With a strong nationalist culture and ethos, having extended on the part of some to an armed prosecution of a claim to place, West Belfast possesses a unique place identity almost as a city within a city’. Neill, W.J.V. & Schedler, H. (2001:19), Urban Planning And Cultural Inclusion. Lessons From Belfast And Berlin. Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave.

27 This area has cultural codes aligning it more to the Republic of Ireland than to the United Kingdom, evidenced by the high proportion of Irish language translations on signage.

28 Conflict tourism has become a major attraction for visitors to the city, ‘the Cupar Way peace wall is... one of the city’s top attractions, bus and cab tours regularly stop by and encourage tourists to scrawl their own messages on it’. Somers, J. Why Northern Ireland’s ‘Peace Walls’ Show No Signs Of Following Berlin’s Example. http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2014/11/03/peace-walls-northern-ireland_n_6093634.html. Accessed 20/10/14.
Examples of signage on Belfast’s Antrim Road

Fig. 18 The owner’s name, as part of the collection of community names, is represented in uppercase sans-serif, on a culturally significant blue background.

Fig. 19 Another name recognizable by the community, in upper and lower case sans-serif.

Fig. 20 Angela’s references owners name in italic script, adding informality to familiar language.
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Examples of signage on Belfast’s Falls Road

Fig. 21 The Red Devi Bar uses uncial lettering and Irish language to express affiliations with Ireland

Fig. 22 This sign requires cultural knowledge to understand that the sign references a football kit

Fig. 23 The name, Michael Flanagan, is culturally significant and will be familiar to the community
Examples of signage on Belfast’s Newtownards Road

Fig. 24 This taxi sign references place and uses red, a colour expressing Unionist community ties.

Fig. 25 The sign and the mural combine as one with each interpreted in association with the other.
Impact of intervention on the presentation of signage on arterial routes

Maintenance of signage may be important to the potential for a thriving economy of place, however, even maintenance in the interests of updating signage can erode the character of place. In Belfast, weathered signage is replaced, but the character of place is often compromised in the interests of improving the aesthetic appearance of signs. These distinctive place markers with their myriad of information and communication properties, are being transformed to be more ‘aesthetically pleasing’, in efforts to ‘update’ the built environments of the routes. Since 2010 intervention has seen new narratives on signs, often contrary to those traditionally representative of place. Particularly affected are colour palettes, which are traditionally representative of socio-political affiliations of place.

As part of Belfast City Council’s Renewing the Routes Program changes to signage have been undertaken with ‘aesthetics’ as the key criterion. While signage has been in some instances in need of repair, and acknowledgement is made of research supporting that maintenance of the built environment may bolster the economy and even safety of place, this intervention is concerning. Signs are replaced on a node-by-node basis, resulting in sweeping rather than arbitrary changes to the built environment and established ‘sense of place’ of the routes. As each route is ‘transformed’ by the same body of professionals, having obtained the work by public tender, some uniformity in manufacture and materials, colours or choice of letterstyle occurs, although language is usually maintained. That signs are also replaced somewhat en-mass, removes the sense of a temporal evolution of signage along the streetscape.

Design decisions are ultimately being undertaken, although there is some consultation, by those who are ‘making’ the signs, not formed in the usual ad-hoc manner by local stakeholders, who, were they to have autonomy, might make very different decisions as to how signage should appear. The intervention extends to a high proportion of each built environment, with a significant risk of faux manufacturing of place by other than local actors and a rebranding of place not always

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31 Lynch, K. (1973; 1960:47) The Image Of The City. Cambridge Mass.; London: M.I.T. Press. Ref The term ‘node’ comes from the work of Lynch, who In Image Of The City, defines nodes as points, ‘strategic spots in a city into which an observer can enter, and which are the intensive foci to and from which he is travelling. They may be primarily junctions, places of a break in transportation, a crossing or conversion of paths, moments of shift from one structure to another’. In Belfast these nodes refer to blocks of Victorian terraced houses which have been adapted for commercial purposes.
in accordance with underlying environmental themes. Of the routes examined for this study all have now been subject to this type of intervention to varying degrees. The impact of intervention on the Newtownards Road has perhaps been the most extreme, although local traders groups have also played a role in the creation here of fake shop fronts not observed on the other routes. Some examples below demonstrate how coding systems have been altered on signage, thereby removing some of the place-specific themes previously expressed through language, letterforms and colour. (Fig 26-28)
Fig. 28 This butcher has had its non-uniform italic sans-serif lettering replaced with a sophisticated serif and larger initial capitals, at odds with the unsophisticated and straightforward message

Conclusion

The location, presentation and dispersal of signage on Belfast’s arterial routes is a direct consequence of planning initiatives made some forty to fifty years ago, the ramifications of which continue to reinforce pre-existing socio-cultural divisions. The Peace walls and dividing roads remain, excluding once walkable communities from the city centre. As a result, signage is constrained to main routes and is commonly representative of local dialogues and socio-economic and political ideologies. Once departed from the main route commercial signage ceases to exist, replaced by the more primal graphic marks of place, graffiti, murals and flags. Commercial signage on these routes, however, is largely, where intervention has not occurred, representative of the values, needs and aspirations of communities and, as such, it can, be a reliable and honest barometer of the true nature of place, playing an integral role in the creation of the ‘spirit of place’. Signage on Belfast’s arterial routes gives voice to cultural discourses, the array of typefaces, colours and materials and allows for freedom of local expression. In the segregated working class communities of the Antrim Road, Falls Road, and Newtownards Road language and letterforms reflect community relations and aspirations, socio-economic means and represent local culture. Seldom on these arterial routes, of limited economic means, are expensive materials used in the construction of signs and colour palettes flag underlying socio-political affiliations of communities, history and ideology of which those living there are proud. Increasingly, intervention in Belfast seeks to replace weathered, broken or faded signage, with this intervention comes the risk of diluting the authentic local narrative value of urban vernacular signs, replacing it with benign, or non place-specific narratives. Place specific socio-economic and cultural codes, language, letterform, colour, materials, are invaluable to the creation of ‘sense of place’,
without them neutralisation of place occurs. While Belfast city centre has been reimaged as inclusive and culturally neutral, local culture, expressed on signage, is at the core of personal and group identity for those living in the city’s communities. Eradication of local dialogues, of personal and group ideologies, of personally chosen lettering to express language and culturally significant colour codes, amounts to the eradication of culture.

In acknowledging that signage in need of maintenance should receive appropriate intervention, the suggestion is not that signage should not be repaired or replaced, instead this paper argues that, when replaced, culturally significant codes should be retained. Through thoughtful intervention and a regard for the value of signage as a reliable socio-economic indicator and valuable cultural artefact, the character of Belfast and sense of place, at least on arterial routes, could be maintained. What remains of the ‘spirit of place’ of Belfast, a city where culture is at the core of community identity, could be protected. Authentic signage expressive of culture works together with traditional buildings, where they still remain, to create an image of place unique to Belfast. The postmodern vision for the city centre no doubt increases global spend and entices tourists, thereby bolstering the economy, but it is a threat to authenticity, eradicating culture in the name of neutrality. On the arterial routes, responding to local, not global, economic agendas, where culture is at the core of identity, signage need not be neutralised. Let at least the urban environments of communities on arterial routes remain representative of local culture; there, ‘let Belfast signage be Belfast signage’.
REFERENCES


