

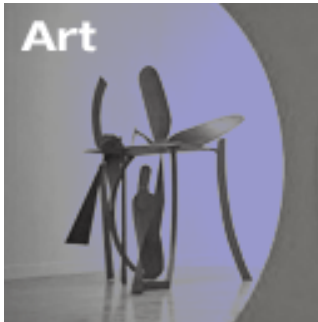
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Repainting history

Belfast is trying to put its troubled past behind it, while keeping its heritage intact. So should the paramilitary murals adorning its housing estates be preserved - or destroyed? By Owen Bowcott

Wednesday May 2, 2007

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Erasing traumatic memories is not simple. Transforming the paramilitary murals that loom over many of Northern Ireland's housing estates into more welcoming images is a slow process. One display likely to be replaced soon is a colourful, Ulster Defence Association composition marking the murder of five Catholics in a betting shop in 1992, which occupies the entire end wall of a low-rise block of flats in Tullycarnet, east Belfast.

The Tullycarnet estate - where a portrait of James Magennis, a Belfast-born Catholic who won the Victoria Cross for his second-world-war service as a navy diver, has superseded an apocalyptic painting of the Grim Reaper - is a prime example of the progress being made and of the difficulties involved. Residents become attached to familiar landmarks, even those with murderous connotations. "I thought I was going to get lynched when the Magennis picture replaced the Grim Reaper," says Tommy Taylor, a local loyalist backing the change. "It was a massive step."



One of the murals adorning east Belfast. Photograph: Getty

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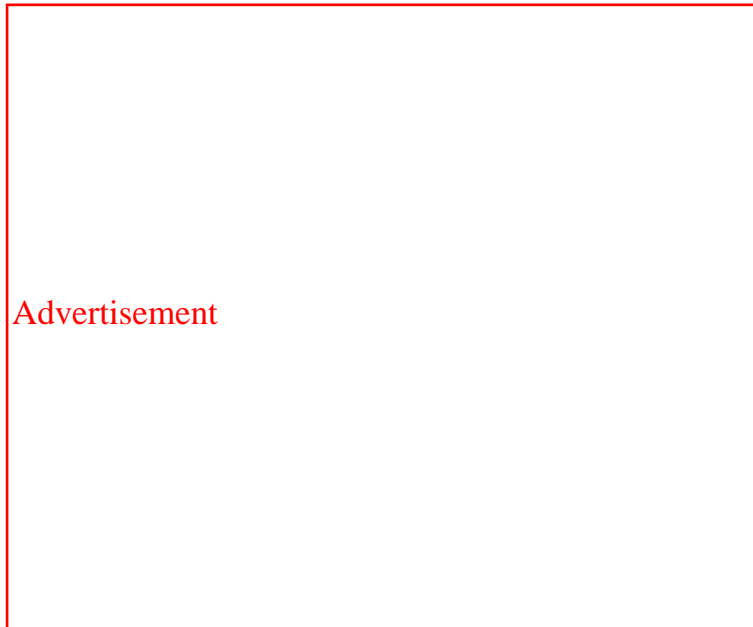
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The UDA mural now under discussion is dedicated to Mark Rice, one of the men who carried out the slaughter in the bookmaker's shop 14 years ago. He lives on the estate. "His parents told me they want rid of the picture," says Taylor. "Rice has completely changed - but he wants to keep a photo of the mural."

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Historical revisionism is always contentious. "People see these murals as expressing their identity," says Sammy Douglas, a community worker who helps loyalist communities redesign murals. "They are a message to the other side. They mark out territory. If you are a Catholic or a nationalist, they say, 'You are not welcome.' Removing them is difficult. People contact me and say they live in housing estates and are too afraid to ask about having them changed. People need to tell their stories but they don't need to keep them up on the wall all the time."

It is often young men, under 25 and with a sense that they missed out on the excitement of the Troubles, who are keenest to preserve the paintings of paramilitary figures and their lethal armouries. Douglas has encountered another source of opposition: "Tour guides have called and said, 'Don't take them down.' They want to take the backpackers around the streets in summer on tour buses.

Even I sometimes wonder whether we are simply painting over divisions. Is it a denial of our past history?"

Paul Carland, from the Housing Executive, is confident that the gable ends of homes now dominated by paramilitary murals can be made less intimidating. "If people in communities feel safe, they don't need to mark out their territory," he says. "If they feel confident and have a voice, they don't have to put up murals."

Even when agreement has been reached, there can be practical obstacles to overcome. "We were replacing a loyalist mural," says Douglas, "and the guy who originally painted it was going to start on the Monday morning. But he rang on the Friday and admitted that he couldn't paint faces. For years he had only done figures wearing balaclavas".

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