Introduction

The Forum for Alternative Belfast held its third summer school in August 2011 in collaboration with the South Belfast Partnership Board. The study area for the week was inner south Belfast and its connection to the city centre. In 2010 the summer school was called “Talkoot” a Finnish word for the gathering of neighbours working together to build or repair.

The Roads Service and Belfast City Council took part. One achievement of 2011 was the building of a new roadway called “Talkoot” a Finnish word for the gathering of neighbours working together. The study area includes the inner south Belfast and its connection to the city centre. In 2010 the summer school collaborated with the South Belfast Partnership Board. The study area for the week was the inner south Belfast and its connection to the city centre. The threat of this road has loomed over these inner city communities for nearly 50 years. The drive of these policies is to move the traffic from the City Hall to the new ring road. The proposed new Belfast Central station will encourage land in public ownership can be released for housing and other uses providing active frontages.

Background

South Belfast may be considered reasonably well connected for a pedestrian or a cyclist to the city centre. This is the case for the Ormeau Road but not the Ormeau Road, Great Victoria Street and Sandy Row. Walking or cycling along these roads remains a bleak experience, especially at night. The study area includes neighbourhoods of economic deprivation, including: Sandy Row, the Markets, Donegall Pass and Lower Ormeau.

One of the main causes for the blight and vacant sites in the area is a long-standing inner ring road plan by the Department for Regional Development Roads Service. The road proposal has caused blight by its “take line” and the vacant sites are clearly seen on the Forum’s “Missing City Map”, the product of the first summer school in 2009. This road was first conceived back in the 1960’s, the Westlink section of this plan was realised but the southern section was never built and later reduced to that of a projected inner ring road to remove the traffic from the centre and around the City Hall. This road includes Hope Street, Bruce Street, Bankmore Street, Cromac Street, Victoria Street, Dunbar Link, Millfield, Durham Street and the Boyne Bridge and is now part of the wider policies including DDR “Belfast on the Move”, “Streets Ahead”, “Rapid Transit” and other sustainable transport measures.

The drive of these policies is to move the traffic from the City Hall to the new ring road potentially serving pedestrian and cycle routes from housing areas and the wider south Belfast from the centre. The threat of this road has loomed over these inner city communities for nearly 10 years.

Outcomes

- Over 80 people packed the Crescent Arts Centre on Friday 19th August 2011 to hear the outcomes of the week. This publication demonstrates what civic and community resolution of problems can achieve in active workshops. The implementation of these ideas should not be allowed to be of poor quality and with no gain to all neighbours.

- If other modes of transport were taken into consideration together with a wider spread of traffic over the city over a five, ten, fifteen year period a series of streets would be needed but not a four to six lane wide road.

- A road is not needed to facilitate Rapid Transit.

- Hope Street, Bruce Street, Bankmore Street, and Ormeau Avenue and Cromac Street can be tree lined with wide pavements for pedestrians and cyclists. Cromac Street is remade as an arterial street with active frontages.

- The new streets are walkable / cycling links between the proposed new Belfast Central Rail station and the River Lagan with a bridge to the Ormeau Park and East Belfast beyond.

- Land in public ownership can be released for housing and other uses providing active frontages.

- The social and civil leadership demonstrated to resolve this blight requires that regeneration of problems can achieve in active workshops. The implementation of these ideas should not be allowed to be of poor quality and with no gain to all neighbours.

- An Independent critical design review process is required to ensure the best result for the city and adjacent neighbourhoods. This project should not develop with the random and poor quality speculation that the city has seen in the last decade.

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Process

Thirty people signed up for the week and on Monday morning key addresses were given by each of the government departments attending. Belfast City Council presented a wider vision for the city. The Department for Social Development pointed out that most of the vacant land in the study area was in public ownership and there were a number of opportunity sites. The Department of the Environment reported that planning reform is moving forward which will empower local community groups towards preparing local development plans. The Department for Regional Development outlined the details of “Belfast on the Move” and the proposals for “Rapid Transit”. Key to the presentation was the comment that the successful function of Rapid Transit was not dependant on moving all the traffic from the City Hall. The Roads Service outlined the thinking behind the City Centre Ring: Southern Section. Opportunities for public realm improvements were outlined and the potential of releasing sites for buildings. The next few days carried on as informal workshop sessions, presentations and negotiations.

STREETS NOT ROADS

The first map shows an extract of the Forum Missing City map, the red sites are vacant and are often caused by blight due to the longstanding proposal to build a 4-6 lane road through the area.

The second old map post 1950 shows the city when it was connected and intact. We need to make this scar on the city into a new opportunity for a cross city boulevard that is densely planted with cycle lanes, streets and wide pavements.

Participants

With thanks to all the representatives from: Belfast City Council, Dept for Social Development, Dept of for Regional Development Roads and Rapid Transport, MAG, Sustrans, Adapt NI, Playboard, South Belfast Partnership Board and the local neighbourhoods who spoke and contributed.