

Project Proposal Application

To be completed by the lead proposed supervisor,
with input from the non-HE Partner Organisation(s).



Arts and
Humanities
Research Council

SECTION 1: PROJECT SUMMARY AND APPLICANT DETAILS			
Proposed Project Title:	Innovating <i>Interface Architecture</i>: Investigating the adaptive reuse of the abandoned buildings dividing Belfast’s communities.		
Project Summary: <i>(Maximum 100 words)</i>	This project addresses an important but critically overlooked legacy of sectarian conflict in Belfast; the neglected and abandoned buildings residing within contested ‘interface zones’ dividing contentious Catholic and Protestant communities. Termed here as <i>Interface Architecture</i> , they range from buildings of noted historic interest such as Victorian-era linen mills and churches, to post-war school buildings, to nondescript functions such as telephone exchanges and warehouses. The PhD conceptualises this <i>Interface Architecture</i> as latent <i>community assets</i> , where innovative architectural design-based research examining adaptive reuse offers the opportunity to promote local social, economic and environmental transformation.		
Host University:	Ulster University		
Name of Non-HE Partner Organisation(s): <i>(Add more lines if needed)</i>			
1. Department of Justice, Northern Ireland			
2.			
Contact(s) at Non-HE Partner Organisation(s): <i>(Add more lines if needed)</i>			
Name:	Michael McAvoy	Email:	
Primary AHRC Subject Area: <i>Select one subject area from the list here. Please do <u>not</u> add or amend subjects, as there will not be a corresponding Subject Area Review Panel to assess your nomination.</i>	Architecture: History, Theory and Practice		
Does the project include a Creative Practice component?	YES <input type="checkbox"/>	NO <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
Do you consider the project to be interdisciplinary?	YES <input type="checkbox"/>	NO <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
If you consider the project to be interdisciplinary, please state why: <i>(Maximum 100 words. Please note that your application will be assessed by the relevant primary AHRC subject area review panel. However, in this space you should indicate which other subject areas your proposal covers and how your methodology is genuinely interdisciplinary.)</i>			
N/A			

SECTION 2: PROJECT PROPOSAL AND CASE FOR SUPPORT

Please provide full details of the proposal and make your case for support below:

(Maximum 750 words)

CONTEXT

The conflict in and about Northern Ireland (often referred to as ‘the Troubles’) has profoundly impacted the social, political and economic structures of the region. There has been sustained academic attention from planning, human geography and sociology, but the *architectural legacy* of the Troubles remains an underdeveloped area of scholarship.

It is now 25 years since the signing of the 1998 *Belfast Agreement*, but the so-called ‘peace-walls’ and ‘interface barriers’ continue to divide many Catholic and Protestant communities, particularly in Belfast. In 2012, the Department of Justice (NI) assumed responsibility for the reduction and removal of these barriers, achieving commendable success in some areas. Yet, most major interface barriers remain and physical division is an everyday aspect of life for many communities.

The Hidden Barriers research cluster at Ulster University has examined how both ‘visible’ and ‘hidden’ architectural barriers remain normalised within the urban fabric (Coyles, 2017a; 2017b; 2018a; 2018b; 2023; Coyles, Grant & Hamber, 2021). This proposal goes further, examining a critically overlooked gap-in-knowledge; the realm of disused and abandoned buildings residing within interface locations. Termed here as *Interface Architecture*, they range from buildings of historic interest such as Victorian-era linen mills and churches, to post-war school buildings, to nondescript telephone exchanges and warehouses. These buildings sit in prominent locations, adjacent to prime arterial routes, in areas often suffering high levels of social, economic and environmental deprivation. This Interface Architecture has huge potential for rehabilitation. However, there are significant barriers to conventional architectural intervention due to the cultural and geographical sensitivities imbued in these interface locations.

AIMS & OBJECTIVES

The project moves beyond the idea of signature ‘shared space’ projects common in interface locations. It instead conceptualises this Interface Architecture as latent *community assets* where design-based research can examine and expose the latent and inclusive benefit to Belfast’s increasingly ethnically diverse inner city neighbourhoods. It highlights the transformative role design-based research can play in catalysing social, economic and environmental enhancement, with aims and objectives that will be applicable beyond the immediate focus of the study:

- *To understand the potential of innovative adaptive reuse to address local social, economic and environmental deprivation*
- *To understand the capacity of innovative adaptive reuse to foster inclusive connectivity in physically divided areas*
- *To evaluate neglected architectural heritage and optimising its cultural and economic potential*
- *To evaluate innovative adaptive reuse as a catalyst for social, economic and environmental inner city rehabilitation (regional, national and international)*

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The proposal suggests four introductory research questions:

- **Where are the opportunities to adapt and reuse Interface Architecture?**
What buildings are involved? Where are they located? What communities are impacted?
- **What is the potential for social, economic and environmental benefit?**
Opportunities for job creation? Community Asset Transfer? Neighbourhood planning?
- **How might the innovation of Interface Architecture inform peacebuilding policy?**
Implications for Department of Justice interface policy and wider Northern Ireland conflict-transformation initiatives?
- **What are the lessons (policy and practical) for analogous national and international contexts?**
How might research findings inform understanding of contentious cities and deprived inner city areas?

PHILOSOPHY

The project considers architectural design as an ecosystem innately connecting local people with their buildings. The architectural design-based research will inherently investigate, analyse and ultimately synthesise, understandings of the complex social, economic and environmental forces, at play in these contentious and challenged inner city locations. A mixed-methods methodology, where analyses (inspired by such thinkers as *Foucault* and *Lefebvre*) of power-relations at play in these networks triangulates with *inter-group contact theory* and *practice-based architectural fieldwork*, will bridge the worlds of design-based research and urban regeneration. A focus on adaptive reuse (not ‘new build’) also immerses the study in the realities of economic constraints and environmental obligations to promote socially, economically and environmentally sustainable placemaking.

The PhD provides a unique opportunity to explore and reveal how adaptive reuse of Interface Architecture opens up pathways for social, economic and environmental enhancement, whilst addressing important issues of inner city deprivation, inclusive placemaking and inter-communal peacebuilding. This proposal is uniquely placed to deliver its aims and objectives. It combines academic and non-academic partners with extensive expertise and statutory remit for the related policy development. The Department of Justice are directly responsible for interface policy in Northern Ireland and bring their exclusive policy expertise, knowledge, research and insights to the social, economic and environmental issues at hand. They are complemented by established academic research experience underpinned by a track-record of UKRI funded research in this field, and over ten-years of community engagement with the variety of stakeholders in these locations and contexts.

(750 words)

Provide details of any resources and facilities, including equipment, fieldwork, training, etc., that will be required to complete the project successfully. NBC has limited Research Training Support Grant funding, which may affect the feasibility of high-cost projects. Please note where you might also secure additional funding, (e.g. partner organisations; department or school). Include estimated costs:

(Maximum 200 words)

There are no extraordinary resources that are needed to complete this research. The Department of Justice recognise the clear benefits of this research to policy development and have pledged significant in-kind support. The collaboration with the Department of Justice will enable the candidate to avail of departmental staff time, knowledge, databases and in-house training opportunities which will provide a significant contribution to the research underpinning this PhD topic. Specific training within the Department of Justice will target skills development such running focus groups; organising stakeholder workshops; sourcing statistics; research studies/reports and creating effective strategies for internal and external dissemination.

(93 words)

Outline the arrangements for communication between the non-HE partner organisation and the academic host institution in regard to project management and monitoring academic progress:

(Maximum 200 words)

The lead supervisor has a longstanding research relationship with the Department of Justice (DoJ) and has a track record of maintaining ongoing communications between Ulster and DoJ staff. The staff involved are well known to each other, have collaborated on previous research and engagement activities, and meet frequently to track progress and exchange knowledge on a range of areas related to this PhD proposal.

The lead supervisor (Coyles) and DoJ representative (Michael McAvoy, Head of Community Safety Division) will maintain regular direct email communications, and phone calls, as the project gets underway. They will also agree, in advance (to ensure diary commitments are feasible) a series of regular monthly meetings to track progress. It is envisaged that these meetings would take place in-person and via MS Teams, depending on the diary commitments of those involved.

McAvoy will be present as 'third-supervisor' during supervisor meetings. As per standard practice at Ulster, an electronic note of these meetings is held on the Ulster PhD Manager system and will be shared between all supervisory staff. This means that progress will be monitored consistently and rigorously, from both the host institution and non-HE partner's point of view.

(193 words)

What benefits will there be for the candidate and the non-HE partner organisation as a result of your collaboration?

(Maximum 200 words)

This collaboration is distinct in that it is the DoJ who are directly responsible for the implementation of policy related to the research and who have ownership of the interface barriers encapsulated in the research. Whilst commendable work has been undertaken to remove all interface barriers, as the DoJ letter-of-support acknowledges, there is a recognised need for innovative design-based approaches to this subject. The PhD therefore opens up an entirely new stream of research and engagement which has the potential to directly inform and enhance policy development in this area. Specifically, the DoJ have an interest in testing this model of interface engagement and tracking its longer-term outcomes. There is a similarly unique opportunity for the candidate to directly avail of the exclusive expertise and policy mechanisms under DoJ remit. The DoJ will host the candidate as needed and share insights into work already undertaken in these locations, access to an extensive range of stakeholders and consultees who work with the DoJ in these areas, and cross-cutting facilitated access to the range of government and institutional stakeholders involved in these locations, such as the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), the Department for Communities and Belfast City Council.

(198 words)

State what financial (if any) or in-kind contribution the non-HE partner organisation will be making over the duration of the award:

*(Maximum 200 words. A financial contribution is **not** a requirement. However, the AHRC expect that **non-HE partners based overseas** will make a financial contribution to the costs of the student's return travel and accommodation when visiting.)*

The DoJ will make substantial in-kind support to the project of £18,110 minimum through the following:

- Time given by Michael McAvoy (average 2.5 hrs per month): £6,040
- Time given by 2 no. Deputy Principal staff to support candidate on data collection and community engagement (average 6 hours per month): £4,470
- Provision of a workspace for the candidate for a total of 12 months over the PhD study period (11.6 sqm): £3,500
- Facilitation of meetings with institutional and government partners at the Department of Justice: £1,285
- Hosting a policy roundtable in Year 2: £1,315
- Access to training and CPD: approx. £1500

Describe the nature of the collaborative arrangement and the activities the candidate will be undertaking with the non-HE partner organisation:

(Maximum 200 words)

The research undertaken within this PhD is of direct relevance to the Department of Justice (DoJ) and its policy remit for oversight of 'interface barriers' across Northern Ireland. The DoJ view themselves as a full partner in this proposal and Michael McAvoy will be involved from the outset as a 'third supervisor' to ensure that the developing methodology and ongoing research maximises mutual benefits between the candidate and the DoJ.

In addition, two additional DoJ Deputy Principals will support the candidate on day-to-day activities where DoJ knowledge and expertise are needed. This will be of tremendous benefit to the candidate and will range from practical assistance such as liaising with landowners and local stakeholders, to collation and dissemination of reports and key policy data, to facilitating conversations with related institutional partners and government departments when needed (such as the Police Service of Northern Ireland and the Department for Communities, who will both be interested in this work).

The DoJ will provide a dedicated workstation for the candidate to immerse and establish themselves within the DoJ policy environment and facilitate other departmental secondments if needed. This offers genuine opportunity to enhance the research experience and knowledge-exchange between candidate and non-HE partner.

(200 words)

SECTION 3: SUPERVISION AND EXTERNAL ADVISORS

Primary (or Co-) Supervisor:	Dr. David Coyles
School or Department:	Belfast School of Architecture and the Built Environment, Ulster University
Email Address:	
Secondary (or Co-) Supervisor:	Dr. Clare Mulholland
School or Department:	School of Natural and Built Environment, Queen's University, Belfast
Email Address:	
Advisor based at the Non-HE Partner Organisation:	Mr. Michael McAvoy
Organisation/Institution:	Department of Justice, Northern Ireland
Email Address:	

Explain how the expertise of the supervisory team and external advisor(s) will allow them to support the proposed project and the selected candidate:

(Maximum 500 words)

The supervisory team are uniquely positioned to support the candidate. Lead supervisor (Coyles) is an architect, Senior Lecturer in Architecture and Director of the Architectural Research Group at Ulster, where he also leads the 'Hidden Barriers' research cluster. Coyles has pioneered a body of architectural research on 'Hidden Barriers' through projects exploring convergences of Architecture, Conflict, Community and Policy. A recent Hidden Barriers paper by Coyles (with Grant and Hamber) was awarded the 2024 best paper prize in the highly-ranked *Journal of Urban Affairs*: <https://urbanaffairsassociation.org/2024/02/13/best-article-jua-2024/>

Coyles has been PI on successive AHRC grants, and Co-I on a third, examining architectural legacies of conflict. He has published widely on this topic; co-authored a 2021 Impact Case Study on this research; and regularly gives public talks on the findings, e.g.: <https://imaginebelfast.com/event/hidden-barriers/>

Coyles has a track record of supervising and line-managing RAs and currently supervises four doctoral candidates aligned to the 'Hidden Barriers' research cluster. He is extensively networked at academic, policy and community levels, evidenced in his recent appointment as a board member to the Ministerial Advisory Group for Architecture and the Built Environment (NI), with responsibility for 'Interface Areas and Inclusive Spaces'.

Coyles has worked extensively with second supervisor Mulholland (Coyles & Mulholland 2021, 2022, 2023), a Senior Lecturer in Architecture at QUB and an established architectural and academic expert on interface architecture and community segregation. Her research focuses on divided cities, spatial practices, socio-spatial integration, intergroup mixing, and community participation. She is a co-investigator on the Ulster £4.6 million AHRC-funded Green Transition Ecosystems project, leading a group focused on adaptive reuse using sustainable architectural techniques, managing the related collaboration with industry partners. She has extensive experience in interface areas and community engagement, including as academic contributor to the successful €6.5 million PEACE IV funding application for the Shankill Shared Women's Centre in west Belfast (opened 06/2024) and co-authorship of the PEACE III-funded research project, *Planning for Spatial Reconciliation* (PFSR 2016, 2019).

McAvoy heads the Community Safety Division (DoJ), with responsibility for interfaces and a body of legislative and policy responsibilities including hate crime, public protection, anti-social behaviour and increasing community confidence in policing. He leads the Inter-Departmental Programme for Government aspiration to create 'Safer Communities' and also brings high-level regeneration expertise as co-author of Belfast's Troubles-era *Laganside Development Plan*, (where investment exceeded £1002M), and lead on redevelopment of Belfast's 19th century Crumlin Road Gaol (£22M). The DoJ consider this study vital as peacebuilding in Northern Ireland is at a critical juncture where the absence of inter-community violence at interfaces affords an opportunity to move beyond working to remove interface structures, and towards innovating design-based solutions to utilise the built environment to drive community, economic, social and physical renewal. DoJ policy teams are cognisant of examples of housing-led, leisure-based or retail-focused urban regeneration at interface locations involving existing buildings and will use these insights to support the candidate. Exploring the critical success factors and the opportunity for creative design-thinking is now an urgent focus for DoJ and partner Departments and agencies.

(500 words)

SECTION 4: RESEARCH ENVIRONMENT

Please provide details about the research environment the selected candidate will be joining and its suitability:

(Maximum 500 words)

The candidate will enjoy a uniquely immersive research environment specifically dedicated to this proposal, moving between a base in both the host and partner institutions as required by the developing project.

A dedicated research space is provided within the Architectural Research Group (ARG) within the Ulster University Built Environment Research Institute where 100% of our research environment was judged as 'being conducive to producing research of world-leading or internationally excellent quality' in REF2021. Located in Ulster University's new City Centre Belfast campus, this provides state-of-the-art facilities in a dynamic shared office for all Built Environment Research Institute PhD researchers. Within this, the Hidden Barriers research cluster led by Coyles (one of five within the ARG) provides an extremely tailored support environment for the candidate in its dedication to conflict architecture research. The legacy of cluster AHRC projects has established an international

network of 'conflict architecture' scholars (USA, Africa, Europe) regularly feeding into cluster activities. This allows the candidate to draw upon a diverse breadth of expertise beyond the host institution, with researchers who have worked on the regeneration of analogous contexts of social, economic and environmental deprivation, and a variety of forms of ethnic division. There are currently four other PhD candidates active within the Hidden Barriers cluster, forming a close-knit peer-support network of researchers active in the same field, facilitating exchange of knowledge, ideas and greatly energising the research experience.

Mulholland (QUB) resides within the Futures, Presents, Pasts (FPP) research group at QUB and the candidate will also be able to share the benefits from the research environment that it provides. Mulholland has developed extensive connections with industry and architectural practices across Northern Ireland, enabling the candidate to tap into these networks as necessitated by the developing research. The FPP group also arranges regular research seminars and public lectures, which will be open to the candidate. The ongoing collaboration between Coyles and Mulholland means that the candidate will be able to avail of considerable opportunities for networking and peer support from those researchers aligned to their research clusters.

The collaboration with the DoJ adds an especially distinct enhancement to the research environment, with the candidate also having a dedicated research space within the Department. This will immerse the candidate in the policy development process and provide unique insights that will enrich their design-based research. This placement will be enabled with 2 allocated DoJ Deputy Principals giving time to help the candidate access a variety of inter-Department / multi-agency fora involving this Interface Architecture, greatly informing the development and undertaking of their research. They will also facilitate the provision of temporary workspaces through dedicated secondments to other Departments and agencies to facilitate the research (for example, The Executive Office and the Department for Communities, both agencies with potential interests in Interface Architecture) as need arises. This cements a strong and dedicated working relationship between the candidate and the non-HE institution and optimises the reach of the research and the impact pathways that are being examined.

(495 words)