

TO GRAFFITI OR NOT TO BE  
YOUTH CULTURE AND GRAFFITI IN SOCIAL ANALYSIS

Denis Linehan

At a time when Europe seems to be bursting out of her seams, it may appear a little inconsequential to present an article on the role graffiti can play in complementing our knowledge of the social worlds of the city. In defence let me corrupt a little of Thomas Hardy.

Though dynasties pass  
And Gorbi mightn't last  
We'll still be drinking Murphy's  
In old Cork city.

My argument I'm sure is clear, but allow me to begin with a story of topical interest. One day last month I was partaking of some of the aforementioned beverage in a quiet public house on Dunbar Street when the barman proudly presented me with a section of the Berlin Wall. Actually, it was quite small, no bigger than my thumb-nail in fact, reminiscent of those saintly relics that my aunts used to haul back from Knock or Lourdes to ward off Communism. Yet distinctively, I could make out the psychedelic colours of the graffiti that humanised that infamous barrier with protest and dissent. It struck me then that graffiti is almost universal. Traces of graffiti were found on the walls of taverns in Pompeii and today in significantly different cultures from New York to Amsterdam and eastward to Tokyo, graffiti materialises itself in many different shapes and forms. Is there then some primordial urge within man to leave a message on his habitat? Is there a need within us all to break the silence and since it is only minority who end up published in the media, can graffiti be regarded as a genuine outlet for people? Is it the only true literature of the people? And have we developed at all, with the exception of the spray can or felt tipped pen, since the day Ug scraped something on his cave wall to make him feel good?

I jest perhaps, but ask these questions to lead you into the more credible idea that graffiti is useful as a tool in social analysis. For example, in a localised situation where information on the prevailing social conditions are readily available, graffiti can be useful as a social indicator in a number of areas. The use of space by the groups concerned comes top of the list, but graffiti, when interpreted correctly, can be used to delineate territory and in some

places, can be used to illuminate deviant behavioural tendencies in built-up areas. Moreover, it can provide insights into some of the cultural values of the groups involved which very often underlies their social activity in the first place.

These ideas I shall develop presently, but let me focus on the nature of graffiti in Cork city. Here as in many other places, graffiti has weaved its way steadily into the fabric of the city. Recently, this has increased somewhat, for reasons I will suggest below, but it has always been a minor part of the social life of the city. Some is subcultural, like the colourful squiggles of the Goths and the Punks; some is the work of the essentially adolescent graffiti artist who will roam all over the city to leave his or her mark in as obvious or as spectacular a place as possible. "Fás is streamlining your job opportunities" screams the ubiquitous Sprog on the side of the new Fás building on Sullivan's Quay. And on the new overpass on the Lower Road, Zeba proclaims "I was here first", making some territorial claim perhaps, but more likely displaying glee at getting there before his competitors.

Most graffiti, however, is neither of the above. Most is the product of a particularly urban genre de vie, one which is not as exotic as that of the members of a subculture, but nonetheless interesting. It is the product of the youth of the city, usually the poorer youth who on the whole makes more use of the streetscape than those of a higher socio-economic class. It is the consequence of street games and cider parties, doing nothing at the street corner, socialising and courting outside the chip shop, and of the expertly smoked cigarette beneath the street lamp. More broadly, it is the issue of street life, the result of much of their leisure-time activity and very often what is left behind when these youngsters leave and crystallise into adults on the streets of Kilburn and Cricklewood.

Graffiti, therefore, cannot be grouped illogically into a homogenous mess if we are to unravel the subtle chaos of social space. You must approach it as if it were hieroglyphics, as much of it appears to be meaningless and with rare exceptions, it is at the very best, deceptively uninspiring. It can be misleading and one must take into account an important temporal factor and realise that considerable amounts can be quite old. This on the other hand can be quite useful, in that it can clearly illuminate points in the landscape that have enjoyed use over a number of years. Dates and names of pop bands are

good indicators of how long a place has been used. But this temporal factor can also affect the accuracy of territorial maps based purely on evidence from graffiti. I suggest that as a social indicator, its use should be complimentary and in the realm of geography it cannot be seen as an end in itself. Nevertheless, it is possible to demonstrate how effective it can be in illustrating the spatial variations and behavioural tendencies of several youth groups on the Northside of Cork city.

The sale of Doctor Martin's Air Cushioned Soles, shoes and boots, has soared over the last eighteen months. The demand according to salespersons is unprecedented. I heard a story of a man driving up from Caherciveen to Cork at seven in the morning to ensure his tempestuous daughter would receive a visit from Doctor Martin for Christmas. These shoes are now in fashion for certain groups in the city but in more sociological terms these groups have developed a fetishism around them based on their perception of them being cool or hip or whatever. Veterans will tell you they "are just a fine, strong, comfortable shoe" but don't believe a word of it.

I bring all this to light because there is a connection between the increase in sales and the growth of the Gothic subculture (which has died down considerably since those hot summer days in the Peace Park) and of course the resurgence of Punk. With this new growth there has been a parallel growth of graffiti, especially within the city centre; there has been an increased awareness in some parts of town of the value of territory and indeed, the fun you can have in actual defence of it.

What is just as remarkable as our spiked headed friends, however, is the manner in which the ordinary youth of the city have reacted and the corresponding developments in their own graffiti. One finds in many areas where the territorial space of the groups interface, graffiti 'tableaux' upon which opposing groups mutually oppose each other in very colourful language. Luckily, serious episodes of injury are uncommon, unlike the violence accompanying the Ska revival in the early eighties.

For instance, in my own area, by using graffiti, the difference in the type of space used by two opposing groups can be seen very clearly (Figure 1). Punks on the whole, make use of space nearer the city centre and their territory ends once they enter the more neighbourly arenas of Barrack Town and St. Lukes. I would argue that punk activity

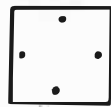
Fig.1. SOCIAL SPACE OF YOUTH GANGS

LEGEND

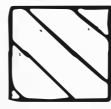
- 1 Bridge St.
- 2 Macurtain St.
- 3 Lower Glanmire Rd.
- 4 Patrick's Hill
- 5 York St.
- 6 Wellington Rd.
- 7 Summer Hill
- 8 St. Luke's
- 9 Dillon's Cross
- 10 Barrack-Town
- A City Centre
- B Tivoli
- C Mayfield

◆ Subcultural Graffiti Sites

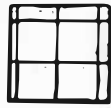
● Ordinary Gang Graffiti



low-medium residential



medium residential/flats

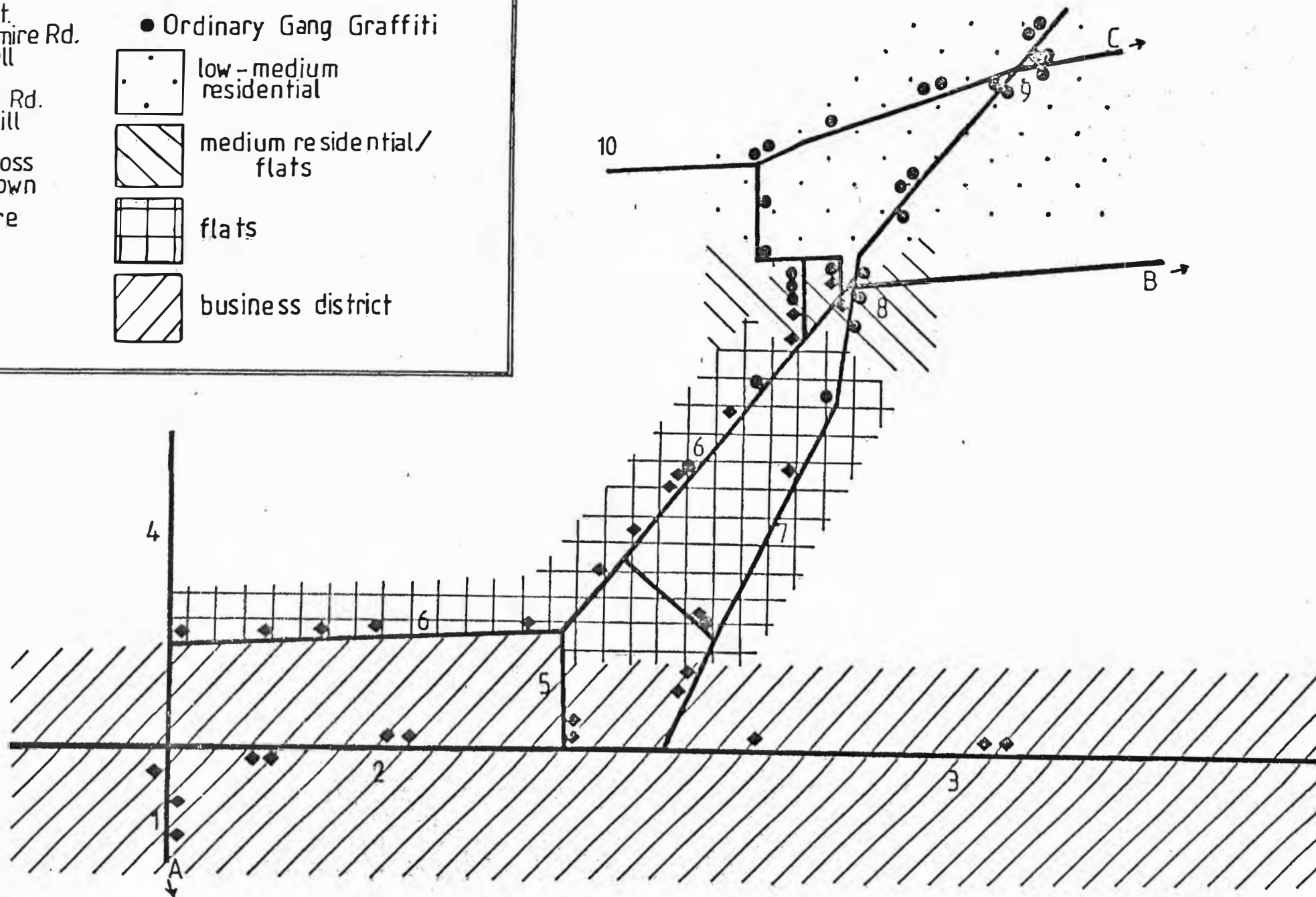


flats



business district

NOT TO SCALE



is concentrated near the city centre and flat complexes for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is a space with a weak local control system, allowing punks to appropriate space for their own activities with little resistance from occupants, especially at night. This is not the case as one moves northward into the neighbourhoods up the hills. Secondly, punk groups are smaller than 'ordinary' groups, so their catchment area for membership is from a wider area. Thus, the group is more likely to congregate outside community space. This tendency is reinforced by the value system of the punk himself, who for hormonal or sociological reasons, sees himself reacting against the norm and thus, does not wish to see himself affiliated with the residential space of his family. Thus, they move into the anonymity of the city centre. Meanwhile, ordinary youth gangs have no such inclination and regard their own residential area as their turf, their own place, to be protected against outside subcultural elements. Therefore, the values of both transcend into space.

A similar situation arises in Mayfield, an urban community a mile northwest of the above area. However, here it is possible to analyse the graffiti further and illustrate some of the micro-behavioural tendencies of young people in a built up environment, particularly in relation to normal and deviant leisure activities. Mayfield is an area which displays considerable variety in settlement and social form, but the main dichotomy is between Corporation and private estates. The Corporation estate comprises of National Building Agency (N.B.A.) house style, which is constructed in part out of prefabricated asbestos sections, and despite a recent renewal programme, this large estate is in bad repair. Many houses are vacant and a large flat complex within the estate is abandoned. This factor coupled with the open plan of the houses and the weak sense of private ownership amongst the residents, has led to the appropriation of space for deviant activities by some youth groups in the area. Ley and Cybrinsky (1974), in a study on the spatial ecology of stripped cars in the inner-city of Philadelphia cultivated the idea that certain types of behaviour make distinctive bids for space and that this bid is located in zones at points where space is otherwise weakly claimed and poorly surveyed. These are points where the local control system has broken down. Through a locational analysis of cider party and bonfire sites and graffiti, in and around the estates in Mayfield, this idea proved correct over and over again.

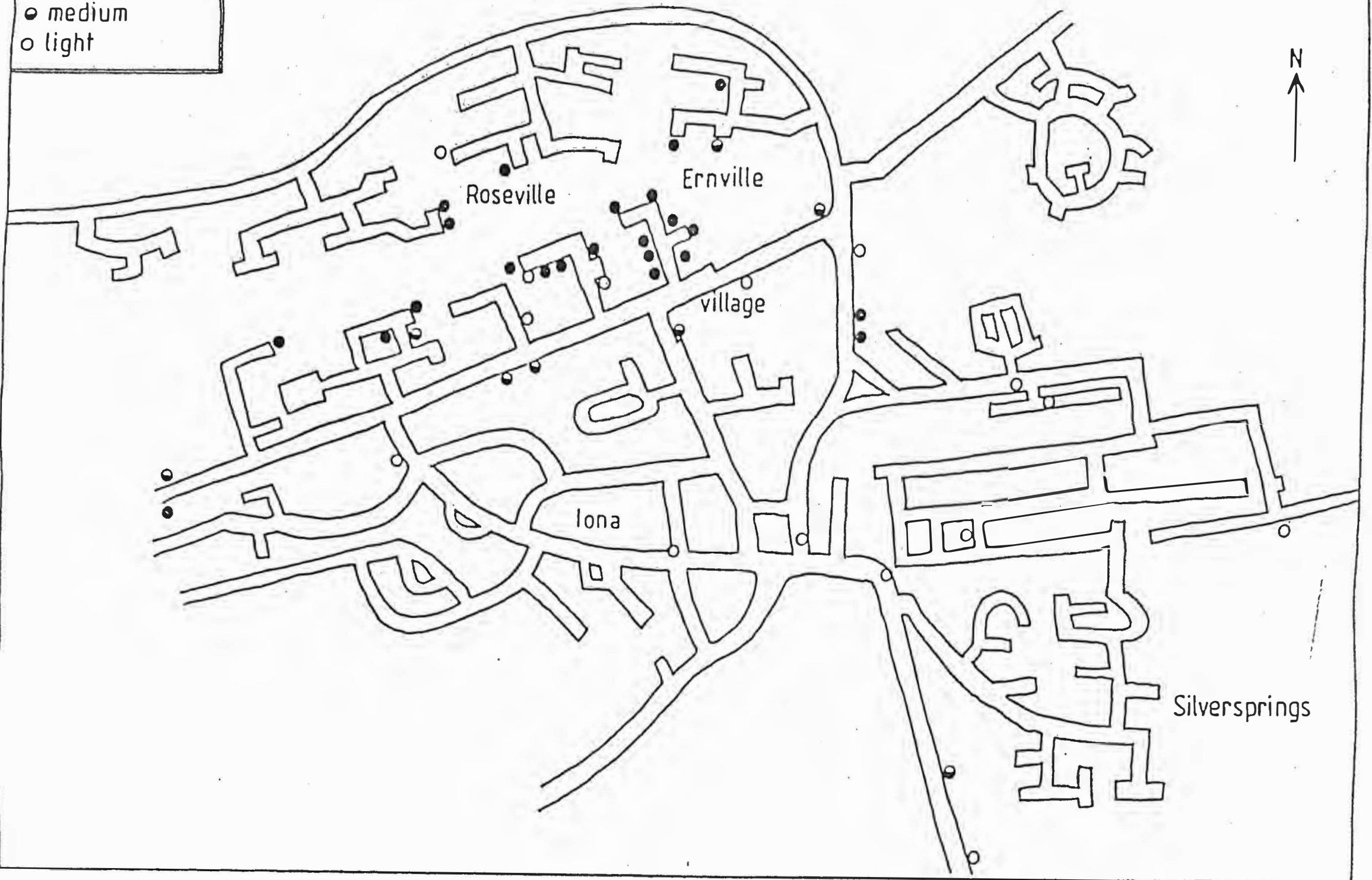
Kids tend to use 'blindspots', points where they cannot be seen by their parents, for much of their leisure time activities. The poorer Corporation estate, Roseville, provides more points like this than the private estates due to the extroverted plan of the houses. The settlement form of private estates is usually introverted by nature, boosting their local control system and allowing for higher levels of surveillance. But Roseville, due to the structure of the estate, provides many spaces which facilitate opportunities for deviant behaviour. Vandalism is likely to be higher. The result in Roseville has been the continuing decline of the urban fabric, increased residential dissatisfaction and the abandonment of houses and flats. The same situation has occurred in a similar Corporation estate in Togher, on the south side of the city.

Figure 2 illustrates the extent of graffiti within the community. The concentration in the Roseville estate is seen clearly, especially around the abandoned flat complex at Ernville. Concentration of graffiti also occur at 'blindspots' and at meeting places outside the estates, like the chip shop and the bus stop. Graffiti is rare and never of the same intensity within the private estates. Social and cultural differences also help to shape these patterns. For instance, the youth population in Roseville is higher and the houses smaller than in the corresponding private estates; consequently kids experience more pressure to use neighbourhood space than young people elsewhere. But it is important not to forget the role that organisation of space plays in forming these patterns. Planners must recognise that space itself is not a void into which one can throw people and houses, and should design estates accordingly. Space as Foucault says is 'humanly constituted', it is ours to create or destroy, to spoil or make beautiful. Inequality, however, has determined that the choices as to which spaces to live in are given only to privileged. Graffiti itself is as much a protest against this as it is the furtive scribbles of the disaffected, but that is a wider area for future discussion.

This paper will have introduced you briefly to some of the ways in which geographers can use graffiti to examine contemporary society. In reality, I have only touched the surface and there is room for further study in this area. However, I'm going back to that pub on Dunbar Street for a nice quiet pint. The piece of the Berlin wall is in a

Fig.2. GRAFFITI SITES IN OUTER MAYFIELD, 1989.

- heavy graffiti
- ◐ medium
- light



glass case and people can stare at it on their way to the toilet. Someday nobody's going to know what it is, but they'll still be drinking Murphys.

#### REFERENCES

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