

Farewell to Troubles

Peace has come to Northern Ireland, at last. The surest sign is Belfast's renaissance.

BY SARAH SENNOTT

ON A COLD NOVEMBER EVENING in Belfast, an eclectic group of students, writers and politicians gathers for a book party near Queen's University. Two old hands in the Northern Ireland peace process discuss the latest developments. But the hottest buzz in the room isn't politics. It's excited talk about a new cultural magazine, an upcoming music festival and the latest cool bar. Indeed, the title of the book being feted says it all: "Ireland: From Bombs to Boom" by local author Henry McDonald.

Since the groundbreaking 1998 Good Friday Agreement, peace has come to Northern Ireland by fits and starts. The Northern Ireland Assembly, symbol of the New Ulster, has been suspended for two years. Last week negotiators for the leading political parties, Sinn Fein and the Democratic Unionist Party, seemed on the cusp of an agreement that could reopen it. Yet even as the politicians dither, one thing can be said: the time of Troubles is truly over. The surest evidence? Belfast itself.

Once almost inconceivable, signs of a civic renaissance abound. The last decade has seen a rush of foreign investment and urban renewal. A new generation of artists, designers, musicians, producers and writers has risen out of the rubble of sectarian strife to invigorate a city that was a war zone. "Just as the peace process reinforces cultural changes, cultural changes reinforce the peace process," says Queen's University professor Richard English. As he tells it, a new Belfast is being born and "etching itself into people's imaginations." The Troubles, begun in the late 1960s, have been supplanted by the Changes, all for the good and seemingly irreversible.

Begin with the economy. Unemployment recently fell to a historic low of 4.2 percent. Drawn by Northern Ireland's young, well-educated work force and low-priced office space, foreign investment has grown by nearly half over the last six years. Large multinationals—Caterpillar and the packaging company Chesapeake

among them—are buying up Belfast businesses. New software companies and call centers are sprouting like mushrooms. Last month Citigroup, the world's largest financial-services company, unveiled plans for a new technology center, scheduled to open by spring. The city skyline is a jigsaw of cranes and new high-rise offices. The racket of drilling and riveting

and studios that is becoming Belfast's creative heartland. Prime Minister Tony Blair has a huge stake in the success of the peace process, both in the political sphere and in daily life. Government funds for municipal projects have thus been ample. Ten years ago, to cite but one example, the city's River Lagan was a stagnant mess: exposed mud flats reeked of toxic chemicals; its



A BETTER BOOM: Having a blast in a bar has replaced the blasts of car bombs

throughout town herald more growth to come. Not so long ago, Belfast's Europa Hotel was the most frequently bombed building in Europe; today it's thriving, joined by a new generation of boutique hotels, from the hip Ten Square to the fashionable Malmaison.

There's also a newly vibrant cultural scene. The city's Arts Council has doled out over £24 million in lottery money over the last decade, including £9 million for an extension to the Grand Opera House. Millions of pounds have been pouring into Cathedral Quarter, a warren of galleries

banks were strewn with trash. Today, state-of-the-art lock and aeration systems keep the river flowing smoothly—and cleanly. Hiking and cycling trails line the waterfront. Sleek, modern buildings, made largely of glass, exude a new confidence that bombing days are over.

Young Britons, increasingly, see Belfast as a trendy short-break destination. More than 1 million visitors came last year, up from a mere 200,000 during the Troubles. Belfast artists are making waves abroad. "There is a type of energy in this city that comes out of a vibrant cultural tradition

Young Britons are seeing Belfast as a trendy short-

and a growing mix of cultures," says Stella Hall, director of the Belfast Festival. The Irish designer Chris Murray recently launched the clothing label Apache, whose political playfulness—with anti-war slogans and the like—has taken on cult status across Europe. The theatrical production company Ransom's first show, "Hurricane," has traveled from Belfast to London's West End and then to off-Broadway. David Holmes, a leading soundtrack producer ("Ocean's Eleven"), and Snow Patrol, an emerging rock band, are both Belfast born and bred.

Northern Ireland hasn't seen such good times since World War II, when there was a thaw in Roman Catholic-Protestant relations. The rebirth of the IRA and Unionist paramilitaries during the early 1960s put an end to that. Bombings and bloodshed plunged the economy into decline. Only after the 1994 ceasefire did the city begin to revive. With a new generation of "ceasefire children" growing up with the New Belfast as their reality, this momentum is unlikely to slow, let alone stop.

That's not to say that Belfasters have let down their guard entirely. Twenty-six misnamed "peace walls" of brick or corrugated steel gates still separate Catholic and Protestant communities. And while the IRA and Unionist factions have (mostly) laid down their arms, the paramilitaries have turned themselves into mafialike gangs, running drug rings and black markets in everything from cigarettes to booze to DVD players. Still, it's hard to understate the dramatic change. Belfast author Glenn Patterson remembers

how, 20 years ago, the city center was a "ghost town," sealed off by barbed wire and police lines to prevent bombings. Now it's home to some 260 bars and restaurants where young professionals gather after work. During the summer, along the city's once dangerous streets, socialites sip cappuccinos at café tables that spill across the sidewalks. The drinking hole where Patterson used to negotiate security checkpoints is now a chic nightspot. "There's no turning back," he says. Northern Ireland's divisions may not be dead—but no longer do they rule. ■

break destination.

Italy



CRUMBLING ITALIA: The Palazzo delle Esposizioni collapse

Land of Ruins

Italy is falling apart, literally.

BY BARBIE NADEAU

THE REOPENING OF ROME'S magnificent Palazzo delle Esposizioni this month was to be the premier social event of the year. Romans proudly called it "our MoMA," destined to become one of the most prominent cultural centers in Europe. City fathers touted its flawless restoration, costing nearly €20 million. The building would have been stupendous—if the ceiling hadn't fallen in two months ago, plunging eight workers onto a pile of sharp rubble and narrowly missing a group of building inspectors who had just left the room below. With a criminal investigation underway, work has stopped and Italians are shrugging off the incident as a bizarre but isolated event.

Bizarre, yes. Isolated? Hardly. Italy is no stranger to crumbling architecture—UNESCO has rated 35 percent of Italy's World Heritage Sites as "at risk," not from environmental factors or natural disasters but from "neglect, pollution and indifference." But these days the decay isn't confined to historic ruins. Full city blocks in Florence are cordoned off with red-and-white police tape to protect passersby from falling travertine façades. According to the Legambiente, Italy's environment agency, 40 percent of Italian public schools are in

"urgent need of serious maintenance"; authorities in Rome have tasked schoolchildren to report cracks in walls and other potential hazards. In villages of Umbria and Tuscany, cobblestone streets have swallowed cars after underground supports collapsed during recent rains. A slew of ceilings have fallen in on buildings in Rome and Naples. Some have collapsed entirely, among them a two-story apartment house in Liguria that recently killed a young girl as she slept.

Something other than age is at work here. In many cases, experts say, stricter building standards and basic enforcement of existing rules could prevent catastrophe. In Rome alone, the Legambiente reports that 48.3 percent of renovation projects are done without authorization or building inspection. This means no one is checking concrete stability or ensuring that materials meet safety regulations, according to agency officials. Contracts are often given

out without public scrutiny or permits—often they're issued long after work on a project is completed—setting the stage for lax construction, or worse.

Schools are a particular problem. One in six is over the legal limit in asbestos use, and the Legambiente claims that 73.2 percent do not have basic fire-safety certificates. In earthquake zones, as many as 60 percent of schools are at serious risk of "structural trauma" from even a mild tremor, according to the U.S.-based Multidisciplinary Center for Earthquake Engineering Research. On Halloween 2002, a moderate earthquake in the tiny village of San Giuliano in the central region of Molise killed 27 first graders and teachers when their elementary school collapsed. But MCEER's Terri Norton attributes the loss of life less to the earthquake than to "poor-quality materials and construction."

There is little incentive to change. Earlier this year Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi promised sweeping amnesties that would allow renegade builders to pay a penalty to "legalize" their clandestine structures and renovations after the fact. Berlusconi says the amnesties will generate revenues of €24 billion for the state's coffers. As if lost tax and permit revenues were the main problem, rather than the lost lives of citizens killed by crumbling walls and ceilings. ■