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Sport

Stadium planners in a moral maze

Kevin Mitchell
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It would have been impossible to contemplate even a few years ago: Gaelic games, football and rugby sharing a ground anywhere north or south of the border in Ireland. The taboo was spectacularly shattered last winter when England's rugby team were welcomed on the hitherto exclusively Gaelic turf of Croke Park. Now it's the north's turn. And, with depressing predictability, plans for a 35,000-seater stadium on the site of the infamous Maze prison are in danger of crumbling like peace talks.

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Edwin Poots, Northern Ireland's sports minister, insists that the football-rugby-Gaelic games stadium will go ahead unless a better plan turns up. Proponents say some of the prison where republican prisoners starved themselves to death will remain as a 'conflict resolution centre'. Opponents, who are beavering away for an alternative site, call it 'a shrine to the IRA'. Belfast City Council, meanwhile, wants the stadium built in town.

Objectors to the Maze stadium say it is too far away - 12 miles west of the city - and it would be better to reclaim some of the land around the old Harland and Woolf site, by the Lagan. And that has baggage of its own - the shipyard is as much a Protestant memorial as the H Blocks are for Catholics. Mr Poots, as befits a DUP member, is digging his heels in and we can only wish him luck. To his aid comes Sebastian Coe. As the London Olympics 'Games supremo' he has promised to deliver the proposed stadium three Olympic football matches in 2012, a pledge with which Mr Poots hopes to convince detractors of the Maze site's merits. Is there nothing the English won't do to make up for 800 years of troublemaking across the Irish Sea?

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