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BELFAST



## Site of IRA Hunger Strike Haunts Northern Ireland

By BRYAN COLL / BELFAST  
 Tuesday, Nov. 11, 2008

Michael Fassbender as Maze Prison hunger striker Bobby Sands in a scene from the movie *Hunger*

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It was known as the H-Blocks, Long Kesh, the Cages, Thatcher's Breakers Yard. [Northern Ireland's notorious Maze prison](#) drew more grim nicknames — and housed more paramilitary prisoners — than any other jail in Western Europe. Its last inmates were released under the terms of the 1998 [Good Friday Agreement](#), which laid the foundation for an end to sectarian violence in the British province. And after bulldozers razed most of the former prison buildings last year, the site where Bobby Sands and nine other Republican militants died in a hunger strike in 1981 became little more than an abandoned relic of Northern Ireland's darkest days.

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But now one of this year's most talked-about films has put the Maze back at center stage of Northern Ireland's politics. *Hunger*, which charts Bobby Sands' final weeks inside the Maze, opened in Britain last week and is set for a limited U.S. release next month. This is no jaunty jailhouse flick, but rather the most uncomfortable 96 minutes anyone is likely to spend in a cinema this year. Graphic violence, emaciated bodies and stomach-churning filth provide most of the avert-your-eyes moments.

But it's the film's timing that is making local politicians squirm. *Hunger's* release comes as Northern Ireland's power-sharing government is under pressure to agree on the final design for a much-contested, large-scale redevelopment program at the Maze site.

While many Protestants in Northern Ireland's majority [Democratic Unionist Party](#) (DUP) view the hunger strikers as little more than convicted terrorists set on suicide, Catholic republicans allied to the DUP's power-sharing partners, [Sinn Fein](#), regard Sands as an iconic political hero. Given the politically loaded history of the

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prison, agreeing on what the new Maze should symbolize has proved as tricky as an escape from Alcatraz.

After more than four years of government planning and consulting, DUP First Minister Peter Robinson and Deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness of Sinn Fein have failed to reach a decision. And now with the release of *Hunger*, public and political impatience is growing.

An early proposal for a Maze Stadium, which would host both Protestant-favored sports such as soccer and rugby and predominantly Catholic games like Gaelic football and hurling, received cross-party support at first, but is now likely to be scrapped for financial reasons. That leaves the most controversial proposal still on the table: an International Center for Conflict Transformation (ICCT) to be partly housed inside the remaining prison hospital, where Sands and other hunger strikers died. The project's backers say the ICCT, with conference suites and an interpretive center, could act as a peace-making laboratory for visitors from conflict-ridden nations.

"The story of Long Kesh is one of defiance and resistance," says Danny Morrison, a former spokesman for Bobby Sands and an ICCT supporter. "A lot of positive things came out of here. We should use the site to explain how [Northern Ireland's] resolution came about. I can see students from Burma and the Middle East coming to use the space."

For Dessie Waterworth, a former prison officer, the proposed ICCT represents little more than a shrine to the IRA. After working in the Maze during the hunger strikes and the preceding 'dirty protests', where inmates smeared excrement on their cell walls, Waterworth has less rosy memories of the place. He has no desire to see the remaining prison buildings salvaged.

"They should be flattened and ground into dust," he says. "Why should we glorify terrorism and people who chose to kill themselves?"

Waterworth has been the target of more than 30 death threats from loyalist and republican paramilitary groups and says his family home has been bombed three times. He is not alone. A total of 29 prison officers from the Maze were murdered during the Troubles and an estimated 50 officers from Northern Ireland jails committed suicide during the same period.

"People forget that prison officers are victims as well," says Waterworth, who dismisses the unsympathetic portrayal of his colleagues in *Hunger* as "propaganda." "People here don't want to see terrorists being honored. Are we going to end up putting up shrines where everyone died?"

It's not just the Maze that is causing old grievances to resurface in Northern Ireland. The Consultative Group on the Past, a government-appointed body tasked with examining how to deal with the legacy of the Troubles, is expected to deliver its much-anticipated final report within weeks. The group will likely recommend a Truth Commission-style body to examine unsolved killings committed during Northern Ireland's 30-year conflict. That tortuous process, plus the Maze's post-conflict makeover, could mean that Northern Ireland's contested past and the passions it kindled are about to resurface again. This time, though, the violence is more likely to be verbal than deadly.

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