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THE decision of the Ulster University to move most of its operation into Belfast combined with the greater demand for places at Queens means that there's a desperate need for new student accommodation in the city.

After a green light to a number of developments around the new Ulster University campus, Queens this week announced two new housing developments to cater for 1,200 students.

While issues around the impact of such numbers of students moving into existing residential areas has been raised one issue has yet to be addressed — what these new developments will look like?

The rush to cater for student accommodation seems to have

trounced the need to pay any attention to the aesthetic of the new buildings.

From what I have seen these new student buildings wouldn't look out of place in an East European city of the 1960s.

Utilitarian need seems to have been the only criteria considered, how the buildings will integrate or add to Belfast's cityscape obviously wasn't even considered.

The developers of these new buildings are guaranteed a handsome return over decades — you'd think then that the least our town planners would demand is buildings of the highest architectural standards.

Instead, we are to be lumbered with red brick monstrosities blight-

ing our skyline until the next bunch of developers, spotting a way to make a quick buck, knock them down in order to build some new block of despair.

I was genuinely baffled how architects could come up with such soulless creations. Had their imaginations been lobotomised?

Then the answer hit me, they, like me, must have young children who force them to play Minecraft. In that world you are forced to build with square blocks and only square blocks.

Yet I suspect, even under such limitations, my eight and six-year-old could have come up with something more interesting than the creators of Belfast's new student accommodation.



THE brutal gangland execution in Dublin of David Byrne at the weekend followed by the tit-for-tat killing in the same city on Monday night was all too reminiscent of what life used to be like here.

Whatever shortcomings there exist in our present political institutions — and there are many — credit must be given for the fact that our peace, as yet, hasn't descended into that kind of gangland war.

The fact that Kalashnikov rifles were used in the initial shooting and

an alleged claim of responsibility from the Dissident IRA led some to argue that this terror group must have been involved.

But this later proved not be the case.

Sadly with the unraveling of Eastern Europe, weaponry of this type has become readily available to criminal gangs.

We can but hope the Gardai get a handle on this surge in a deadly turf war and come down hard on those responsible — and those behind them.

Assault weapons have no place on the streets of either Dublin or Belfast.



SF MAKE A BOOB OF IT ALL

EVERYONE can make a typo — and much to my annoyance I've noticed more than a few in this column over time.

It can't be helped, even with numerous sets of eyes checking my copy there has been the odd booby.

But nothing as embarrassing as the election pamphlet put out by Sinn Féin Southern leader Mary Lou McDonald where she spelt Bobby Sands 'Booby Sands'.

In Republican circles getting the name of Bobby Sands wrong is akin to the Pope calling Jesus 'Jaysus'.

Coming hot on the heels of Thomas 'Slab' Murphy's conviction for tax evasion the Sinn Féin campaign has had a less than auspicious start.

Smile you're now Sir Van The Man

SOMETHING truly amazing happened when Van Morrison received his knighthood from Prince Charles at Buckingham Palace... he smiled.

And here's the proof as the delighted East Belfast boy shows off his medal outside the palace in the company of his first daughter Shana.

However, there was no smile inside the palace as Charles lowered the sword on Van's shoulder as etiquette dictated the singer had to remove his ubiquitous hat.

The last time there was such a comb over at the palace the great Bobby Charlton was getting his peagee.



EVEN for a society as hardened to tragedy as ours — news that a homeless man had been found dead in a shop doorway on one of Belfast's busiest streets came as a shock.

Many of us mistakenly believe a multitude of state agencies offer help to the homeless, this is not the case.

Much of the help on offer comes from charities such as the Welcome

Organisation situated in Townsend Street, Belfast.

While that organisation has a few paid workers, the majority of staff is made up of volunteers who give up their free time, with no financial gain, to help the homeless.

I had the privilege of performing at a comedy night organised by the Welcome Centre to raise funds and I also witnessed first hand the essential work they do.

While every volunteer is a hero in their own right, the story of 85-year-old Sister Olive Cooney deserves a mention. This octogenarian nun offers a laundry service for those living on the streets. She happily accepts soiled clothes and bedding from street sleepers and returns them clean fresh and neatly folded.

Such a simple act of humanity and kindness has a profound impact on those whose only possessions are often carried on their backs. While women such as Sister Olive could never have their enthusiasm to help the homeless dented, the rest of us are not so unanimous.

Over Christmas I noticed an influx of young men, all foreign, who suddenly appeared begging in doorways across Belfast. Initially I thought their arrival had something to do with the unfolding refugee crisis in the Middle East. Maybe this was the beginning of the war torn refugees arriving on our shores?

It quickly became clear this wasn't the case when the Chief Constable reported that 126 foreign nationals had come to Belfast over the Christmas period to beg.

Unlike the real homeless they'd stayed in multiple occupancy housing and left Belfast after the holidays.

Apart from handing out warnings there was little the police seemed able to do. Of course the real victims of such deception will be the genuine needy who remain on our streets. We must not allow these heartless criminals to harden our hearts against the genuine homeless among us.

The man who died in that doorway, I'm sure, had a mother who adored him — he attended school and played with friends just as we all once did. We should look at the destitute and remind ourselves that but for good fortune we could be the ones lying in the doorway.

So if you can afford to donate a few pounds to the Welcome Organisation do so. I guarantee you will sleep more soundly in your bed knowing you've done a little to help those who have no roof over their head.



MAGIC MIKE TO RETURN

HAVING sprinted for the exit after the murder of Kevin McGuigan last year Mike Nesbitt is now manoeuvring to come in from the cold and rejoin the Executive.

Autocue Mike has been missing his sliver of the limelight and while arguing his walking out of the Executive helped concentrate minds the truth is his departure was hardly noticed and his decision to crawl back is humiliating.

Mike's inspired initiative in the run-up to the May election is to publish nine documents laying out the UUP's position on everything from the economy to animal welfare.

This brainwave will at least ensure local paper recycling centres will have a steady supply of paper.

SICKEST OF JOKES

AS I approach the end of the Gaggin' tour I realise that you can never judge an audience by the venue. After one of my two shows in the prestigious Lyric theatre I was stopped by an usher from going back on stage to collect my props after the show. They informed me there had been an incident.

I was stunned to hear a woman had laughed so hard she'd vomited over the woman sitting in front of her.

I'm still wondering if I can work the sad incident into my publicity material for next years show? He's so funny he'll make you puke. No, maybe not.

