

THE UTILISATION OF ASSEMBLAGE THEORY IN THE STUDY OF THE REPURPOSING OF REDUNDANT CITY CENTRE SPACE

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ABSTRACT

Repurposing a building, rather than demolishing, means a new scheme tends to start from a very inefficient scenario. This paper seeks to better understand how city centre repurposing schemes are shaped by property-related factors, across five case study developments where former uses had contracted or ceased altogether. Faced with the subsequent empty space, the paper critically examines 1) the extent to which a building's material content, and that of its surroundings, determines decisions at the feasibility stage of city centre repurposing schemes, and 2) which material aspects assisted or resisted the actual act of change, once repurposing works had commenced. In this vein, initial empirical results suggest the importance of innovation in overcoming the sheer space taken-up by infrastructure passing vertically through a building and in communicating externally what's changing internally, and the importance of flexibility in planning policy to cater for uses in the ascendance, in these building 'shells'.

Keywords:

Assemblage, repurposing space, city centre, retail

This is work in progress, the findings are preliminary and the conclusions still to be finalised.

MAIN TEXT

1. Introduction

This paper focuses on the role of buildings/spaces in the formation stage of city centre place assemblages (repurposing schemes) across five case studies, where former uses had contracted or ceased altogether, raising questions about how to fill the subsequent empty space with something else. In light of this empty space, the study critically examines 1) the extent to which a building's material content, and that of its surroundings, determines decisions at the feasibility stage of city centre repurposing schemes, and 2) which material aspects of the building and its surroundings assisted or resisted the actual act of change, once works had commenced. The overall aim is to better understand 'what works' in the repurposing of vacated city centre properties – through finding the conditions under which something new may be created.

This paper sits within, and is motivated by, the desire to better understand the making of more resilient and adaptive retailing spaces. This is brought about by a number of issues which are resulting in the need to repurpose city centre space. Pre-Covid 19, there was already a surplus of city centre retail space for reasons such as the 2008 financial crisis continuing to hamper consumer confidence/spending power and activities such as shopping and banking increasingly moving online. This resulted not only in redundant city centre space, but a decline in footfall for remaining city centre businesses. The situation has been exacerbated by the rolling Covid-19 lockdowns, which have left many retailers struggling to survive the lockdowns' impact on trade. This issue also faces ventures in the arts, hospitality, entertainment and recreation sectors. In light of this, the repurposing of city centre space, particularly former retail floorspace, needs to be better understood. As such, for our study, assemblage theory is employed, whereby the appeal of assemblage analysis lies not only in its ability to deal simultaneously with complex retail arrangements (including, for example, buildings, people, tenancies, merchandise and technologies), but also in its focus on 'formation stories'. In terms of formations stories, investigating the spatial processes which have enabled change to take place is of key interest

to our study. More specifically, given our study's interest in the adaptation of retail space – that is, the actual act of change – the focus of our study is the role of the built fabric/materials in retail/retail repurposing ventures. To examine such ventures, a case study approach is utilised, investigating five retail adaptation schemes across Glasgow, Edinburgh, Liverpool, Nottingham and Hull, whereby a case study approach enables innovations in real estate practice, planning practice and building form to be explored.

Our research investigates these five city centre retail assemblages from the specific viewpoint of their materiality. To situate our work, it differs from previous materialities/urbanism research, such as that by McFarlane (2011), Soaita and McKee (2019), and Hillier (2011). These three studies play a key role in the development of our approach, however. For example, McFarlane (2011) focuses on materials (particularly those of housing and infrastructure) as a lens to reveal what their materiality says about the experience of living in informal settlements in Mumbai. Soaita and McKee (2019) explore material factors that (de)stabilise or (de)territorialise a sense of home because there is no 'home' without the 'house'; its material content frames the experience of dwelling. Similarly, Hillier (2011) explores the material agency ascribed to non-human objects/structures by humans, but with a specific focus on what humans see as their potential, doing so through a large scale art installation. Drawing on these studies, this work expands the application of assemblage thinking, through its focus on retail real estate, and it is primarily concerned with the role of materials in the formation stage of place assemblages. In terms of the originality of the research, it is believed that nobody has yet used the emerging assemblage literature to form a better understanding of city centre retail/commercial environments. In this light, it is hoped our study offers a new direction for real estate/planning studies at a time of unprecedented urban concerns regarding retail survival and the repurposing of surplus retail space.

To this end, the overall aim of the study is to utilise an assemblage approach to generate a better understanding of the making of resilient and adaptive city centre spaces, with a specific focus on the ways key actors interact with the built fabric/material characteristics of city centre real estate to meet the challenges of repurposing existing floorspace, particularly redundant retail floorspace.

In order to achieve this aim, the objectives are:

- (i) To utilise an assemblage theoretical framework for considering the repurposing of redundant city centre space;
- (ii) To elicit the views of key actors/stakeholders on the ways repurposing schemes are shaped by building-related factors, with a focus on the pre-existing properties (structural characteristics, materials and visual appearance) of the site itself and the surrounding area, and the subsequent potential seen in the site; and
- (iii) To draw out key innovations in real estate practice, planning practice and built form, to generate a better understanding of the making of resilient and adaptive city centre spaces.

Our study critically examines city centre transformations, conceptualised using an assemblage framework. The concept of assemblages was initially developed by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), translated to English in 1987, was the key text in their theory of assemblages. It was later elaborated upon by assemblage theorists, including Manuel DeLanda. DeLanda sought to make the concept more teachable, especially in his 2016 book *Assemblage Theory*. It has been applied to a wide variety of research topics, including urban places, whereby assemblage theory's strength lies in its 'very manipulability' (Anderson and MacFarlane, 2011, no page) and its 'chameleon-like' qualities (Savage, 2018, p.332). However, this comes at a cost: there is a risk of assemblage "slipping into a conceptual labyrinth" (Savage, 2018, p.332). In response, to avoid such a labyrinth, our study is structured around a clear theoretical framework that, firstly, identifies the three key properties of an assemblage (heteronomy, relationships of exteriority, and emergence) and, subsequently, summarising those concepts and themes that are most relevant to our study. The motivation of this approach is to seek to make the empirical findings understandable and accessible.

2. Assemblage Theory

In philosophical usage, 'assemblage' is not the taken-for-granted dictionary definition. Rather, there are three key properties which separate an assemblage from other terms such as an arrangement, composition or ensemble. These are the closely related properties of heteronomy, relationships of exteriority and emergence.

Heteronomy is a key characteristic of an assemblage. The components of an assemblage form a heterogeneous mixture, meaning they are diverse in character of content and can be separated (DeLanda, 2016). Coke with ice is an example of a heterogeneous mixture because its elements can be seen and separated, whereas the components of a gin and tonic are fused into a seamless whole in which their individuality is lost.

Relationships of exteriority is a second characteristic of an assemblage (see DeLanda, 2016), which means that assemblage components retain their autonomy outside of the assemblage in which they exist. They do not fuse into a seamless totality and lose their identity, as happens where component parts are characterised by ‘relationships of interiority’ (DeLanda, 2017) (note that ‘exteriority’ and ‘interiority’ are not spatial terms, in this context). Given assemblages are composed of relationships of exteriority, this means its components can be unplugged and then plugged into a different assemblage (McFarlane, 2011; DeLanda, 2016). This also contrasts with situations where a component part only makes sense within a whole (a bicycle, for example). Moreover, a component can be part of more than one assemblage at the same time, while assemblages can also be ‘nested’, for example a single property can be nested within a city centre, although it is important to that, in terms of power relations, nesting is not hierarchical in any way.

Emergent properties is the third key property of an assemblage where, more than co-functioning, ‘emergent properties’ do not exist within an individual component, but are instead produced by various components working together. (Thinking about chemistry and the reactions caused by mixing chemicals helps conceptualise emergent properties.) Indeed, the word ‘assemblage’ is an attempt to translate the original French word ‘agencement’ and refers to both the action of fitting together a set of components and the result of such an action (DeLanda, 2016; Rutzou and Elder-Vass, 2019). In this way, agencement can be conceptualised as a generated strategic agency, and implies an agency and immanence which the word ‘assemblage’ does not (Hillier and Abrahams, 2013). In this vein, an assemblage as a whole that has properties that are not present in the component parts.

In exploring assemblage thinking, it needs highlighting that assemblage is arguably more of a standpoint than a neat theory. It is a “thinking framework” (Hooman & McDonald 2019, p.179). Hondros (2017) emphasises that assemblage theory allows a theoretical space in which we can step back and ‘virtualise’ the world and think about what’s going on. In this vein, DeLanda (2017) helpfully explains that, in assemblage thinking, the world (Earth) – as a theoretical space – can be envisaged as one huge continuum in which every future possibility lies, whereby an assemblage is formed as a progressive segmentation within that continuum. Deleuze and Guattari refer to this continuum as the ‘plane of immanence’, and it includes both ‘the virtual’ (the pre-possible) and its actualization simultaneously (Hillier and Abrahams, 2013, p.39). In terms of actualization, by ‘segmentation’ it is meant that within the overall ‘Earth-envisaged-as-one-huge-continuum’, a part becomes distinct through establishing boundaries. It is through establishing boundaries that an assemblage ‘lays down its frame’ (Hillier, 2011, p.870) or claims its territory (‘territorialisation’ in assemblage language). Whereas our study deals with place assemblages which have physical boundaries, a key point to make is that in assemblage thinking, the forming of boundaries is often non-spatial, because it relates to fixing the identity of an assemblage. What binds us to an identity is a function or role.

Moreover, given our study examines the repurposing of city centre retail space, Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of assemblage was of particular interest because it emphasizes both spatiality and temporality (Li, 2007). Assemblage theory offers an understanding of place through its development, whereby territorialisation is about processes which stabilize the identity of an assemblage, but that identity is not permanently fixed (Muminovic, 2015). Instead, it varies over time. Territorialisation processes relate to the various roles which individual component parts may play, from the purely material/functional to the purely symbolic, thus creating different mixtures for an assemblage and a different identity at different points in time (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Hillier, 2011; Muminovic, 2015). In assemblage language, material roles (material components composed of matter) are known as ‘content’ and symbolic roles are known as ‘expression’. All assemblages are a mixture of different levels of material and expressive roles. For example, a building provides material content while its architectural style provides an expressive (symbolic) component (DeLanda, 2016). Together they fix an overall identity. Territorialisation creates meaning, as assemblages territorialize both material forms and forms of expression.

Furthermore, territorialisation refers to the degree to which an assemblage subjects its own components to a process of internal homogenisation, and the subsequent extent to which its boundaries are sharpened and made

impermeable (DeLanda, 2016). While admittedly confusing to use the term ‘homogenisation’ in relation to assemblages’ pointedly heterogeneous components, territorialisation is a measure of internal homogeneity (‘internal coherency’ or ‘internal consistency’ are possibly more appropriate, alternative terms) (while at all times remembering that assemblage theory rejects the notion of ‘coherent wholes’). Lastly, in forming boundaries, coding completes a territory. Coding relates to the rules and traditions of a particular assemblage and, like territorialisation (content/expression), coding also fixes the identity of an assemblage. The paper will return to the concepts of territorialisation (content and expression) and coding later.

Assemblage’s application to a wide variety of research topics, its manipulability and its chameleon-like qualities have already been noted. To this end, Anderson and MacFarlane (2011) observe the danger of the proliferation of assemblage’s usage devaluing its academic currency. In response, this section turns to those concepts and themes within assemblage theory which are most relevant to our study. Their inclusion seeks to ensure that – at the data analysis stage – assemblage theory is fully utilised as an explanatory force, to reveal meaning in the data. They are, in turn, the interrelated concepts of the rhizome/lines of flight, and the variables of materialities/expressivities and coding.

The rhizome and lines of flight

An assemblage can have higher or lower levels of territorialisation. As the values lower, an assemblage’s boundaries grow softer/fuzzier because of the breaking-up of actual spatial boundaries or through increased internal heterogeneity leading to a weaker identity (DeLanda, 2006). Internal heterogeneity is increased when a component part starts to change in some way. For example, a component’s function might change because of the breakdown of a relationship or the impact of new legislation. These destabilising processes are known as ‘deterritorialization’. In terms of the repurposing of city centre retail space, deterritorialization processes would mean that space is becoming another spatial entity.

While assemblages always ‘claim’ a territory as heterogeneous parts are gathered together and hold together, this can only ever be a provisional process. Assemblages of heterogeneous components are inherently unstable and fluid (Hillier and Abrahams, 2013). Indeed, assemblages are not expected to hold together indefinitely, but instead their instability (mobility) means that there is always potential for innovation. Fuzzifying processes (deterritorialization) produce difference, new forms and functions (Hooman and McDonald, 2019). An assemblage’s instability (mobility) means it is constantly opening-up to new lines of flight, new becomings (Anderson and MacFarlane, 2011; Savage, 2020). To better understand ‘lines of flight’, a key concept in Deleuze and Guattari’s work is the rhizome. The rhizome and the ‘Earth-envisaged-as-one-huge-continuum’ are closely related metaphors. An attempt to dissect this continuum would reveal a dense, interweaved botanical rhizome where no element works alone, within an open system with no evident origin or end. Formed within this, in assemblage thinking, each assemblage is also an open system (Holland, 2013). Components can unplug (detach) from a particular material or expressive function and rhizomatically seek to make connections to other assemblages along a *ligne de fuite* or line of flight – a type of conduit (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987; DeLanda, 2017; Woods, 2017). There will be a point along a line of flight where a change in essence (a change of state) will occur. This defines the point at which a ‘thing’ transforms into something else (or ceases to exist) (Muminovic, 2015). In this way, in assemblage thinking, the action is in the rhizomic connections, whereby once sufficiently deterritorialised along a line of flight, reterritorialisation (reassembly) begins, with the forming of a new assemblage.

The rhizome metaphor draws on the idea that social and material formations are assemblages of other complex configurations, and they in turn play roles in other, more extended configurations (Van Wezemael, 2008). A key point to make is that action (or agency) is co-created. A component part looks outwards, focuses elsewhere and exits (flees/flows/leaks away from) an extant assemblage and starts to form a new assemblage with other components. This instability (mobility) brings a potential for innovation because the component part has both benefitted from the experience of being part of the extant assemblage while also having an outward view, looking elsewhere, into the world outside that assemblage. In this vein, processes of territorialization, deterritorialization and reterritorialisation enable us to acknowledge the mutual influence of the inside and the outside of a particular assemblage (Hooman & McDonald 2019). Action is co-created with the outside world, whereby assemblages are opportunistic, like a rhizome.

The variables of materialities/expressivities and coding

While there is a point along a line of flight which marks a change of essence (state) and a subsequent transformation into something else (or a demise), before reaching this threshold, assemblages exhibit variable states relating to use (material or more symbolic), intensity of use and the particular rules/traditions of any given assemblage – which result in changes taking place at varying speeds. As such, DeLanda (2016) describes an assemblage as a ‘parameterised concept’ with certain ‘given variables’ (parameters). These variables relate to fixing the identity of an assemblage, through territorialisation (intensity of use from material to expressive) and the extent to which an assemblage is coded. Territorial and coding alterations to an assemblage produce phenomena of relative slowness and viscosity, or, on the contrary, of acceleration and rupture [along the line of flight] (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). In this way, assemblages can sometimes undergo abrupt changes, as seen in city centre retail space. To help conceptualise an assemblage’s variable states, assemblage theorists have referred to charting points on horizontal/vertical axes (Deleuze and Guattari) or drawn-on the imagery of laboratory experiments and the metaphor of tuning control dials to adjust the variables of an artificial phenomenon’s environment (DeLanda). The latter’s metaphor of tuning control dials can also help emphasise the speed of change which can impact on the individual components of an assemblage. However, the key point to make is that an assemblage, to some degree, is always in a state of flux, but – despite this – it can remain below the threshold marking a change of essence (state).

Coding

Coding is the process of ordering matter in an assemblage. Through its rules and rituals an assemblage embodies an emergent order (code) which enables it to hold together. In this way, each assemblage has its own life (Hooman and McDonald 2019). Moreover, there is both formal coding (forms of government of others) and informal coding (forms of government of self). By this it is meant that humans are both governed (regulated) and self-governing (self-regulating) subjects. We are governed by formal rules, and self-governed by informal rituals, habits and traditions. In a city centre retail assemblage, examples of formal ‘rules’ might be a host of property-related (civil) laws. Moreover, given our study examines materials, a key point to make is that legislation is coded into structures/buildings themselves, in the form of planning policies and building regulations. Informal rituals, habits and traditions might be everyday cultural practices such as late night shopping, festive events and the January sales. An assemblage can have higher or lower levels of coding, and – given coding is a variable – coding alterations can take place (such as new legislation). Like territorialisation (content/expression), coding alterations may not lead to a demolishing of existing codes and ultimately a change in essence (a change in state/deterritorialisation), but instead a partial reordering (Hooman & McDonald 2019). In these ways, codes play a role in fixing an identity of an assemblage and, through establishing boundaries/laying down a frame, coding completes a territory.

Through this introduction to the key concepts of assemblage thinking, and those most relevant to this study, it is seen that assemblage thinking is concerned with how collectives are produced, not as aggregates, but as assemblages that have generated their particular ‘own life’ through relationships of multiple different groups, buildings/spaces, formalized codes of control and more informal habits and traditions, all overlaid with a distinct symbolic expression. Assemblage theory offers understanding of place through its development, giving a broad image of ‘place’ as undergoing phase transitions as the nature of that place changes – gradually or abruptly. As highlighted, assemblage theory can risk slipping into a conceptual labyrinth. In response, this summary of an assemblage’s key properties and assemblage theory’s concepts/themes most relevant to our study provides a touchstone to return to.

3. Methods and data

This section sets out how, guided by assemblage theory, the data for the study were generated and analysed. Details of the three core elements of choosing the case study method, the selection of the five cities, and identification of specific properties are presented in the first section. Subsequently, the methods of data collection and analysis are given in the second section.

3.1 Methods

3.1.1 Case study approach

To achieve the aim of better understanding the making of resilient and adaptive city centre spaces, with a specific focus on the ways key actors interact with the built fabric/material characteristics of city centre real estate, an in-depth qualitative method is essential. A case study approach is particularly useful as it enables a

full picture of the specific object of inquiry to be built up, while fully acknowledging the importance of its context, in this instance the wider city centre. Importantly, case studies are regarded as the best strategy when the research focuses on a contemporary phenomenon within a real-life context, when the researcher has little/no control over events and when ‘how’ or ‘why’ questions are being asked (Yin, 2003). A further appeal is that a case study allows researchers to gain a close and detailed view of a phenomenon and study directly the processes that lead to change (Blaikie, 2010). This is especially pertinent as assemblage thinking that guides the study embraces the processual nature of change. It is important that the findings have relevance beyond a single case study and, thus, given the unique and heterogeneous characteristics of real estate, five case studies are used to reduce specificity and possible lack of replicability.

A case study approach is also about connecting with theory; this study involves analysis against a carefully considered assemblage theoretical framework, developed to guide data collection and analysis (following Blaikie, 2010; De Vaus, 2001; Yin, 2003). Thus, it is intended that the findings will have relevance beyond each research site, by making theoretical generalisations: generalising from a study to a theory (De Vaus, 2001; Blaikie, 2010; Bryman, 2016; Groat and Wang, 2002).

3.1.2 Selecting the five cities

This paper is part of a larger study that explores the adaptability of the real estate market in five major UK retailing centre case studies – Edinburgh, Glasgow, Hull, Liverpool and Nottingham – over the period 2000-17. These cities are all regional significant and classed as ‘northern’ in the UK. Controlling for broad geographical location in the sample is important, with Wrigley and Dolega (2011) finding north-south economic imbalances to be influential on the resilience of retailing centres. The cities are, however, diverse in many aspects, and are specifically selected to reflect the hugely distinct and nuanced characteristics of city centres. Differences relate to economic structures, identified to impact on processes of renewal (Reynolds and Schiller, 1992; Harper Dennis Hobbs, 2016). A number of rankings and indices were analysed to explore the underlying characteristics of the sample, revealing the complexities of city centres. Based on Knight Frank (2017, with additional data supplied to the project), factors considered, and findings revealed, included that Edinburgh is much better placed than any other city in terms of population growth and affluence, as well as expenditure growth. This perhaps reflects its position as a capital city, attracting an international clientele. However, its supply is significantly physically constrained and thus more susceptible to competition. For Hull, while it is in line with the rest of the sample in terms of catchment, expenditure (apart from tourism) and competition, alongside quite high rankings for retail provision and resilience, it has low scores for rental growth and investment demand. These contrasting factors reflect market complexities, and suggest that there might be too much supply, with an insufficient mix of retail and leisure provision, for a centre with such a low score for affluence. These examples serve to highlight the heterogeneous nature of city centres.

Observed differences and changes can be identified in the four decades immediately prior to the study period, providing further contextual details. Collating the Multiple Branch Scores (a key metric originally developed by Schiller and Jarrett (1985) and available for 1961, 1971, 1984, 1989 and 1995, used to identify comparative standing) over that period reveals variety across the sample. Glasgow had high and consistent growth (increases of around 30-40% between each census period), while Edinburgh was much slower to grow initially (a growth rate of just over 10%), before then matching Glasgow. Despite the MBS scores for both centres growing by over 30% from 1989 to 1995, their rankings within the UK did not change, revealing the UK-wide expansion of central retail space. Liverpool, Nottingham and Hull had contrasting fortunes. Liverpool fell significantly in the rankings (from 3 to 17); Nottingham fluctuated but, overall, rose fairly steadily (from 12 in 1971 to 6); while Hull had the most dramatic change, falling from a ranking of 13 in 1961 to 33 in 1989, then rising equally dramatically and very quickly to 10 in 1995. In terms of changes to stock, the MBS for Hull and Nottingham increased by just over 10% over 1984-89, mirroring Edinburgh. Over the 1989-95 period, the growth seen in Liverpool and Nottingham matched Glasgow and Edinburgh; while the MBS for Hull, by contrast, grew 188%, from 57 to 107, higher than for any of the other cities. Alongside the underlying economic and market characteristics driving these differences and changes, the MBS data reveal just how ‘lumpy’ and unstable the stock of property can be in individual cities, a function of new developments, causing market shifts and shocks.

3.1.3 Identifying the specific properties

To introduce the five city centre case studies, the sample comprises a partly vacated shopping mall, two former department stores, a functioning-but-contracting bank and a back-building development around a yard. The

latter property had stood empty, long term, before it was repurposed. In contrast, the established functions at the other four properties had only contracted or ceased in the recent past. At four properties, repurposing works had followed a change in ownership, while at one property, a long-standing tenant made the decision to invest in repurposing their space, partly influenced by the landlord's renovation works to the overall building. All case study properties were selected because they are in designated 'primary shopping areas'. Coincidentally they are all in conservation areas, and four have a footprint entirely taken-up by constructed space (that is, no open space). In both instances, this would often be the case with city centre locations.

3.2 Data

3.2.1 Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews formed the study's core primary data collection method, selected to enable the exploration of the complex repurposing process and reveal subtle and intricate details (following Denscombe, 1998). This method enabled in-depth exploration of the core elements of assemblage theory, through the case study properties. Thus, there was a clear list of issues to be explored, with the semi-structured format permitting open-ended answers and space for participants to elaborate on points of interest, enabling emerging themes to surface (Denscombe, 1998). To reinforce the anchoring of the study in assemblage theory, a 'headings matrix' was employed to ensure each element of assemblage thinking was appropriately covered.

The sampling strategy was to target all relevant professional stakeholder groups, spanning building owners, occupiers and/or their respective agents; planning representatives (including public sector, private sector agents and wider city economic development roles); and those with city centre management roles. In total 24 interviewees took part in the one-to-one interviews, with – due to the Covid-19 lockdowns – participation either via online video call or over the telephone. They took place April-August 2021, each lasting around 45-90 minutes, depending on the interviewee, providing highly in-depth data.

3.2.2 Data analysis

All the interviews were professionally transcribed and subsequently checked by the interviewer. NVivo Pro 1.3 was the dominant means used for organising the data, with the raw data explored to tease out codes and concepts, to develop a thematic coding framework. A thematic coding framework is intended to take large quantities of raw data and organise, sharpen and discard it (Miles and Huberman, 1984). With assemblage thinking providing the theoretical framework for the research, the key elements of the theory being explored provide the structure – the scaffolding – for the thematic coding, with the codes, concepts and categories themselves emerging inductively through engagement with the interview texts (Denscombe, 1998).

4. Findings

The findings set out below seek to chart the process of change, using the time-line of change as a guide. This approach is hoped to enable the reader to access the concepts and processes most intuitively. As a consequence, therefore, the references to the underlying key assemblage concepts of the rhizome/lines of flight, and the variables of materialities/expressivities and coding, that guided the data collection, are interspersed throughout, appearing where found to be relevant. This approach is felt to have greater utility than ordering the findings by the three key assemblage concepts, which would create an impenetrable sequence of findings.

High Street context

In terms of the British high street, the volume of empty units is at a record high with no sign that the demand will ever be there to meet the supply (Simpson, 2021). In this vein, four owners (A01, C01, D01, E01) discussed vacancy at the purchase stage. For one (C01) the property had been bought with an understanding of a 20-year income stream, yet two quarters later the tenant went into CVA. However, three owners purchased the properties knowing they were already vacant to some extent (D01, E01), or highly likely to be soon vacated: *"despite the fact that we bought a building with income, we knew the income was not going to last long"* (A01). Additionally, for another owner:

"It was significantly vacant, so that affected value and the value was attractive. I mean, we acquired the building at a price that you could not have built it for. And this happens a lot ... you hear it all the time ... we bought it very competitively ... but the building standard was excellent" (D01).

Assemblages do not embody any ordered, predetermined shape, but opportunistically co-evolve with their surroundings. While vacated space was a characteristic of all five case study assemblages, the attraction was not ‘emptiness’. Neighbouring uses and attractors were important:

“You know, they [occupiers] are ultimately looking for the right space at the right price, but they’re not going to go to [the property] if it’s an island out in the middle of nowhere ... there’s something about the area we are in, that the building, though it had been vacated, didn’t feel isolated” (D01).

While vacated properties are attractive, isolated properties are not. Table 1 shows the neighbouring uses around vacated buildings which triggered an initial interest for both potential owners and occupiers.

Table 1: Neighbouring uses and attractors

Access to public transport A02, B02, C01, C02, D01 (buses, trains, trams)
Adjacent to multi-storey car parks C03, C04, C05, D01, D07
Organic footfall A02, B02, C02
Proximity to shops B02, D01, E01
Proximity to leisure, hotels, restaurants and tourist traffic A02, D01, E01

These uses are, “all, I would say, very much working to our benefit” (A02), illustrating how assemblages opportunistically co-evolving with their surroundings. Moreover, four of the five case studies had chosen to locate in – operationally – something of a sweet spot, with building frontages directly abutting both pedestrianised and trafficked streets. In this way, the properties benefited from pedestrian-orientated spaces: after all, “we all want a streetscape with a European feel” (D01). Of the four properties, two – aspirationally – wished to flow onto the streets [B02b, A02], while two already had licencing in place for tables/chairs. At the same time, across the same four properties the benefits of trafficked roads were listed. Not only do they enable access to adjacent car parks and taxi ranks, because “*sometimes people just want to get out the car, don’t they, and want to be on the doorstep*” (C05), but also facilitated additional quick visits to a property (B02b). Additionally, they created ease of access to trams and buses, with one occupier explicitly stating they wanted to be on a bus route to enable employees to get to work (C02).

As highlighted in assemblage thinking, the world – as a theoretical space – can be envisaged as one huge, unending continuum. As such, assemblage theory seeks to do away with artificial beginnings and endings, seeking instead to establish a “logic of the AND” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). For example, “the assemblage of Princess Mary comprises flesh and blood and gown and tiara ... and ... and ... and” (Hillier and Abrahams, 2013, p.19). The list could go on: and shoes and pearls and earrings ... and ... and ... and. In this vein, in seeking to access both pedestrianised and trafficked areas, the case study assemblages are attracted to spaces where ‘ands’ can be maximised. For planners seeking to create the conditions under which vacated buildings might be repurposed, this raises questions around embracing an ‘and ... and ... and’ approach to urban management – even if this approach challenges current urban design orthodoxies, whereby the decisions to invest on the very edge of pedestrianised areas raises questions about the appropriate size and configuration of overall traffic-free areas in city centres. Perhaps, rather than wholesale pedestrianisation, finding protracted ways of allowing for vehicular movement, may maximise ‘and ... and ... and’ opportunities and attract to investors in vacated space.

Assemblage components: the property

For owners/occupiers, at the decision-making stage, a key issue which they found to be their “hesitation piece” (C02) – that is, issues which “gave us some pause” (A02) – was the condition of the vacated space. Its state of disrepair was an issue raised by four interviewees (A01, C01, C02, E01) across three of the properties (of the remaining two properties, one was in excellent condition and one was already undergoing a full building upgrade). In all instances, however, disrepair was outweighed by the buildings’ attractiveness – including period architecture. This highlights the importance of a building’s external attractiveness/architectural style, which – in assemblage language – is known as an expressive component. Overall assemblages are a mixture of expressive and material components. Expressive components play a symbolic role, while material components – or material content – are composed of matter. An example of this mixture would be the building itself which provides the material component while its architectural style provides an expressive component. The key point to make, however, is that all assemblage components – whether material or expressive – exist

in a connective alliance. With this in mind, the components which triggered an initial interest in the properties are set-out in Table 2.

Table 2: Components triggering interest

Attractiveness of the building, including period architecture A01, C01, C02, E01
Plentiful floorspace A02, B02, C02
Multiple access/egress points (enabling subdivision) A01, A02, B02b, D01
Seemingly adaptable building A01, A02, D01
Prominent, visible location A02, B02, B02b, C02
Strong, robust building A01, D01
Good price D01, E01
Locally iconic building A02, C02

The components set out in Table 2 refer to the potential seen by the owners/occupiers in each property, largely – though not entirely – in terms of the ways they could occupy its space: its material content. For example, an internal space free of architectural ornament appealed, “so when you're [planning on] ripping the guts out of a building ... you could do that there” (A03). Given the paper is interested in how decisions over repurposing vacated space are shaped by property-related factors, it is beneficial to give more nuance to Table 2. For example, while it was highlighted that multiple access/egress points to enable subdivisions of the overall building, the building’s ability to accommodate attendant reception areas is also a factor (A01). While multiple access/egress points may enable the sub-division of a property, other uses often cannot operate within a single building due to security concerns because “you’d be amazed what people will do: drilling through walls and floors” (B02b).

The simplicity of internal space was only highlighted by one owner, not because this is not an unvalued attribute, but because most of the case study properties did not offer a simple space, but spaces plagued by idiosyncrasies after years of use and alterations. Similarly, while only one interviewee (D01) referred to plentiful natural light as something which triggered their interest in a property, again, this does not mean natural light is not a valued attribute. Rather it reflects the fact that, for five interviewees (A01, A02, A03, C04, D07) across three properties, there was no natural light because the windows had been blacked-out to accommodate retail servicing areas, storage and partitioning.

Phase Transitions

In Table 2, two of the case study properties were identified as being locally iconic. This is of interest because assemblage theory offers understanding of place through its development, giving a broad image of ‘place’ as undergoing phase transitions as the nature of that place changes. Indeed, nostalgia and warmth regarding previous uses of the case study properties were expressed by seven interviewees (A05, B02, C01, C02, C03, D04, D07) including:

“There’s quite a lot of nostalgia around the re-emergence of the building ... people have a lot of nostalgia around that building because it’s been around for a long time, and have recollections of family days, and Christmas grottos, and all the rest of it. It held quite a big part of people’s hearts.”

The interviewee data suggests that, when a place undergoes phase transitions, it does not appear to leave its symbolic expression of the previous phase fully behind, indicating that, in repurposing schemes, it is beneficial to redevelop properties with former good memories, such as certain department stores. Moreover, the study suggests that starting from ‘no use’ makes repurposing more difficult. Indeed, for the case study property which had stood empty, long term, as a previously ‘unknown’ property, its repurposing efforts were contrasted with the fact that:

“We’ve got a vacant Debenhams in the city centre at the moment, to redevelop that and repurpose it, everybody would know about it, because it’s the old Debenhams unit. But ... [our scheme] in the city centre that nobody knew about [because it had been empty, long term], to try and promote that, and for people to understand where that is, it’s a hard job. So, you may make it into a brilliant scheme, but you’ve got to get the public to find out about it” (E06).

This illustrates how potential owners/occupiers are drawn to prominent, visible positions when considering investing in a building. However, more than a prominent position, the interview data suggests it is also beneficial to re-use a building which has some prominence in people’s minds. In this way, repurposing a recently vacated mall or department store assists change.

Gestural (expressive) buildings

Given the case study repurposed buildings are not purpose built, from the street, it is not easy to ‘read’ their architecture to ascertain their current function/s.

“You're trying to change something, and then once you've done it, you're trying to let people know you've done it. You need to externalise that at some stage You change the use, but then how do you articulate that externally? ... how [do] you explain to people what you've got?” (D01).

Therefore, repurposing schemes need to find ways of externally communicating internal change. Signage is the most obvious way, but complicated by the conservation area designations whereby signage, “has to be quite discreet because it’s in a conservation area: you can’t have anything blingy” (E04). Problems coming to an agreement on appropriate signage were highlighted by most interviewees. Signage was particularly a challenge for those properties which have been repurposed to house multiple uses/occupants. This included, for example, issues over the amount of permitted signage for properties with multiple occupiers: “you're only supposed to have one A-board, and although you could argue it's [one A-board] for each business the council have argued that it's one space” (E05). Moreover, where the signing of each business has been permitted, there remained an issue with perceived visual chaos, whereby, “no two logos are ever the same” (D07). Overall, the issues raised about signing included the use of bright brand colours, mix of logos, location and appropriate style (projecting, fascia, totem, banner, flag, arrow, neon, A-board, digital window display). Issues over style were exacerbated by the lack of traditional eternal shop fascia zones at some properties (D04, E04).

Given the paper’s focus on the role of buildings/spaces, in terms of achieving an external presence via ‘some other form’ than signage, the range of approaches are set out in Table 3. However, it is important to note that the problems around businesses within repurposed buildings achieving an external presence is exacerbated by the fact all five case studies are victims of their original design in some way: as an internal mall building, a banking establishment or former department stores. As such, the point was made that there is no real engagement unless you enter (C04, D01, D04).

Table 3: externally communicating internal change

Outdoor seating on adjacent public land
Seeking to extend improvements (territorialise) adjacent public land
Seeking to have ‘sense of arrival’ fixtures on adjacent public land
Present themselves as a meeting place
Façade lighting schemes

To add more insight to Table 3, in terms of outdoor seating on adjacent public land, at one case study property consent was sought to create decking-style balconies. The local authority planners reluctantly agreed to accept the owner’s argument that the alterations were entirely necessary to support the new uses in the repurposed building, whereby:

“People can see it [the new venture] from outside, which means they understand it exists, because otherwise if it's all indoors, it's all very nice having a sign saying ‘restaurant’, but people walk by. So, it's that engagement: it's flowing out into the streets” (D01).

This belief relates to assemblage thinking, in that the components which constitute an assemblage include its effectivity: what it can do (Hillier and Abrahams, 2013). People see a potential in certain materials/structures to produce certain effects. However, herein lies a problem as local authority planners have, traditionally been focused on material form. For them, the issue was that, by accommodating the balconies, traditional elements were lost:

“That to me was a big deal. We weren't really very happy about that, as officers, to us that's a big gamble really ... unless the [food/catering element] goes in and those balconies come to life, I feel like ... we have lost the historic setting of the building” (D04).

This illustrates the long view traditionally taken by planners, in this case to preserve the existing fabric of the city (the material form), whereby, “planning is meant to be in the public interest, for the greater public good: this is a long-term view on things” (D04). However, given the case study properties house commercial ventures, there is an increased need for external facades to fulfil an expressive function, whereby the building

is to become an expression of what lies within. The need to articulate externally what is happening within means properties need to take on increasingly expressive roles. Rather than the traditional long view taken by local authority planners, given the record high volume of empty units, this raises questions about whether a shorter view is required, one more focussed on material forces: on enabling a building to be more of an expression of what lies within, rather than preserving the material form.

Assemblage thinking's focus on "material-forces rather than material-form" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) may be a potent way of thinking about repurposing schemes. However, the quote contains a key issue: that permitting the change was a gamble.

Resisting change

In terms of buildings/spaces resisting change, in the first instance, the years of accumulated clutter, alterations and sub-divisions of previous owners/occupiers could make it difficult to envision what can be done with a building (A02). The buildings can also be complicated to take accurate measurements of, for architects to work to, and full of quirks. For example, one property featured elevation changes on each floor and such quirks add to complexity and cost. Indeed, it was highlighted by a property owner that, "*everybody just assumes, from a physical perspective, that buildings are easily changed, and they're not ... you're always starting from a very inefficient scenario*" (D01). In light of this quote, Table 4 sets out the key ways the case study properties resisted change.

Table 4: built fabric is resistant to change

Difficulties extending/concerns about future plans to expand, current capacity soon fills up
Verticality
Fit for modern day purpose
○ Fire and safety improvements
○ Disabled access (accessibility)
○ Extraction/ventilation systems (cooking/indoor air quality)
○ Accommodating IT infrastructure
Conversion to multi-occupier
○ Access/egress
○ Timings – different opening/operating hours
○ Refuse requirements / servicing requirements / delivery requirements
○ Lack of storage space
○ Circulation of new users
Lack of ease of use of adjacent public space
Fulfilment of planning conditions, including the provision of secure covered cycle parking

All five repurposed properties now have catering facilities, and all five are in conservation areas, with stricter controls on external appearances. However, only one property has a service lane elevation, while for the others, their frontage is a public frontage creating the challenge of deciding the least sensitive elevation for accommodating such infrastructure (C04, E04):

"There were flues. Luckily, we had one side of the building that wasn't as visible and they were able to take it up one of the side walls where it didn't impact on its appearance as much, but there is a balance. You have to have a balance if you want to get it [the property] into active use or repurpose ... because, at the moment, obviously city centres are very much towards a mixed use ... [so] yes, you do end up with flues" (E04).

Even when accommodating the infrastructure internally is an option, in order to discharge at the roof level "you can't just whack it up through the internal floors because you've got ... [uses] above and all the space that would be available is already taken up" (C03). Moreover, it was highlighted that, in order to accommodate ductwork within the building, they would have "to drill through concrete, and it [the repurposing scheme] is the first floor of ... four floors ... so we would have had to go through the concrete floor each time which was two or three feet deep, and that's a huge job to run a two foot diameter pipe through that core" (C02), continuing that, "*we got around that by using – it sounds like Scooby Doo [laughing] – a disused lift shaft. So that's what we did*" (C02).

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