Repurposing retail space: exploring relationships through assemblage thinking

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28th ERES Conference, SDA Bocconi School of Management, Milan

The 'REPAIR' research project

- 'REPAIR': Real Estate, Place Adaptation and Innovation within an integrated Retailing system

  - A mixed method ESRC-funded project, across four Work Packages (2018-2022)

  - Identify and evaluate property related factors and landowners', occupiers' and place-makers' behaviours that affect the creation of diversity, innovation and, thus, adaptive capacity within retailing centres

Today's paper

"Repurposing retail space: exploring relationships through assemblage thinking"

- Retail sector is experiencing unprecedented change
  - Shifts in shopping behaviour; retailer rationalisation/failure
  - Patterns compounded by covid-19 pandemic and lockdowns
- City centres have a crucial economic and social role
  - Real estate vacancy rates are high and rising
  - Essential to bring back into effective and enduring use
- **Aim of the study**
  - **To identify and better understand 'what works' in the practice of <u>repurposing retail real estate</u> in UK city centres**

Conceptual framework

- Assemblage thinking is adopted to guide the study
  - It's a philosophical way of thinking, from Deleuze and Guattari (1980)
  - An assemblage is the bringing together and co-functioning of different things
  - Components may include: materials forms (persons, bodies, things), practices, knowledge, social organisations, forms of expression … (Rutzou and Elder-Vass, 2019)
  - Embraces processual nature of interactions and of making and unmaking
  - Components are heterogeneous, can 'unplug', and co-function in a way to generate a new entity
- Clear appeal to aid study of real estate change

Conceptual framework

- Assemblage thinking ….
  - …. sheds light on the dynamic processes involved in continual urban reformation (Hooman and McDonald, 2019)
  - … signifies the city not simply as an output or resultant formation, but as ongoing construction (McFarlane, 2011)
  - … emphasize provisional stabilisation, disassembly and reassembly (Baker and McGuirk, 2017)
  - … is useful in finding approaches already at play in cities (Hooman, 2014)

But also
  - … requires pragmatism to enable application for an empirical study

- To explore repurposing, focus: (i) human relationships; (ii) three key concepts
  - the planar frontier, 'the commons', labours of assemblage

Key concepts guiding study

- Planar frontier
  - Plan of immanence, where becomings emerge, assemblages begin
  - Plan of transcendence, plane of organisation, shapes behaviour through goals, standards
  - Focus is on relationships at the frontier, where new assemblages are shaped by organising structures

- 'the commons'
  - Component parts are diverse, hold together through common strategic purpose (Li, 2007, Savage, 2020)
  - Practice of interaction, care and cohabitation (Negri, 2006), common 'desire' (Bonta and Priteyi, 2004)

- Labours of assemblage
  - Components are heterogeneous and not required to shed their differences (Tampio, 2009)
  - An assemblage is a laboured-over achievement (Baker and McGuirk, 2017), "hard work" (Li, 2007)

Methods and Data

- The process of change in five case study retail repurposing schemes
  - UK northern, regional, significant cities: Edinburgh, Glasgow, Hull, Liverpool, Nottingham

- Multiple occupiers, mixed uses and/or innovative uses – 'difference' in High Street
  - Uses: comparison retailing, food & drink, high-density office, education, experiential attraction
  - Buildings: include large, prominent central locations, architecturally iconic

- 24 in-depth interviews across professional stakeholder groups
  - Owners, occupiers, planners (private and public sectors), economic development, local organisations, asset managers

- Thematic coding – codes, concepts, categories emerged inductively around the conceptual framework

Results: planar frontier

Planar frontier
- Inhibit
- Guardian
- Enable
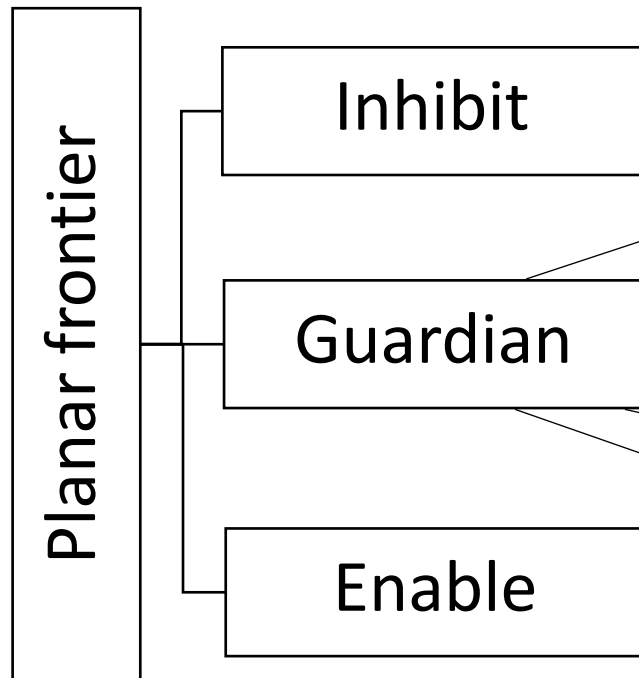
"maybe that some of the designations that the council has created around trying to protect retail is actually accelerating its demise" (Occup01)

"given a bit more flexibility and a little bit more freedom, we actually might be able to reinvigorate some of these high streets, attract more customers" (Occup02)

Importance of "economic, social, environmental outcomes as well as making things happen … not just putting up blockers" (EconDev01)

"you'd be normally looking out for protection of residential occupiers" (PublPlan03) … and …

residential "certainly complicates the picture for us … it does ask us a lot of questions about how we … how we might be able to or not be able to manage city centres and town centres going forward"

"and what was a massive enabler was the support from the council and more important from the planning department" (Occup03)

Results: 'the commons'

'the commons'

- Cooperative fabric
- Driving force
- Symbiotic relationship

shared values, honesty, caring, trust, good relationships, positive vibes, team working, and shared desire

desire towards seeing the building brought back into repair, into use, reopened and doing well (Owner01, Owner03, PrivPlan03, NonG01, NonG03)

the desire of one stakeholder, is often exhibited as stronger: this is *puissance*, the power to act, the desire to produce something or to make something happen – spans range of stakeholders

Owner03: "the most important thing we tried to achieve … was a partnership between landlord, tenant, operator and community"

"we are trying to create a community now, where it's a lot more about the interaction between the different uses in the building than before, where it was all about having the same uses in the building" (Owner04)

"a resident has a different expectation from an office user from a … from a retail operator, it's only natural" (Owner04) …"and that I believe is storing up problems for High Streets" (NonG04)

Results: Labours

Labours of assemblage

Burden

Support
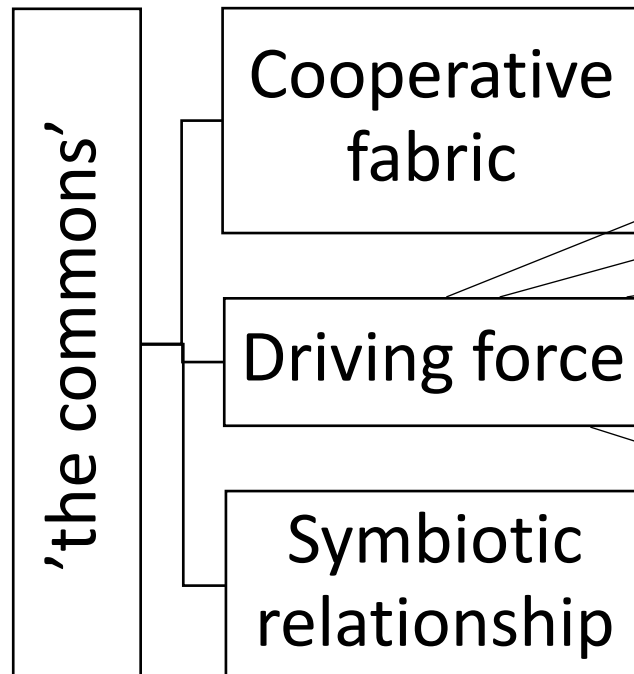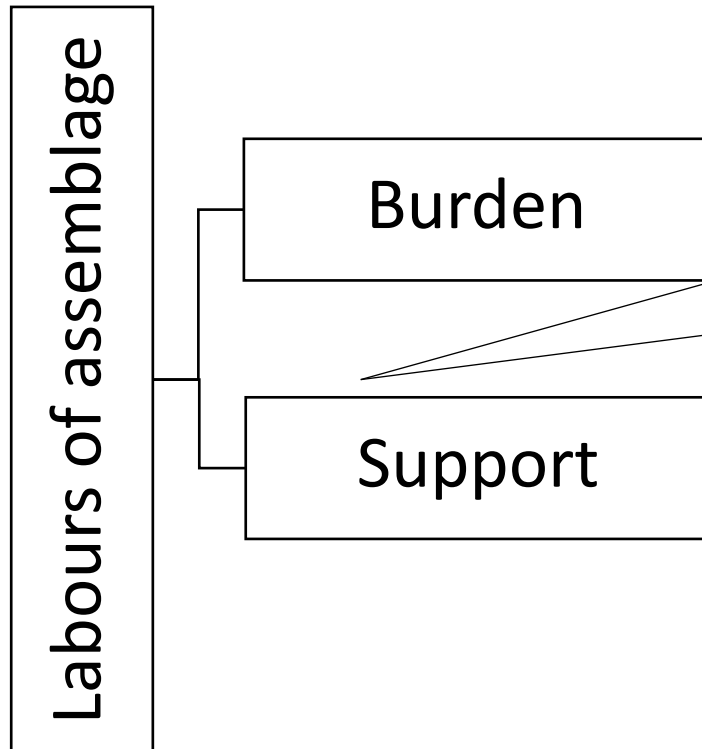
The majority of references towards feeling the burden are from owners … the risks are not shared equally …. every other stakeholder is able to 'unplug' with less (financial) loss

Owner03: "it's been a tremendous amount of work and cost, and lots of belief and commitment from everyone, especially the … owner" and it "has been one of the biggest challenges of my career to date".

Facilitating the work of the developer:
- seeking negotiations and compromise, which worked very well (PublPlan03)
- brokering relationships to make it as easy as possible for the scheme to go ahead (EconDev05)
- working to support and enable the developer to continue, making the process as smooth as possible (EconDev01)

Conclusions

- Focus on repurposing of vacant high street properties, bring them back into productive and sustainable use, enable positive change within high streets, to enhance adaptive capacity and improve resilience

- Despite some relaxation of regulations (in England), a more fundamental update to city centre planning policies could help invigorate central areas
  - **Shared desire**: Allowing the business community a role to pursue their developmental priorities through establishing their own planning policies, mitigate risk, share the role of 'guardian'
  - **Mixed use**: Symbiotic relationships can generate a new entity for a repurposed property, create a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts, bringing business success, employment opportunities, positive spill-over effects for the local area. Extrapolate to the high street level
  - **Relaxation**: Easing some restrictions, such as relating to signage and seating, may increase footfall and vibrancy

- Caution: recommend research into incorporation of residential uses in the repurposing of retailing areas to mitigate conflict and enhance enduring, positive change