Assembling placemaking: making and remaking place in a regenerating city

Jill Sweeney  
*University of Newcastle*

Kathy Mee  
*University of Newcastle*

Pauline M. McGuirk  
*University of Wollongong*, pmcguirk@uow.edu.au

Kristian J. Ruming  
*Macquarie University*

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Assembling placemaking: the making and remaking of place in the regeneration of the post-industrial city

Authors

Jill Sweeney¹, Kathy Mee¹, Pauline McGuirk² and Kristian Ruming³

¹ Department of Geography and Environmental Studies, University of Newcastle, Australia
² School of Geography and Sustainable Communities, University of Wollongong, Australia
³ Department of Geography and Planning, Macquarie University, Australia

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Abstract

Placemaking is increasingly drawn upon by planners, city authorities and citizens as a means of reclaiming, remaking and regenerating urban space. Yet understandings of placemaking and the work it may entail can vary markedly. Often, planning discourse and placemaking literature conceive of placemaking as a singular material change to a landscape, a project that is complete once installation has finished. In contrast, we see placemaking as an open-ended achievement, constituted through diverse and dynamic assemblages, and realised through a multiplicity of post-installation labours. We draw on a case study of Newcastle, Australia, to highlight these labours, the affective, contingent work which brings together the human and non-human, the material and social, and the enduring and ephemeral, to make place. Through three citizen-led placemaking projects in Newcastle, we elucidate the importance of these assembling labours, and argue for a more nuanced understanding of placemaking, its multiple and sometimes transient outcomes, and the role diverse placemaking efforts may play in regenerating the city.

Keywords

Placemaking, urban regeneration, assemblage, DIY urbanism, Newcastle
Introduction

For the past two decades the city of Newcastle, Australia, has been the subject of innumerable plans, reports and meetings as state and local governments, citizens and interest groups have attempted to transition the city from former steel-making town to vibrant, service-oriented and knowledge economy hub (Ruming et al. 2016). Indeed, the discussion and planning has been so plentiful (and so seemingly ineffective) over this period that it has become a source of immense frustration for residents; as one commentator wryly noted, ‘the redevelopment of Newcastle is three to five years away and always has been’ (Key Informant Interview). Yet a glance around the inner city today reveals that change is underway and, more interestingly, that it is being driven not only by formal regeneration schemes but by a remarkable diversity of small-scale, citizen-informed placemaking projects designed to improve, enliven and redefine the spaces of the city. Fuelled by the success of the temporary urbanism initiative Renew Newcastle, a local government focus on achievable, low-budget change and a concomitant swell of activity amongst community groups, artists, businesses and residents have seen placemaking projects flourish (Westbury 2016; Gentle and M²Guirk, forthcoming). This in itself is not an unusual story. A number of cities attempting to navigate a path through post-industrial transition also have citizens eager to take up paintbrushes, gardening trowels, and coffeemakers in order to do something in their local community. Our account of placemaking in Newcastle augments this story in two key ways. First, it uses the lens of assemblage to reveal the great diversity of elements, connections and labours (McFarlane 2011) which come together to produce placemaking, and to highlight the many human and non-human agencies, materialities, ideas, regulatory technologies and significantly, absences, which have been assembled in Newcastle to produce such things as community gardens, festivals, markets, small bars, workshops and public art. An assemblage lens enables us to view the ‘material, actual and assembled’ (Farias 2009:15) elements that constitute these projects as well as the work that brings those elements into conversation with each other.

Second, and as a consequence, the paper offers an assembled understanding of placemaking that reflects its open-ended and indeterminate nature. We view placemaking as an ongoing achievement, never a finished product, where the labour of placemaking continues long after the initial project has been installed. This labour is sometimes iterative, sometimes ephemeral, and it is central to the way placemaking acts to revitalise urban locales. In developing this account we draw upon three specific placemaking projects produced in Newcastle: Hit the Bricks, a street-art festival that ran in 2013 and 2014; the Darby Street Community Garden, a pocket park created on a busy inner-city street; and Keys to the City, a project which installed second-hand pianos in public places. These case studies are drawn from a research project investigating formal and informal processes of urban regeneration in Newcastle and surrounds. Data for the project was gathered through extensive media and document analysis, participant observation at community consultations, public meetings and regeneration events, and a wide range of interviews with residents and key informants sourced from the organisations, groups and agencies strongly associated with urban change and renewal in Newcastle.

An overarching purpose of this paper is to bring assemblage thinking to placemaking, as a way of opening out how we understand the role of placemaking in urban regeneration. As such, we focus first on two of the case studies – Hit the Bricks and the Darby Street Community Garden – to draw out the diverse labours of placemaking projects, including the post-installation labour of maintaining and re-performing those projects beyond their original assembling. We argue that this labour
involves not only the sourcing and organising of people and materials, but also practices of noticing, observing, feeling and communicating, and through these bringing together disparate elements to make and remake place. Thus there is a vital affective component to the act of placemaking and the assembling of placemaking projects. To build on this theme we shift our focus to the *Keys to the City* project, which highlights the deeply contingent nature of placemaking efforts and the necessity of affective practice to reproduce, enliven and even transform the intent of a project. *Keys to the City* allows us to consider what happens when an assemblage changes, when important elements of the whole are modified or removed. Thus in the final empirical section of the paper the role of presence and absence within an assemblage is explored, illuminating the ways in which the labouring of assemblage creates diverse subjectivities and embeds people within the changing socio-material landscape of the city, giving rise to ever-evolving forms of placemaking work.

**Assemblage thinking and placemaking**

In drawing on assemblage thinking we are cognisant of its potential for generating a more nuanced theorising of placemaking. Recent years have seen a flurry of interest in the assemblage approach, which has increasingly been applied to the conceptualisation of cities; Dovey (2012:354) defines an urban assemblage as being ‘formed from the interconnectivity and flows between constituent parts [...] it is the flows of life, traffic, goods and money that give the street its intensity and its emergent sense of place. From this view all cities and parts of cities are assemblages’ (2012:353). More particularly, Farias (2011:369) argues that assemblage thinking enables us to ‘make sense of processes of construction by which cities, urban phenomena and urban life are constituted.’ These processes are multi-scalar and varied, involving the human and the non-human, the social and the material. They incorporate relationships and labour that are performed continually to bring the diverse constitutive elements of the assemblage together (McFarlane 2011). McFarlane (2011:209) argues that assemblage ‘places emphasis on the depth and potentiality of urban sites, processes and actors in terms of their histories, the labour required to produce them and their inevitable capacity to exceed the sum of their connections’. Through this ongoing labour, the city is seen to be ‘alive and brimming with movements, practices, performances and contingencies’ (Smith 2003: 38), and further, it is seen to be alive with the potential for multiple urban trajectories (McGuirk et al. 2016). Thus, an assemblage lens highlights the variety of elements that shape space, and the diverse urban places, forms and processes they may engender. We understand placemaking as the work of assembling, the generating of affect and performing of practices which serve to connect heterogeneous elements and draw them together into conversation, to produce and maintain a particular coherence; to make place.

In this paper we are particularly inspired by Anderson (2012) in considering places as unstable relational coherences. Anderson explicates this using the example of a surfed wave, suggesting that the ocean, the surfer, the board, the wax, and the shore must all be actively brought together through the practice of surfing for the surfed wave as place to emerge: ‘The place of the surfed wave is generated through practice; it is only through the act of surfing that the surfed wave exists’ (2012:576). The action then is the connecting force, the assembling of the components of the surfed wave that enables not only the energetic materialities of the ocean and the body to come together but also the skills, experience and effort of the surfer. Also present are the surfer’s not-knowing, the gaps and unpredictabilities of experiential labour. The surfed wave as place thus becomes, coheres, and even dissipates as the assembled elements change, as the wave flattens or the surfer wipes out. Over time and with the iteration of many waves and many surfers, the broader liminal space of the coastline also coheres as a place, shifting with each addition or subtraction from the assemblage.
Our interest then is not just on ‘the material, actual and assembled’ but also on ‘the emergent, the processual and the multiple’ (Farías 2009:15). Drawing on assemblage thinking in this way reveals the importance of repeated practice, of labour, in connecting placemaking and place.

There is no singular, widely accepted definition of placemaking, though it is generally understood as a process of reshaping space in order to make it more appealing and useable, and to generate a sense of place. As Buizer and Turnhout (2011) note, the process of placemaking is situated, differing in each place it is performed (see also Laszczkowski 2015). In planning practice and popular urban design, where in recent years the notion has enjoyed a great deal of attention, placemaking is often uncritically portrayed as an accepted ‘good’, a necessary and expected ingredient for redevelopment and the reorienting of a landscape towards improved capital accumulation; as Jones and Evans describe, “good” design is now seen as the route towards good place making, with all the attendant risks of environmental determinism’ (2012:2319). O’Rourke and Baldwin (2016:103) suggest that placemaking is seen as a process ‘involving people in how their public spaces look, feel and operate to discover what they want and expect from a space’, which implies a level of deliberation and consultation, something planned and executed rather than emerging more organically. Relatedly, Shaw and Montana (2014) see placemaking as a term that evokes positive images while being used for a variety of agendas. They trace a renewed interest in placemaking following the emergence of creative cities policies in the 1990s, when placemaking shifted from being seen as a community development initiative to become part of ‘citywide strategic planning policies’ (2014:168), including concerted efforts to make cities creative, liveable and above all, competitive. Pollock and Paddison (2014) particularly note the heavy focus on cultural economy and the ‘creative class’ within the placemaking regeneration literature, which suggests the extent to which placemaking has now been enrolled into neoliberalised schemes of urban redevelopment and gentrification.

Yet placemaking is perhaps best understood as an umbrella term encompassing two distinct, if related, conceptualisations: formal practices of urban planning and redevelopment, and informal practices such as those sometimes identified as DIY urbanism (Iveson 2013), tactical urbanism (Lydon and Garcia 2015), or everyday urbanism (Chase, Crawford and Kaliski 2008). Formal placemaking, incorporated into state-led regeneration agendas and plans, manifests materially as significantly redeveloped public spaces, new retail and entertainment options, and urban spaces fashionably finished with public art, street furniture, and fresh precinct branding (Barnes et al. 2006). In such cases ‘place’ is defined through the assembling of planning discourses and regulation, artists’ impressions, public announcements, political expediency, consumer preferences and community consultations – these being unequally influential elements – and as a result this form of placemaking emerges ahead of community use, enacted as a ‘managerial technique’ (Fincher et al. 2016:517) rather than a locally-embedded response to the needs and desires of everyday living in urban space.

In contrast, informal or DIY urbanism is frequently characterised by smaller-scale, grassroots spatial practices which challenge the optic of precinct level regeneration projects. Finn (2014:381) notes that these activities are ‘often innovative, sophisticated, and low-cost solutions to difficult or unaddressed urban problems.’ Here, a varied and unpredictable array of groups, small businesses, microcapital flows, local relationships and ad hoc materialities may be assembled to produce dynamic interventions that are responsive to the evolving needs of citizens in place. This type of placemaking in particular has a ‘feel good’ factor (Fincher et al. 2016:518) that may generate an empowering sense of involvement for residents, particularly in the context of a neoliberalising urbanism that encourages residents to engage with their environment primarily through practices of well-ordered consumption. Informal placemaking projects may be strongly informed by activist
movements (Spartaro 2016) and retain an everyday political performativity as citizens appropriate and intervene in the urban fabric in ways governments may be seen as incapable or undesirous of doing. Yet the politics of placemaking vary, emerging from diverse assemblages and contexts, and cannot be defined according to whether a project fits within a formal or informal approach.

Indeed, these two conceptualisations of placemaking, formal and informal, are by no means exclusive or neatly separable. Fabian and Samson (2016) for instance argue that planners and urban designers have shown increasing interest in DIY urbanism. And as can be seen in our case studies, formal planning and citizen placemaking can become enmeshed on the ground in complex ways. The Newcastle City Council has been instrumental in enabling many small-scale citizen-driven projects to occur, playing a supportive role through regimes of funding and guidance, including the establishment of a small grant scheme for community placemaking initiatives.

Notably, this support from council reflects a broader enthusiasm for small-scale placemaking within the city. While many aspects of Newcastle’s urban regeneration were hotly contested (see for example, Ruming et al. 2016), the placemaking projects we write about here were not contested on race, class or other human grounds. Rather, they were widely supported by the residents we interviewed and by the spectrum of community, business, media and government actors involved in regeneration in Newcastle. Our political interest in these projects thus does not stem from grounds of contestation but from assemblage thinking’s concern with ‘the capacity of events to disrupt patterns, generate new encounters with people and objects, and invent new connections and ways of inhabiting everyday urban life’ (McFarlane 2011:209). As Ruddick (2012) notes, assemblages do not have a pre-given politics; rather we can understand their power as emergent and contingent, leading to assemblages which may be emancipatory or oppressive.

Assembling Placemaking Projects: Hit the Bricks and the Darby Street Community Garden

Hit the Bricks was a street art festival that ran in Newcastle in 2013 and 2014. Developed and run by a trio of artists associated with local design group Look Hear, it was one of a number of projects that Look Hear created to foster creative opportunities for artists and designers, particularly those just starting out in the industry. Thus, to begin with, placemaking was not high on their list of motivations. For Hit the Bricks, between 20-30 street artists from Australia and overseas were invited to come to Newcastle and paint murals on brick walls around the inner city over the course of a weekend (Figure 1).

In its first run especially, the festival was highly experimental, as the organisers were new to producing this type of event. As one organiser, Steve, said,

> I went into it blind, and that was okay. Because I kind of thought, this is what I think should happen, and the other guys helping out, too, they brought in their own special flavour to it... we did what we thought would work, which would be just to talk to people that we already knew. Some people knew what we were doing and they offered walls to us. We talked to paint suppliers and we said, can you give us a good deal, things like that...It was pretty basic, pretty roots based.

The festival was thus strongly informed by Steve’s (and his co-producers’) not-knowing, and their subsequent openness to the process of experimenting, acting on untested ideas, and learning from the results. The experiential labour undertaken during the assembling of the project was a key element shaping the second run of the festival in 2014. By 2014, having seen both the success of the
festival and the highly positive reception from the local and broader artistic communities, Look Hear’s rationale shifted to target placemaking more directly: ‘We want to encourage people who live here to get out of their cars, get on their bikes and have a look at their city, to notice things they’ve never seen before, to re-engage,’ said one of the organisers (Gregory 2014).

Figure 1: Hit the Bricks festival in progress, 2014. Source: Simone De Peak/Fairfax Syndication. Note the top right image, which depicts artist Guido van Helten painting what became a beloved, if short-lived, mural. For more images from the festival, see the album in the Newcastle Herald: http://www.theherald.com.au/story/2662884/hit-the-bricks-scale-points-to-a-vibrant-city/#slide=1

Hit the Bricks required significant labour to bring together the diverse, and geographically dispersed, component parts that constituted the festival. Operational elements of labour included researching, contacting, funding and organising accommodation for the artists, some of whom were flown in from overseas. Paintable walls had to be sourced from owners of houses and commercial buildings, which involved meeting with building owners, understanding and complying with state heritage and
local government regulations, and working through possible artist-wall combinations, where the immediate material environment, the road infrastructure, the general use of the area, the styles of the participating artists and the owners’ artistic preferences were brought into relation with one another. Large quantities of spray paint had to be bought, if possible with the aid of a discount or sponsorship by paint suppliers, and heavy equipment such as scaffolding and scissor lifts was hired. The costs of this were covered in part through participation fees paid by wall owners.

There were also facilitative elements to be assembled, and in this the Newcastle City Council played a key role, helping the organisers to meet public liability and heritage requirements. Council also helped the organisers to cord off streets during the painting. The organisers liaised with local businesses to encourage them to engage proactively with the festival, to put out shop wares, provide coffee or music, and help to capitalise on the event. Look Hear was also responsible for event promotion including updating social media and giving media interviews, and finally, overseeing and managing the wide variety of activities, sites and participants in action on the day. This included helping artists and their support crews to deal with unexpected elements – in 2014, for instance, the festival was held on a November weekend when a usually-temperate Spring visited scorching heat and high winds upon the city – not ideal when the majority of artists were painting with aerosols.

Steve encapsulated his initial idea of this long and complex process as ‘just get[ting] some walls and get[ting] some people to paint them’. Yet it is clear even from a brief summary that the project involved a great deal of labour in assembling the necessary actors, materialities and agencies from within and outside of Newcastle, and in bringing them together in a way which enabled the ideas of the project to flourish materially within the city. The festival neatly highlights the labours of placemaking and the way they may involve a wide diversity of groups, some with a primary focus on the placemaking activity and others who are involved in a more peripheral, yet still valuable, way.

Similar themes can be seen in our second case study, the Darby Street Community Garden (Figure 2). A pocket park located on the most popular café/independent shopping street in inner Newcastle, it features flowering and edible plants that are free to sample and offers people the opportunity to sit, hold small gatherings, or do some gardening.
The garden was created to activate a small corner plot that was perceived locally as a neglected space, one that had become overgrown with weeds and littered with rubbish. The initial push for the garden came from the Darby Street Traders Association, who sourced a landscape designer to plan and manage the project. Newcastle City Council then awarded the project $2000 from its formal placemaking small grant scheme, and more significant donations in money, materials and labour were given by local businesses, the local Business Improvement Association Newcastle NOW, tradespeople, residents, and the national employment agency Jobfind.

The designer of the garden, James, highlighted this variety of materials and actors who laboured together to assemble the garden:

[W]e had a scenario set up through Newcastle NOW which was where we got Jobfind to come in and actually build the project. They brought their own budget for materials and a supervisor and labour... There's [also] a landscape supplier at Beresfield... we paid for our materials but they did the deliveries for free and lot of things like that, that we really relied upon to get it across the line. Similarly with electricians they did a bit of work on the cheap for us. And the arbour structure; Tom, he did that nice and cheap with a stone seat and he donated his time to do that. Same with Jo with the mural on the wall. I called upon all my friends, industry people to turn up.

This early work was contingent upon the diverse social network of friends and industry contacts that James was able to mobilise. Meanwhile, the physical form of the garden emerged from a mix of both sought and unexpected materials that were able to be sourced for free, such as recycled timber from former railway sleepers from Sydney Trains (Figure 2).
Like Hit the Bricks, the Darby Street Community Garden points to the ways that placemaking projects occur through the configuration of a wide variety of assemblages that reach across multiple scales; and that the project’s installation, its footprint on the ground, is highly contingent, shaped by such things as tenuous networks, goodwill, labour in-kind, small grants and material regimes in distant locations (such as the replacing and recycling of railways sleepers in Sydney, a 90 minute drive south of Newcastle). As a garden, it also potently suggests that the labours of placemaking do not end once the project installation is complete.

**Making Place**

The maintenance of the Darby Street Community Garden and its evolution as a placemaking site required continuing labour, and the assembling of a different set of socio-material agencies. James spoke a number of times about the unexpected workload involved in making and maintaining the garden, and the range of people and things who wove in and out of the garden-as-place. He said:

> There’s Simon who lives across the road, he comes down and waters it all the time and he takes all those beautiful photos of the sunflowers. There’s Liesel, she helps out with the watering and she also does our newsletters. Nina made some Christmas cards for us and we sold them. She's looking at having a scarecrow-building workshop within the garden later on.

In this quotation in particular we can see the importance of visualising, performing and communicating the garden and its constituent elements to the broader public, through the use of photographs, newsletters, cards and eye-catching scarecrows. The continued labours of making place in the garden thus stretch out into the surrounding community, moving beyond the official workers to also incorporate the efforts of those who make donations, who come to infrequent working bees, who attend the workshops and importantly, those who pass by and stop to sit in the garden, do some digging or liberate a sprig of basil to take home with them. Each time these activities are performed, the place of the community garden is (re)assembled and its contribution to the regeneration of inner Newcastle is reproduced – if in unpredictable form.
Not only was there unexpected work for James and the others involved in the garden (including the management of surprising elements, such as a tree discovered to be dripping mildly toxic sap), there remained a strong component of indeterminacy about what the garden is and what it will be or can be as place.

James expressed this as a kind of lingering uncertainty, saying,

I guess we feared a little bit that at the start it felt like we'd planted all this stuff, people came and took it and we just planted again and people are going to take it. It felt like we were almost like just farming to sustain these people, who we didn't know who they were, who were just coming, and taking things. It seems like maybe it's going to go that way, maybe that's how this garden is best to work, we're not sure.

His lack of surety highlights the open-ended nature of placemaking. How people will use the garden, how they will enact and engage with it over time, and how the garden will evolve through these processes are things that cannot be known, yet they are vital aspects of making place in the garden. This openness points to the inherent indeterminacy in all aspects of placemaking projects.

_Hit the Bricks_ was also shot through with indeterminacy, and thus unpredictability. Key components of the assemblage could not be foreseen, including not only what the artists painted but how it would be received, who would see it, and how their work might be altered in the time to come. Each site was transformed as the festival unfolded: as the sites became streets of public art. But more than this, the work of making place continued after the artists had gone home and the paint cans were thrown away. Steve and his co-organisers followed up the festival by producing a map (again, sponsored and made available through local businesses) of the location of all the artworks, encouraging people to walk around the city and visit each mural (Figure 3), and it is in this activity that we find a second, vital stage of placemaking: much like Anderson’s (2012) surfed wave, the work of the festival results in the observed wall:

Like the Darby Street carpark, where Tristan Eaton’s artwork is, that’s become a bit of a landmark. It was a bit of a dead space, and so the owners of the apartments there got together and said that they wanted a painting there. So we got one of the best artists that we could find, put him there, and then all of a sudden it’s transformed the area into, I don’t know, something more welcoming, it’s got personality now, it’s inviting. I’ve walked past, and I heard people commenting on how it’s changed the whole atmosphere of that area. (Interview, Steve).

These murals become a key element in making place when they are observed, when they are admired (or disliked), when they’re photographed and shared online, when someone does the work of relating the constituent elements of the site: the design of the mural, the colours, the wall, the urban street. The painting alone does not give the site personality or a welcoming atmosphere; the diverse phenomena of the site do, when the work of assembling them is carried out.

We can understand placemaking then as an iterative activity; not just a material transformation of space, but also a practice of noticing, of bringing to bear the onlooker’s awareness, their emotions, their immediate experience of the material presences of the site – and assembling these in the moment, and through activity. As Steve said, ‘[Walls] recede so much. The city in general recedes, unless there's something there to grab your attention.’
This enrolls a much wider array of labours into placemaking than traditional accounts would suggest. People who pass by and pluck something from the garden, or photograph a mural, are helping to enact a particular assemblage; and as part of this, they are generating new encounters, connections and ways of inhabiting urban life, as McFarlane (2011) suggests. We explore this post-installation labouring further in our third case study, the Keys to the City project.

**Presence and Absence: enacting work through Keys to the City**

*Keys to the City* is a community-driven placemaking initiative which restored old pianos and placed them at public sites throughout inner Newcastle, encouraging people to play, see and share music. Started by a local artist and his son, the project was supported financially and administratively by the *Newcastle NOW* Business Improvement Association, with Newcastle City Council facilitating the project’s implementation on the ground through such things as consultation and granting of permissions to place pianos in particular locations. The pianos themselves were sourced through friends, ‘asking around’ and via the selling and exchange website Gumtree. Eight second-hand upright pianos were installed in the city in November, 2014. Each had been restored and professionally tuned, transported to a council-approved site and bolted to the ground, ready for whatever form of engagement would occur. Thus, a diverse set of materialities, policies and actors were assembled to bring the project into being, including the pianos, a range of community members who offered the instruments (each with an interesting backstory), local government regulations, as well as the particularities of the chosen sites. The planning and organisational labour this necessitated contrasted strongly with the organic genesis of the project, as the artist, Sam, recalled:

> It came about because I’ve got a workshop and a friend unexpectedly turned up with a piano they didn’t want... Then I mentioned it to somebody else, later that day and they said, oh, I
know somebody who's got a piano they don't want. So we ended up having that one and we thought, well what are we going to do with all these pianos?

As with our previous examples, it was a necessarily open-ended adventure, in which the relationships, agencies and materialities involved could not be wholly anticipated. This is ably demonstrated through the different experiences of the pianos themselves -- one was destroyed by one or more people early on, and another was damaged by rain which unexpectedly found its way through a gap in an awning. Since their first installation, some of the pianos have disappeared from their original location and reappeared elsewhere. In another instance, the pianos were part of a roving jam session when an enterprising group of friends organised a ‘piano crawl’ (through a part of town once more famous for its pub crawls), calling for interested musicians, singers, dancers and onlookers to join in. The group’s facebook invitation read, ‘the randomness of the day will be something to enjoy. You can’t plan this kind of thing, it just happens like it should.’ (Pianos in the Streets Newcastle 2014)

Perhaps out of all of our placemaking examples, it is Keys to the City which most clearly elucidates the importance of post-installation labour – of placemaking as an ongoing achievement emerging in concert with the continued labours of assembling. Even before a hand is laid upon the keys, the piano is an agential artefact. The pianos themselves are a quiet presence within the cityscape until they are played, but they are a presence, and an active one; their cleaned-up, retuned, hopeful existence in the everyday urban environment provokes a redefining of the socio-material landscape in ways both tangible and imaginary. Similarly to the observed murals discussed above, the project, and the places that can emerge from the assembling of these diverse elements, are most fully realised through the played pianos, and it is in this labour that the possibilities of the assemblage begin to take shape.

Note this encounter described by one resident, Kimberly, after a walk along Newcastle’s Hunter Street:

[I]t was here that I came upon a scruffy young girl tinkling [the] keys and playing beautifully. She executed a jaunty tune very well and was obviously enjoying herself, her wide smile testament to the joy of the moment. It was a mutual musical exchange; I loved her playing and she loved to play. When she’d finished I applauded and then tried unsuccessfully to involve her in some chit-chat, but she wasn’t interested. Off she went without a word, padding decisively in her bare feet and heading west toward Stewart Avenue... She left me in her wake with a myriad of back story questions: where did she come from and where was she going? And how did this little unaccompanied urchin learn to play so well? (O’Sullivan 2014)

The assembling labours that situated the piano there within a particular socio-material context, and later enacted this player and this listener together gives rise to a place of ephemeral encounter, joy and curiosity. However, although the encounter itself was fleeting, the placemaking work performed there was not. Along with pianos and people and local government regulations and fine weather, various temporalities are part of the assemblage of placemaking. They shift through the site and the affective experiences that both give rise to and arise from the creation of place. In Kimberly’s account above, we see this in the moment of joy, as the girl played, and in the moment that followed, where Kimberly was left with a lingering curiosity and an open-ended not-knowing. The questions generated through that encounter continued to ‘make place’ well after Kimberly had left the site and recounted her story. The story itself then becomes part of the assemblage, reproducing and enlivening the particular place Kimberly experienced – and co-assembled – on that day.
The pianos thus ‘enact work’ (Franklin 2014:19)—the ongoing labour of assembling place—catalysing the further assembling of actors (the musician, the listener, the onlooker and the storyteller), materialities and opportunities to co-create the potentialities of urban sites (McFarlane 2011). As Laszczkowski argues, ‘assemblages of specific things make places different, or make different places, giving rise to divergent identifications’ (2015:149).

Remaking Place

A key element of placemaking is thus its open-ended and contingent nature. Placemaking is a dynamic experience, through which people, practice and the materiality of place undergo constant change. This was plainly captured by the experience of one of the well-loved Hit the Bricks murals. Painted by artist Guido van Helten, the piece occupied a highly visible space in inner Newcastle alongside a set of traffic lights in a busy part of town (Figure 4). Approximately 18 months after its painting, the mural was covered over with black paint in July 2016. Local newspaper, the Newcastle Herald reported that the owner of the wall had it repainted due to maintenance issues. A community group, Newcastle Art Station, shared the mural’s obliteration on their Facebook page saying, ‘So completely bereft and devastated to witness this being painted over charcoal black’ (Newcastle Art Station 2016). People shared the story on various social media platforms, expressing disbelief and anger (see Figure 4). A day after the event was reported, someone had spray-painted a stark ‘WHY?’ on the newly-blank wall (see Figure 5).

Figure 4: Before. Screenshot from Instagram featuring Guido van Helten’s mural (Source: Creative Village Newcastle Instagram 2016)
Like many cities, Newcastle has something of a history of having conversations about the identity of the city via spray-painted walls (see McFarlane (2011:209) on the importance of ‘overlapping histories in producing habits of practice’ which are critical to the labours of assembling). Perhaps the most (locally) well-known example of this involved the derelict Latec House that once stood on Hunter Street, the main thoroughfare through the city. Ten storeys high with broad white sides providing a highly visible canvas, the building had the phrase ‘one perfect day’ painted on one side and ‘THIS IS NOT ART’ painted on the other. Unknown locals created the graffiti as either provocation or appeal to the residents of Newcastle, and the phrases became widely known and valued as an evocative landmark, part of the socio-material fabric of the city and its people. The phrases were covered when the building was renovated into an apartment block some years later, but the graffiti continues to linger in the city in various ways through the work that goes into reproducing them. They are still evoked in conversation, through photography shared online, and as the inspiration for the popular This Is Not Art multi-media festival.

Now irretrievably covered, the Guido van Helten mural has become a similarly present absence in the socio-material assembling of place and placemaking in inner Newcastle. A key element of the assemblage has changed, causing the whole of the assemblage – including the placemaking labour being undertaken – to change as well, giving rise to new affective experiences of place and new ways of performing the site as a place where something of value used to be. In responding to the painting over of the mural, numerous people made references to how they used to engage with the site, with one saying he had ‘admired it everyday when I lived at Wickham’, and another that she had ‘driven by that many, many times and always wanted the lights to be red when I did!!!’ The mural was highlighted for its positive affect on passers-by: ‘The painting was so calming while waiting at the lights’ (Newcastle Art Station 2016). These reflections were prompted specifically by the absence of the artwork, rather than its presence: at least in part, the bodily affective work performed with the mural to assemble place was only realised after the repainting had occurred.
Although similar in material form, the newly-blank wall does not perform the same agency as the original blank wall. The intervening labours -- the painting (and re-painting) and observing -- have transformed the wall, and now serve to enable and actualise new forms and purposes of labour in concert with other elements of the assemblage, such that the blank wall now enacts particular kinds of assembling work for a frustrated onlooker, for the act of remembering the mural while waiting at the lights, or for a renewed push for public art to be valued differently in a regenerating Newcastle.

Thus we can understand both the mural and the wall (in its various stages of renewal) as agents in an open-ended and multilayered process, agents that fuel and help piece together emergent and iterative experiences of place as well as enabling the creation of diverse, embedded subjectivities wrought by the labour of placemaking. This labour embeds actors within the landscape, assembling the materials, imaginaries and moments which together actualise specific and often repeatable forms of living, and through these actions connect people to the changing material stuff of the city. These new subjectivities expand what it means to be a resident in Newcastle as it undergoes -- and they participate in -- processes of urban regeneration.

**Conclusion: Assembling Urban Regeneration through Placemaking**

The placemaking projects discussed in this paper are characterised primarily by work on the ground -- work to assemble, through the bringing together of supplies, sites, actors and governing technologies, and work to make place, through the ongoing performances which bring life to the sites, which create gardens and art districts and streets of encounter. As seen in our examples, that post-installation labour is chiefly performed by residents who repeatedly encounter, assemble and reproduce diverse ideas of the project, whether it be through gardening, noticing or storytelling, or many other forms of activity. Through this labour they engage with complex socio-material coherences which enable them to make place.

Assemblage thinking allows us to see the vital connections between all of these things -- the plants, the garden, the walls; designers and storytellers and passers-by; local regulatory regimes, local government funding and heritage registers, to name only a few -- and how they are brought together to create larger wholes. That the ‘wholes’ created are necessarily indeterminate, unstable and changing is apparent given the uncertain nature of the discrete components of the assemblage: all engagements, performances and materialities are ephemeral. Yet there is enough stability, laboriously held together, to enable a certain level of coherence. In the case of the Darby Street Community Garden, the material stuff of the garden is able to be maintained through the work of nurturing the soil, replanting, and seeking donations. The work of engaging the community through Facebook, workshops, newsletters, signs and Christmas cards also performs a similar nurturing of gardeners and supporters. Through all of these activities the community garden is constantly (re)assembled, an ongoing and thus changing achievement, a thing in evolution.

The dynamic nature of *Hit the Bricks* was powerfully underscored by the painting-over of the van Helten mural. Yet it too coheres, as an idea emerging from a great deal of assembling work, and as a material manifestation of that idea with which people engage and perform the work of regenerating Newcastle through their presence in the inner city, their photography, their excitement. This work, the ongoing labour that makes and regenerates place, is a vital and overlooked component of both placemaking and urban regeneration, one which is thrown into relief when we turn our attention to the assemblage itself.
In the case of *Keys to the City*, assemblage thinking admits not only the great variety of more-than-human things that come together to produce the project, but also the agency and activity that must occur in order to make sense of that project, to turn the situating of pianos in the streets into the playing and hearing of music, and importantly, into the player and listener. In undertaking the work of playing the pianos or audiencing, people inhabit certain subjectivities which are translocal, both embedded (enacted within the site) and mobile (travel with them beyond the site).

Assemblage thinking therefore shows us not only the connections but the connecting, the labour of placemaking and regeneration which continues long after the planned installation or renovation has occurred. It helps us to map the socio-material coherences which grow in complexity over time, and reminds us that when we talk about what placemaking does, we must talk not only about material transformations and new social performativities, but also the way these occur through time with the agencies of non-humans and the labour of people; indeed, the ways in which places are living coherences which evolve and are renewed through encounter, connection and iteration.

This perspective has implications for the ways in which we understand urban regeneration. There is something of a ‘build it and they will come’ assumption folded into formal placemaking and regeneration efforts, where the focus often lies on the planning and construction stages and after which the placemaking may be considered to be complete. From there it may be judged a success or failure, depending upon whether people use it for its intended purpose, and whether it attracts people and their disposable income in greater numbers. Yet placemaking and urban regeneration are not singular events, produced once to change the city. They are assemblages, always in the process of being (re)created. The socio-economic vitality which in planning discourse is such a longed-for object is to be found not in the creation of shopping boulevards or entertainment precincts, but in the work performed afterwards to make them something more than a material eruption within the landscape.

To return to Anderson (2012), from an assemblage point of view, placemaking is the ocean, the wind, the board and the surfer actively coming together to make the surfed wave. In an urban milieu, it is a multitude of actors, ideas, processes, agencies and things which, once assembled as a socio-material outcome, relies on further practices of being noticed, felt and transformed in order to ensure an impactful and ongoing role in the remaking and regeneration of the city. To echo Steve’s comment, the city recedes, unless there’s something there to grab your attention.

**References**


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