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Assembling urban regeneration? Resourcing critical generative accounts of urban regeneration through assemblage

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Abstract

In critical urban studies, managed urban regeneration has been linked to trajectories of neo-liberalising urban policy and urban entrepreneurialism. While the insights arising from this work have been many and valuable, significant gaps remain particularly in terms of the foci of analysis and the conception of politics. In this paper, we aim to address these gaps and to reposition the conceptualization of regeneration as a performed and emergent consequence of 'relatedness' and as subject to a range of relational effects and determinations. To do so we work through four capacities of assemblage thinking that are particularly productive for this task: (i) revealing the relational, multiple and processual nature of urban trajectories; (ii) revealing the multi-scalar labouring involved in configuring the (socio-material) assemblages that constitute regeneration; (iii) identifying openings for multiple possible trajectories of regeneration; (iv) providing critical insights into how regeneration trajectories are constrained. We conclude with reflections on what assemblage thinking offers in terms of critically and generatively rethinking urban regeneration.

Keywords

resourcing, regeneration, assemblage, accounts, generative, urban, critical, assembling

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1 **Assembling urban regeneration? Resourcing critical generative accounts of urban**
2 **regeneration through assemblage.**

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23 **Abstract:** In critical urban studies, managed urban regeneration has been linked to
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26 terms of the foci of analysis and the conception of politics. In this paper we aim to address
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30 particularly productive for this task: (i) revealing the relational, multiple and processual
31 nature of urban trajectories; (ii) revealing the multiscalar labouring involved in configuring
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33 multiple possible trajectories of regeneration; (iv) providing critical insights into how
34 regeneration trajectories are constrained. We conclude with reflections on what
35 assemblage thinking offers in terms of critically and generatively rethinking urban
36 regeneration.

37 **Introduction**

38 Urban regeneration projects are well-established in the repertoire of state responses to
39 deindustrialization, urban-economic restructuring and the perceived need to ‘glurbanise’
40 cities (McGuirk 2004). Critical urban geography has yielded powerful analyses and searing
41 critiques of the processes and distributional effects of managed urban regeneration, linking
42 it to trajectories of neoliberalising urban policy, urban entrepreneurialism and the
43 competitivization of urban development (Hall and Hubbard 1998; Brenner and Theodore
44 2002; Ponzini and Rossi 2010; Samara 2010; Rossi and Vanolo 2013). The insights arising
45 from this work have been many and valuable. Yet significant gaps remain, particularly in the
46 foci of analysis and the conception of politics.

47
48 Much critical analysis has focused on formal policy mechanisms, integrated masterplanned
49 regeneration strategies, megaprojects and their constitutive political alliances (O’Callaghan
50 2012). Relatedly, it has worked with a conception of the agents, relations and processes that
51 constitute regeneration that, we argue, can be productively expanded to further critical and
52 generative effect. Methodologically, much regeneration research has emphasised policy
53 review and discourse analysis over the practice-oriented or ethnographic. Consequently, it
54 has been tempted to read off the aspirations of policy and strategy documents as if they
55 have pre-scripted effects on interest-formation, agency and power, related identifications
56 and subjectifications (see Jacobs 2012). Critical accounts have also tended to focus on actors
57 perceived to be in politically and economically authoritative positions and on groups
58 resisting these authorities, downplaying the place of public servants, residents and other
59 actors in the everyday enactment of regeneration, whilst giving little attention to the agentic
60 capacities of the material or other non-human entities. Finally, regeneration politics are
61 often read through the prism of neoliberal urbanism with insufficient attention to their
62 unfolding in and through grounded ‘frictions’ in response to particular problematisations,
63 and in light of the accommodations and negotiations that arise *in situ* from these (Tsing
64 2011). In short, too little attention has been paid to how practices interact with formal tools
65 of regeneration and how these local practices articulate with ‘wider processes’ (Farber
66 2014). Seeing politics through the prism of antagonistic struggle against neoliberalisation
67 has, in turn, limited attention to the politics of negotiation around regeneration’s everyday

68 practice and the various settlements this involves, including in sites outside “antagonistic
69 constellations” (Farber 2014, 121).

70

71 So significant scope for expanding the registers through which urban regeneration is
72 understood, the array of constitutive actors, objects and practices and their relational
73 character, the conception of politics and the multiple sites of political negotiation
74 underpinning regeneration (Fuller 2013). Some critical analyses have begun to explore these
75 expansions (see Ward 2011; Lees 2012; O’Callaghan 2012; Brownhill 2013; Lagendijk et al
76 2014). In this paper, we build on this work to analyse how assemblage theory can inform an
77 expansive reconceptualization of regeneration to reposition it as a performed, emergent and
78 diversely-constituted practice, enacted in the socio-material ‘frictions’ and negotiations of
79 the everyday. By urban regeneration we refer to area-based interventions—often publicly
80 funded or supported—aimed at producing ongoing improvements in the social, economic
81 and physical conditions of places and communities experiencing aspects of decline (adapted
82 from Leary and McCarty, 2013, 9)¹. Following Lagendijk et al (2014) we approach urban
83 regeneration as an open conception, without assuming pre-defined prepositions about
84 actors, roles, practices, materials or mechanisms but regarding it as assemblage of processes
85 centred on producing the above-mentioned improvements.

86

87 We draw on an assemblage approach to envisage regeneration as a gathering of
88 heterogeneous elements, consistently drawn together as an identifiable terrain of action
89 and debate (Li 2007, 266). This, we argue, builds a relational and multiplex conception of
90 regeneration as subject to a range of relational effects and determinations, rather than a
91 strategic project driven by institutional design from authoritative bodies (Allen and
92 Cochrane, 2007). Further, this conception opens out the points of political intervention,
93 allowing regeneration’s often naturalized hierarchies and hegemonic power relations to be
94 unsettled such that more generative capacities and trajectories might be revealed and
95 activated.

96

¹ Gentrification has come to map closely onto urban regeneration, particularly in its state-led, new-build varieties (Cochrane 2007). Other state-led modalities, many associated with gentrification effects, include waterfront and brownfield redevelopment, mixed-used precincts, investments in public space and infrastructures, cultural investments, and community-led regeneration (see Leary and McCarty 2013).

97 The paper explores what an assemblage lens offers in terms of critically and generatively
98 rethinking urban regeneration. We explore how assemblage thinking can unpack how
99 regeneration is made and how its being made differently might become a possibility, such
100 that inherited understandings of what constitutes regeneration can be enlarged.
101 Nonetheless, we remain sensitive to the materialisations of socio-economic processes that
102 embed any regeneration process (Swanton 2013). We aim to unsettle taken-for-granted
103 meanings of regeneration, recognize the obdurate relations and materialities that stabilize
104 particular regeneration patterns, yet also suggest analyses that might destabilize dominant
105 framings to reveal more fully its constitutive processes and practices (Müller 2015a). We
106 begin by outlining what assemblage brings to understandings of the urban, before
107 presenting a short vignette drawing from our assemblage-informed research on urban
108 regeneration in Newcastle, NSW, Australia. We then detail four capacities of assemblage
109 thinking that are particularly productive for the critical and generative rethinking
110 regeneration we seek to advance through this work. We conclude by drawing out the
111 political capacity of assemblage for urban regeneration scholarship.

112

113 **Thinking the urban through assemblage**

114 Assemblage thinking has a growing influence across urban studies as analysts appreciate its
115 “highly developed sense of urban complexity, of the unities and disunities of the stabilities
116 and instabilities and especially the complex and heterogeneous networks of connection and
117 association out of which the city as a social and as a physical entity is formed and sustained”
118 (Bender 2010, 317; and see Dovey 2010, McCann and Ward 2011, Acuto 2011, Brownhill
119 2013, Farber 2014; Lagendijk et al 2014). Assemblage’s relational ontology understands the
120 urban as constituted by constellations of elements configured into dynamic arrangements of
121 relations and composed into “some form of provisional socio-spatial formation” (Anderson
122 and McFarlane 2012, 124). These formations’ appearance as well-ordered and stabilized is a
123 product of the sedimentation and territorialisation of order across heterogeneous social and
124 material elements and practices (Legg 2009). Cities are viewed not so much as structured
125 and settled, but as being provisionally assembled as ‘an assemblage of assemblages’ (Dovey
126 2010; Farías 2011). Despite their seemingly enduring nature, cities and their constitutive
127 processes of re/composition are “alive and brimming with movements, practices,
128 performances and contingencies” (Smith 2003, 38). The city’s multiple assemblages are

129 conceived as socio-material actor-networks², in which neither actors nor relations between
130 them are assumed to begin with. Instead a central concern of assemblage thinking is to
131 attend to the “on-going labour of bringing disparate elements together and forging
132 connections between them” (Li 2007, 263). So to talk of assemblage is to talk of *assembling*
133 through labors, material practices, friction and accommodation (Swanton 2013). The city
134 thus emerges from multiplicity in fragmented, unpredictable and asymmetrical ways
135 (Bender 2010).

136

137 Repositioning the city as processually produced and always becoming, assemblage thinking
138 reanimates the urban. It achieves this too by insisting that the social is not the only source of
139 action or basis for explanation; rather, assemblage locates human and nonhuman in the
140 same field of observation and explanation (Jacobs et al 2007; Farías 2010; Farber 2014). If
141 *something* has effect or initiates action, it is considered an actant imbued with agency: not
142 in a reflective sense but because of its capacity to make a difference though creative or
143 destructive capabilities (Latour 2005; Müller 2015a). Broadening the scope of agency makes
144 visible across the city a host of “unexpected practices from surprising angles” (Farber 2014,
145 133). Furthermore, assemblage thinking suggests that, while any actor or entity in the urban
146 assemblage may be conditioned by the way it is related to others in an assemblage, it is not
147 fully determined by those relationships. Actors retain their autonomy and can be “detached
148 and plugged into” different assemblages where interactions change and actors’ knowable
149 properties can be repurposed to release different and unpredictable ‘capacities’ by virtue of
150 what they act in relation with in practice (McFarlane 2011a, 653). Together, then, the
151 laboring of assemblage and distributed agency suggest the irreducible possibility that the
152 city might be changed in unpredictable ways to be assembled otherwise (see Anderson et al
153 2012, 172; Grove and Pugh 2015).

154

155 Assemblage thinking, then, seeks to explain the urban through mapping encounters and
156 practices through which the heterogeneous elements constituting the city are assembled. In
157 this sense, everything that matters to the assemblage is related to it in some way and the

² The synergies between the language and conceptual bases of Assemblage Theory and Actor-Network Theory are frequently commented upon. While there are points of distinction between the sets of theories (Anderson et al 2012) they are often drawn on in tandem and assemblage is taken as a close equivalent of the actor-network (Müller 2015a; 2015b).

158 ways in which “everyday life... and larger shifts in political economy” are linked can be traced
159 without recourse to a division of the social into macro/micro, near/far, structure/agency
160 dualities (Anderson and McFarlane 2012, 124; Ureta 2014). No aspect of the city’s socio-
161 spatiality can be explained as the contingent articulation of larger macro-structures or extra-
162 local forces. Rather, assemblage thinking’s anti-reductionism locates all on the same
163 analytical plane to reveal how urban assemblages are “stitched into place by fragmented,
164 multi-scaled and multi-sited networks of association” (Jacobs 2006 3). The ‘wider systems of
165 relations’ and ‘structures’ in which the city is entangled become part of how its coherence is
166 made, without being ascribed in advance as abstractions with ordering force. Yet
167 assemblage thinking remains critically alert to the obduracy of particular orderings as
168 relations are stabilised and scripted into urban performances such that differences become
169 bounded and the margins for manoeuvre around interactions and identities become
170 prescribed (Acuto 2011). Thus the potential to actualise different and unpredicted urban
171 trajectories is not unconstrained. Far from it. All possible trajectories are embedded in
172 contextual materialisations of socio-economic processes that have contingently produced
173 uneven relations and resources of power. Indeed, assemblage thinking keeps power to the
174 fore by recognising assemblages as “structured, hierarchized, and narrativised through
175 profoundly unequal relations of power, resource and knowledge” (McFarlane 2011c, 655;
176 Ureta 2014, Müller 2015a).

177

178 Of course, the idea of thinking the city through assemblage has been critiqued, often by
179 those concerned with the nature and political effectiveness of critical urban studies. Tonkiss
180 (2011), Brenner et al (2011) and Wachsmuth et al (2011), for example, have parsed careful
181 critiques of assemblage’s theoretical coherence founded on the fluidity inferred by the
182 processual becoming of the city; the rejection of linear causality and notions of pre-formed
183 ‘structural’ bases to urban processes and socio-spatial formation; and the rejection of
184 abstraction in favor of empirical detail. Others have raised concerns about the potential for
185 empirical complexity to overwhelm analysis; the equivalence of human agency and the
186 effectivity of matter implied by distributed agency; the capacity to differentiate actors and
187 networks in terms of their relative power and significance; and whether assemblage seeks
188 primarily to understand how the urban is made, rather than how it can be made differently
189 (see Rankin, 2011; Graham 2010).

190

191 We see many of the above critiques, however, as arising from particular applications of
192 assemblage rather than being inherent to its theorization of the urban. In what follows, we
193 present a brief assemblage account of urban regeneration in Newcastle, NSW before
194 working through four specific attributes of assemblage in terms of their potential for
195 rethinking urban regeneration to expand its conception both critically and generatively.

196

197 **Assembling urban regeneration in Newcastle, NSW**

198 Following assemblage's methodological insistence on starting from empirical detail
199 (Brownhill 2013; McFarlane 2011b), our work on assembling regeneration in inner
200 Newcastle has traced the material practices of actors from state and local government
201 bodies, developers, special purpose taskforces, bureaucrats, consultants and facilitators,
202 business associations, not-for-profits, media, residents, artists, community groups, public
203 transport and cycling advocates, and Indigenous groups. We have traced the role of the
204 non-human from standards, modelling and funding formulae, heritage and architecture,
205 maps of sites under-mined by historic mining shafts and grouting used to render
206 undermined sites developable, and visualisations of a 'renewed Newcastle' circulated
207 through public consultations, reports and strategy documents. We have observed practices
208 from strategic planning and development, securing planning approvals, decision making
209 around public infrastructure dis/investments, public consultation, visioning events and
210 workshops, protest and lobbying, to negotiating, enabling temporary occupation of vacant
211 commercial sites, and a multitude of small scale community and private sector-led 'place-
212 making' activities. We have traced the constitution and contestation of central regeneration
213 concepts such as livability, sustainability, decline and renewal and their differential
214 discursive mobilisation and material rendering by differently located actors.

215

216 The accounts we are producing are unpacking the labours, negotiations and settlements
217 involved in creating and maintaining relationships of authority between the NSW state
218 planning and transport authorities, UrbanGrowth (NSW government urban regeneration
219 body), Newcastle City Council, Hunter Development Corporation (regional economic
220 development body), Newcastle Now (Business Improvement Association) and GPT, a
221 largescale developer at the heart of plans to redevelop major sites along inner Newcastle's

222 main thoroughfare, Hunter St. They are revealing how existing hierarchies, distributions of
223 resources and knowledge, have secured core decisions around planning and infrastructure
224 investments/disinvestments in the city: notably to remove the city's heavy rail line, in face of
225 strident public disquiet, to allow the release of land with rich development potential
226 (Ruming et al 2016) and to approve a major GPT/UrbanGrowth high-rise redevelopment
227 project on Hunter St. Yet they are also revealing the assembling of actors and practices that
228 have enlivened quite a different regeneration trajectory and vision for the city. They explore
229 how GPT and UrbanGrowth have negotiated with Renew Newcastle—a non-for-profit
230 dedicated to finding short and medium term uses for vacant buildings in Newcastle's CBD—
231 to allow access to city-centre premises by small scale ventures by small businesses, artists,
232 retailers, community-based organisations that have effectively rematerialized the inner city
233 and its affective resonances. The success of these ventures in drawing people into the city
234 centre is connected to a multiplicity of 'placemaking' projects, many co-funded by Newcastle
235 City Council, which have transformed small spaces in the city through street furniture,
236 graffiti and artworks, community gardens, temporary cultural uses and events. Together
237 these have produced both an new affective experience and, in a counteractualisation
238 (Lagendijk et al 2014), a groundswell of support for a smallscale, piecemeal variety of
239 'regeneration' that can coexist with the city's existing built environment of heritage listed,
240 low rise buildings. This support took material form in NICRA, a group formed to lobby—using
241 affective material strategies (see Figure 1)—for a low-rise, heritage-sensitive form of
242 regeneration. At the time of writing, the GPT/UrbanGrowth proposal had just been
243 redesigned, with much reduced commercial space and building heights, restored street level
244 shops, cafes and public space. Meanwhile, in the same week, the work began on physically
245 removing the city's heavy rail line and debate continues on what role the released land will
246 play in the ongoing assemblage of a regenerated Newcastle.

247

248 **Assembling urban regeneration: capacities for critical and generative rethinking?**

249 Our account above is informed by four distinctive analytical capacities of an assemblage lens
250 that allow regeneration to be conceptualised as a diversely constituted practice enacted in
251 everyday materiality, as well as discursively and ideologically, and as produced through
252 multiscalar relations that need to be configured, negotiated and stabilized across an array of
253 social and material, authoritative and non-authoritative domains. These capacities make

254 known the variety of forces and relations at work to make urban regeneration possible, the
255 excess of capacities and multiple trajectories this generates and, crucially, the ways these
256 trajectories may be constrained.

257

258 **(1) *Revealing the relational, multiple and processual nature of urban regeneration***

259 Assemblage understands the urban—and hence its regeneration—as multiplex (Farías 2011,
260 369; O’Callaghan 2012). Interlocking multiplex processes operate simultaneously to
261 regenerate the city: eg developing land and buildings; providing and maintaining
262 infrastructure; shaping political identities and interests; fashioning and participating in
263 political processes; governing social behaviour and engaging with the city economically,
264 socially and culturally. These processes can interact and transform each other. They can
265 work in counterpoint and to multiple timelines (eg largescale state-led mega projects vs
266 smallscale incremental placemaking practices) (O’Callaghan 2012). Moreover, they involve
267 their own modes of ordering that circulate simultaneously and are composed of diverse
268 socio-materialities. Consider the actors, devices, materials and social practices drawn into
269 relation in regenerating the urban built environment: developers, architects, heritage
270 advisors, media, engineers, builders, bureaucrats, planners, residents, politicians, materials
271 standards, building codes, environmental regulations, geotechnical reports, strategy and
272 planning documents, concrete, glass and steel, designing, strategising, negotiating, planning,
273 promoting, consulting. The diverse assemblages these constitute cannot be reduced to any
274 single logic, temporality or spatiality (Fuller 2013).

275

276 The implications of assemblage’s orientation to relationality, multiplexity and processuality
277 for accounts of urban regeneration are profound. Conventional analyses have tended to be
278 restricted to a limited array of processes thought to be central to structuring social relations
279 of dis/investment; strategic visioning and policy making; political decision making; land and
280 building redevelopment processes; and the operation of related power relations, social
281 realignments and dislocations. This risks subsuming the multiplexity, multiplicity of entities
282 and socio-material practices that are assembled and associated to enable regeneration
283 (M^cGuirk et al 2015). Assemblage thinking’s stance on the city as a relationally crafted
284 multiplex informs its exploratory style of inquiry that works empirically from the ground up,
285 rather than as a form of critique guided in the first instance by theoretical abstractions

286 (Farías 2011). Figured as such, urban regeneration becomes the contingent achievement of
287 socio-material processes and specific, concrete and differentially sedimented relations
288 between diverse entities that iteratively and cumulatively shape regeneration trajectories
289 (Swanton 2013; O’Callaghan 2012). Regeneration becomes an ongoing event potentially
290 assuming multiple forms and multiple points of determination (Farías 2011; Jacobs 2006).

291

292 **(2) *Revealing the multiscalar labouring involved in the (socio-material) assembling***
293 ***that constitutes urban regeneration***

294 Assemblage’s focus on the labours of assembling demands a baroque understanding that
295 embraces the empirical messiness and complexity of phenomena (Jacobs 2006). This ethos
296 repositions conventional appeals in critical urban studies to (i) abstraction (ii) articulations of
297 ‘micro’ and ‘macro’ factors and (iii) singular logics of causality, in ways that lay the ground
298 for reconceptualising the nature and potential trajectories of regeneration.

299

300 *Resisting abstraction:* Rather than seeking social-structural explanations of regeneration
301 related to the dynamics of capitalist dis/investment flows, urban restructuring, or the
302 political projects of neoliberalism, assemblage has us approach these processes from within,
303 through exploration of the variegated practices and processes of ‘how things happen’ as
304 regeneration is achieved (Farber 2014; McFarlane 2011b). Tracing ‘how things happen’ deals
305 with the ‘difficulty of things’ (Dovey 2010, 348) without relying on abstract conceptions of
306 processes (eg capitalist investment imperatives) or pre-formed social categories (eg state or
307 private sector) that can occlude attention to process and practice prior to their investigation
308 (Acuto 2011, Müller 2015a). ‘Investment imperatives’, ‘commodification of place’ or the
309 actions of ‘the state’ cannot be explained as the outcomes of underlying or essential logics
310 of capitalism or neoliberalism, but only as effects of “socio-material processes; as contingent
311 achievements enacted in particular sites” (Swanton 2013, 284). While these conceptions
312 and categories themselves remain useful, they function in assemblage as reflexive heuristic
313 devices whose contextual constitution has to be “studied as they operate in the world”
314 revealing “the work of connection” necessary for them to be effective (Tsing 2011, 6).
315 Assemblage thinking both unsettles processes and categories traditionally foregrounded in
316 critical analyses of regeneration and expands the array of constituent practices taken into
317 account. Simone (2011), for instance, suggests that processes of domination,

318 commodification and dispossession—abstractions commonly invoked to critique the power
319 relations and outcomes of regeneration—might be extended to consider the workings of the
320 iterative, collaborative and adaptive to reveal regenerations’ dynamics and multiple
321 negotiations.

322

323 *Resisting micro/macro binary articulations:* In conventional critical regeneration analyses,
324 abstraction is closely related to the analytical move of interpreting local conditions in terms
325 of macro forces and extra-local determinations that fashion outcomes as contingent
326 articulations of wider processes and structures. Comparatively, assemblage blurs the division
327 of the social such ‘macro-structures’ or ‘extra-local forces’ are not separable but must be
328 understood as part of the relations and dynamics that produce regeneration across
329 multiscaled practices (Farías 2011). This demands a focus on particular sites through which
330 regeneration assemblages are composed and enacted, connecting across sites and scales:
331 for example, creating knowledge through expert reports sourced from global consultants;
332 engaging communities in small-scale placemaking projects to enhance material landscapes;
333 attracting development corporation investments in built environment projects; designing
334 and enacting financial incentive schemes. This focus opens out analysis to incorporate the
335 multiple scales and temporalities across which labours of assembling occur.

336

337 In addition, the focus on labouring foregrounds ongoing, negotiated socio-material practices
338 through which regeneration assemblages are composed by relating materialities,
339 technologies, objects, natures and humans (Farías 2010, 13): for instance, circulating
340 imagery of a regenerated ‘future city’; rehearsing performative routines of consultation
341 between authoritative regeneration actors and community members; engaging residents in
342 the emergent socialities of regenerated landscapes. Accounting for the labours needed to
343 shape and enact particular kinds of regeneration can be uncovered through this focus,
344 bringing in the ‘forgotten many’ (Jacobs 2006) of the affiliations that form around
345 regeneration processes to give it the appearance of coherence. Excavating this laborious
346 assemblage attends to an array of multi-scaled socio-material practices that reveal the
347 claims made of urban regeneration, how these claims materialize, and how they harness
348 other processes in order for regeneration to take on specific forms and functions.

349

350 In these ways, assemblage thinking speaks to power geometries articulated at multiple,
351 intertwined scales and to specific socio-materialities as they translate in particular urban
352 sites and practices that enable regeneration (Acuto 2011). Critically, this allows us to observe
353 how urban regeneration is written into ‘big stories’—of globalisation, urbanisation, capitalist
354 development, neoliberalisation—by tracing chains of meaning and practice that are pieced
355 together in situated encounters, whereby ‘wider processes’ become practically effective by
356 being mobilised to appear as universals that frame the practice of power. It also allows us to
357 capture the negotiations, collaborations and compromises—the ‘frictions’—these generate
358 in place, as well as the new alignments (including in culture and power) and the ‘structures
359 of confinement’ and opportunity these produce (Tsing 2011).

360

361 *Resisting singular logics of causality:*

362 Assemblage’s lack of reliance on abstractions or scaled ideas of *a priori* ‘structuring’ macro
363 processes means that causal or determining power cannot straightforwardly be ascribed to
364 given ‘structures’, scaled political economic orderings or social categories (such as ‘the
365 state’). These are repositioned instead as mediated socio-material achievements made in
366 differential enactments. And these enactments are performed in overdetermined contexts
367 shaped through “deeply unequal relations of power, historical traces... practices of routine,
368 struggle and improvisation within particular sites” (McFarlane 2011a, 386). Assemblage,
369 then, has us examine how causality is realised, in place, through relational configuration and
370 recognizes that “the creative reworking of relations in motion may render causality multiple
371 and indeterminate” (Anderson et al 2012, 183). This does not deny causal power to actors,
372 though it insists that this cannot be pre-determined (Cupples 2011). Applying this
373 understanding allows for critical and generative analysis of regeneration, capable of
374 exploring how its situated assembling mediates ‘broader’ socio-economic processes (global
375 competition, neoliberal urban governance) and, simultaneously, generates its own causal
376 powers to enact different forms of agency and generate different realisations of processes
377 (domination, adaptation, negotiation) (McFarlane, 2011c). Assemblage thinking’s insistent
378 focus on specific sites of practice and the labours of composition underlies a fluid and
379 unfinished conception of regeneration as always in-the-making.

380

381 **(3) *Identifying openings for multiple possible trajectories of urban regeneration***

382 A focus on the labours of composition focuses on how urban regeneration assemblages are
383 ordered and stabilised but, equally, with how composition might entail unpredictable
384 change and reassembly. An entity may be “plugged into” a different assembly such that its
385 knowable properties are productive of different capacities. For instance, a policy document
386 staking claims to the livability of regenerated spaces might be mobilised by developers to
387 advance high-density transit-oriented development or, alternatively, by local communities to
388 advocate nurturing local architectural qualities and medium-density streetscapes (Kraftl
389 2014). Assemblage can thus open out the multitude of possible capacities realized in
390 enacting regeneration, though these are only realised within particular confederations in
391 which urban subjects and objects can perform in multiple ways depending on the
392 sociotechnical networks and sets of practices involved (Farías 2011, Grove and Pugh 2015).
393 Through this register of thinking, regeneration can be reconceived as a series of relational
394 sites of “doing, performance and events...subject to material, performative and discursive
395 change through relational processes, such as new actors infringing on existing formations”
396 (McFarlane 2009, 562). Remove or lose one entity from an assemblage or add another and
397 the structure of possibilities changes as each new alliance unleashes unpredictable
398 associations and previously under-tapped capacities. Through such shifts, stabilised relations
399 might be reinscribed in meaning and function and actors can take on different
400 social/political attributes (eg politicians or community leaders; council meetings; transit
401 systems; consultation sessions) (see Jacobs et al 2007, Cupples 2011).

402

403 These aspects of assemblage thinking open up more careful consideration of the
404 constitutive, generative, reiterative and (potentially) transformative associations of
405 regeneration insofar as what regeneration can be/come is never fully stable or well-
406 bounded. Its elements are multiple, its capacities are immanent, contingent and emergent
407 (Ruddick 2012) and so its trajectories are never fully settled but always open to the
408 possibility of reordering associations, and hence capacities, to create dynamic potential for
409 innovation, novelty and differentiation (Allen and Cochrane; 2010; Jacobs 2012).

410 Assemblages of urban regeneration need to be viewed, to paraphrase O’Callaghan (2012,
411 1937), as one potential trajectory that also incorporates multiple other trajectories and
412 possibilities.

413

414 This assemblage-inspired reconceptualisation of regeneration provides analysts a capacity to
415 explore how received, sedimented relations (from property relations to affective resonances
416 between human actors and specific built landscapes) might be enacted differently. As
417 Suchman says (2012, 57-58), it can “reanimate the figures that populate our socio-material
418 imaginaries and practices, to examine the relations that they hold in place and the labours
419 that sustain them, and to articulate the material semiotic reconfigurations required for their
420 transformations”. A further step in reanimation lies in bringing into view the nonhuman
421 capacity for agency; for instance, the potential for materials to force an assemblage out of
422 its current configuration and to “jump into trajectories that are neither foreseeable nor
423 controllable” (Henry and Roche 2013). We might consider, for instance, how the material
424 characteristics of a regeneration site—soil qualities, flood liability, construction materials, or
425 the resonances of its built environment with particular cultural affinities—do particular kinds
426 of work to ignite certain regeneration possibilities, constrict others or take unanticipated
427 directions (Harris 2013). Similarly, we might consider the capacity of particular visualisation
428 devices to trigger affective community claims in support or opposition to particular visions of
429 regeneration. This wider prism can account for the diversity of forces at work by making
430 visible the various human and non-human alliances that create regeneration. But it also
431 allows the complexity of processes involved, as these alliances connect the embodied,
432 technical, practical and affective become available for analysis (Jacobs 2008). Such analysis is
433 resourced by assemblage thinking to traverse categorical boundaries (human/artifact,
434 social/natural) and to prise open processes, categories and blackboxed accounts of their
435 dynamics (Acuto 2011; Müller 2015a). Thus it can foreground the ontological possibilities of
436 multiple trajectories and indeed the potential for particular alternatives.

437

438 ***(4) Providing critical insights into how urban regeneration trajectories are constrained***

439 Assemblage’s capacity to explore the potential for regeneration trajectories to be unsettled
440 is highly productive and underpins a generative politics. Yet its equal orientation towards the
441 obduracy of particular orderings provides crucial insights for exploring how multiple
442 potential trajectories of regeneration assemblages are constrained as powerful forces
443 “caricature, restrain, restrict and police other objects” (Shaw 2012, 623) such that only
444 “certain common projects...become visible and sayable” (Gidwani 2008, 101), certain actors
445 accrue hegemonic status capable of defining and structuring relations, and certain urban

446 assemblages get to hold together (Ureta 2014; Fuller 2013). Yet the practice of power
447 relations is not simple. Different agents within an assemblage possess different resources
448 and capacities to act, but these do not straightforwardly translate into power. Rather, power
449 relations are “a performative work in progress...(shaped) through interactions with other
450 nonhumans, human bodies, institutions, emotions, discourses, and ideas and through the
451 overlapping of different networks” (Cupples 2011, 940). Hegemonic actors—from global
452 development corporations to state authorities—or ideologies—from neoliberalism to
453 creative cities—therefore become (or remain) powerful through situated material-semiotic
454 and performative configurations.

455

456 So assemblage accounts of urban regeneration fully recognise the effects of power, but
457 explore it through ethnographies of power geometries wherein that power is assembled in
458 practice (Acuto 2011, 256, Bender 2010). Such analyses resist preconfiguring the power
459 relations of a particular assemblage, but are poised instead to reveal how some actors
460 become capable of problematizing, mobilising and enrolling actants such that distinctive
461 geometries unfold across the socio-material and across articulations of the ‘macro/micro’.
462 They might trace how, for instance, global formulae for developer profit ratios are
463 associated with floor space ratios in land use zones in regeneration masterplans, how these
464 are represented in visualisations that attempt to shape orders of value about future
465 regenerated urban landscapes, and how these visualisations affectively resonate with
466 differentiated local communities’ conceptions of worth, or are subverted by them as
467 culturally implausible (Farber 2014). Power, then, is an achievement that must be, and often
468 can be, reasserted through the complex coordination of socio-material practices (Ureta
469 2014). Assemblage provides refined means for excavating the mechanics of power behind
470 regeneration, revealing empirically how sedimentation, repetition, habit and hierarchised
471 relations are materialised to enhance or restrict the capacity of certain regeneration
472 trajectories.

473

474 Exploring how urban regeneration trajectories reflect the reproduction of enduring political-
475 economic power hierarchies, the replay of habitual resource distributions, and the
476 reassertion of socio-material orderings, is both critical and generative. It reveals the
477 relational, socio-material dynamics wherein certain capacities and trajectories are prevented

478 from being activated. As Shaw (2012, 621), puts it “worlds are ... for the most part stable and
479 do not exhibit monstrous contingency...the world is stabilised, anchored”. Applied to urban
480 regeneration, assemblage analytics provide insight into the forging of such anchorings in
481 situated encounters where ‘wider processes’ are translated through negotiations,
482 collaborations and compromises. They excavate how the ‘frictions’ in place forge “structures
483 of confinement...(that) inflect historical trajectories, enabling, excluding and particularizing”
484 (Tsing 2011, 6). While assemblage analytics refuse to attribute the obduracy of particular
485 assemblages to linear causality and determination (Fuller 2013) they reveal assemblages as
486 arrangements that “create agents...allowing us to trace relationships of domination as they
487 are dynamically established” (Caliskan and Callon 2010, 8-9)³. This insight reveals how
488 ‘structural processes’ are shaped through obduracy and enabled to repeatedly ‘stitch in’
489 patterns of outcomes (Jacobs 2008).

490

491 ‘Structures of confinements’ in urban regeneration are difficult to unpick as they shape new
492 interests, identities and trajectories that are differentially beneficial. Assemblage analyses’
493 excavation of the relational, socio-material dynamics behind this formation unsettle
494 categories, processes and hierarchies, questioning their naturalisation as hegemonic, and
495 opening them out as potential points of political intervention, revealing contingency and
496 possibilities for reassembly (Müller 2015a). For our purposes, this is a key capability for a
497 critical and generative rethinking of urban regeneration, sensitizing us to the means by
498 which potential trajectories are channeled and contained. Assemblage thinking allows us to
499 recognize both potentialities *and* vulnerabilities, and where these are closed down via
500 particular materialisations of power and inequality in which not all potential outcomes are
501 equally possible (Ureta 2014, Müller 2015a).

502

503 **Conclusion**

504 As assemblage thinking has become widespread in human geography, debate has
505 proliferated about its workings and worth. Our gravitation towards assemblage is informed
506 by a commitment to reconceptualising urban regeneration to advance critical and generative

³ Li (2007, 270) points out that assemblages “cannot be resolved into neat binaries that separate power from resistance, or progressive forces from reactionary ones. It is difficult to determine who has been co-opted and who betrayed. Fuzziness, adjustment and compromise are critical to holding assemblages together”.

507 accounts. Assemblage-inspired research provides a political edge in taking us beyond
508 hegemonic categories of powerful actors, structured notions of power relations and
509 ‘universals’ such as globalisation, competitive urbanism and market forces as drivers of
510 regeneration (Müller 2015a). It questions the naturalisation of these categories and forces.
511 Rather than seek to expose this naturalisation through critical deconstruction, it aims to lay
512 out contingent assembly and reveal the conduits that provide stability and unity to
513 hegemonic assemblages by mapping the socio-material creation of categories, frames and
514 structures and rendering them open to political challenge. As Bender (2010, 3005-6) argues,
515 “if the actornetwork is a multiplication of the number of actors then there is also an increase
516 in the number of contingencies and points of potential intervention thus increasing
517 opportunities for responsible action”. This is central to the critical and generative capacities
518 of assemblage accounts of regeneration to enliven our sense of its possible pathways and
519 take hold of the politics that reside within (Shaw 2012, Anderson et al 2012).

520

521 So assemblage points urban regeneration analysts to the possibilities of its processes to
522 engender outcomes other than the systematic regressive redistribution of wealth and
523 power, extension of private property rights, and creation of exclusionary, gentrified urban
524 landscapes. It provides conceptual mechanisms—most particularly those examined here—
525 that enable the reconception of actually existing urban regeneration to expose the
526 constitution of its trajectories and “to search out new vantage points (and) make operative
527 undiscovered capacities that are latent” (Ruddick 2012, 211). These conceptual mechanisms
528 reveal how institutional processes that govern regeneration (eg masterplanning, public
529 consultation, public private partnerships)—while they might reflect extant power relations in
530 their attempts to achieve certain strategic purposes and craft particular urban subjects and
531 materialities—cannot fully determine outcomes. Nor can they fully contain the potential for
532 entities to slip out and become aligned with other configurations, overlap with other
533 processes, suggest different identities, trigger other events or create unpredicted capacities
534 that destabilise imagined trajectories (Grove and Pugh 2015). Furthermore, assemblage’s
535 recognition of materiality and its agentic capacities opens out the array of actants and forces
536 thought capable of animating regeneration outcomes. Without pre-emptively falling back on
537 existing categories of analysis or purely instrumental understandings of material, it allows
538 for the capacities of ‘things’, technical devices or material practices to open up new objects

539 and sites of politics and to transform the issues and claims that can be bound to
540 regeneration or contested around it (such as collaboration, de-commodification,
541 commoning). These take us beyond the hegemonic actors and forces habitually recognised
542 and enable us to recognise the emergent and the potential in new animating objects, new
543 juxtapositions, new capacities and new knowledges of regeneration (Müller 2015a).

544
545 This is not an analytics of assemblage bereft of politics (Jacobs 2012) but an explicitly
546 strategic and politicised assemblage thinking that might inform strategic forms of assembling
547 aimed to counter attempts to govern for particular interests and arrangements of power
548 that prevent movement towards more 'emancipatory assemblages' (Ruddick 2012). This
549 might take the form of tracing instances where outcomes are progressive and where power
550 flows change, and articulating the socio-material practices and relational workings involved
551 including the settlements reached between informal actors and those in nominally
552 hegemonic roles. Insofar as we can intentionally control the agentic cuts our academic
553 interventions actually achieve once they are in circulation (Greenhough 2012), assemblage-
554 inspired accounts can resource strategic knowledge production to be put to work to
555 galvanise and inform strategic action by various publics (activist, community, governmental,
556 hybrid) that seek transformative engagements to enliven alternative trajectories of
557 regeneration and to advance political and material strategies to stabilise these attempts
558 (Bender 2010; Russell et al 2011). In this way, assemblage-inspired accounts can resource
559 bringing people, things and knowledge together to energise the purposive creation of urban
560 regeneration assemblages aimed to claim authority in the fields of decision-making that
561 shape urban regeneration and its possibilities (Müller 2015b, Iveson 2013).

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- 700

701

702 **Figure 1.** NICRA used balloons to simulate the height of proposed towers, counterposed
703 against the city's predominantly low rise built environment.



704

705 **Source:** Newcastle Herald

706

707