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Making common ground with strangers at Furnace Park

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In this article we seek to widen the debate about the sites and processes of encounter with strangers by examining the ways in which 'strangeness' necessarily fades within the familiarisation processes at play in any sustained and situated place-making. Our analysis draws upon our experiences of encountering strangers – and of our familiarisation with them – in the initial, year-long, site acquisition and preparation phase of a project to create Furnace Park, an experimental urban space in a run-down backwater of central Sheffield. We show the tensions between a project commitment to the formation of a loose, open place and the pressures (which arose from our encounters with the urban development system) to render both the project and the site certain, bounded and less-than-strange. Furthermore, at Furnace Park the site itself presented to us as a non-human stranger, which we were urged to render familiar but which kept eluding that capture. We therefore show how the geographies of strange encounters could productively be widened to embrace both recent scholarship on the material-affective strangeness of ground itself, and a greater attentiveness to the familiarisation effects born of the intersection of diverse communities of practices within place-making projects.

Keywords: place-making; encounter; strangers; communities of practice; ground; familiarisation

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Introduction – strangers, familiarisation and the pragmatic geographies of encounter

'To live in cities is to come up regularly against the unknown' (Macfarlane 2011, p. 181), and yet this frequent encounter is matched by a constant pressure for the strange to be assimilated into the known. In this article we seek to examine this tension by reflecting upon our experiences as academics involved in a particular inner-city place-making project. In doing so we extend and develop recent scholarship on the pragmatic logics of place-making, the geographies of encounter and the familiarisation processes that they entail.

Gill Valentine (2008) has noted that increasingly geographies of encounter scholarship has claimed an important role for encounter, and its public spaces, as a stimulus for urban democratic revival. The origins of this would appear to lie partly in anxieties about urban enclosure in 'right to the city' scholarship (for example Mitchell, 2003) and activism (*Reclaim the Street* and the *Occupy* movement), and partly in an increasing interest in the 'micropublics of everyday life', the local spaces and moments of encounter, quietly arising from a 'new urban citizenship, cosmopolitanism, [and] hospitality' (both Valentine, 2008, p. 323) explored, for example, in the work of Amin, 2002; Chatterton, 2006; and Bell, 2007. Not entirely persuaded by the optimism of the latter, Valentine suggests that more must be done to identify the actual means by which encounters with difference produce any form of transformational change, and whether in people or in places, for she points out pithily that whilst 'toleration' is a form of instrumentalist accommodation, it is not one that requires any fundamental concession from the powerful.

Geographies of encounter scholarship since 2008 has increasingly sought to explore the processes by which places become known (and transformed) through encounter. Much of this work lies within a processual view of place and human identity: that humans and their places are in a constant state of becoming, as humans iteratively encounter and adapt to each other, their cultural milieus and their physical environments. This work reactivates the philosophical pragmatism of John Dewey, and (via Bridge, 2008) also links it to Jürgen Habermas' concern for the re-creation of effective public spaces for dialogic, communicative interaction. Such theorisation finds empirical application in, for example Regan Koch and Alan Latham's (2012; 2013) fine-grained study of the 'domestication' of Prince of Wales Junction; in Colin Macfarlane's account of the 'incremental urbanism' (2013, p. 36) of 'slum' settlements, achieved through 'knowledge, resources, materials and histories becom[ing] aligned and contested' in an 'urban learning assemblage' (both 2013, p. 1); and in Katrina Brown's (2012) study of the daily negotiation of diverse uses of a canal towpath. This turn to pragmatism is also evident in legal geography (Delaney, 2010; Valverde, 2012; Blomley, 2015) and – as we will show – connects to Etienne Wenger's work (1998) on learning, meaning and identity as formed through

'communities of practice' and Setha Löw's (2013) work on the production of shared meanings in urban space.

Our aim in this article is to present a case study examination of how the unknown – or strange to us – was encountered and how it was familiarised within our place-making endeavours. Our article broadens the place-making-by-encounter-and-familiarisation scholarship in three ways: first by being an 'insider' account – a reflexive examination by us as academics implicated in the making of a place; secondly, by our concern to focus not upon the transformative (or otherwise) effects of human to human encounter, but instead upon our human encounters with the unknown materiality of the case study site, thus figuring the site itself as a stranger; thirdly, by our concern to show the directive, shaping role of pre-existing cultural expectations brought to our site, and our project, by the myriad (human) stakeholders who needed to come together to make the project happen. Here we seek to show how these expectations drove forward an attempted (but never fully realised) elimination of the unknown and of how a restless surplus of strangeness remained.

Specifically, our case study will explore the tensions between the project participants' avowed interest in creating 'loose space' (Frank & Stevens, 2007) – place as heterogeneous, undirected, open to multiple engagements and purposing – and the urban development system's requirement for certainty and clarity about a site's character, its community and its uses.

We produce an analytical account that is perhaps slightly less optimistic than that of other recent commentators and while do not wish this to be a discouragement to others who might seek to advance social justice through place-making, we intend rather to helpfully supplement existing scholarship by adding a sense of the 'viscosity' of place-making. 'Viscosity' is here used in the sense of the project management metaphor 'wading through treacle', for making a place (and getting to know it) involves effort, saps energy and entails a constant stream of encounters with unanticipated obstacles which must be made sense of and adapted to.

Ours then, is a reflexive account that seeks to emphasise the trial-and-error aspects of our place-making engagement with space, and of the plurality of strange-to-us forces and voices encountered there. In doing so we believe that our account contributes to (rather than detracts from) the production of a 'generalized respect for difference' (Valentine, 2008, p. 333), by noting both the fragility and obduracy of the stranger. Furthermore, our case study helps to explore Ash Amin's suggestion (2008, p. 8), that the promise of public space-making may lie more in 'the entanglement of between people and the material and visual culture of public space, rather than solely in the quality of social interaction between strangers' – with ours ultimately being an account of the complexity of making sense of the 'throwntogetherness' (Massey, 2005, p. 11) of multiple (human

and nonhuman) bodies in a confined physical space. To examine *this* form of encounter we explore recent scholarship on the material-affective strangeness of ground itself, and suggest ways in which that geo-humanities work can be drawn upon to counter the tendency of geographies of encounter scholarship to focus almost exclusively upon encounters with *human* strangers.

The authors' place within the case study project

Our case study is specifically rooted in our own negotiation of the situational, perspectival and temporal relativity of the 'stranger' position, for we started as strangers to each other and our disciplinary backgrounds (and the perspectives arising from them) are different, but we think complementary. We chose to write this article as a single voice, merging our two sets of experiences and perspectives. Our creation of this 'singular' writing has, itself, been a process of attunement attendant to the formation of a *textual* common ground. This article been forged, like the case study site itself, through strangers familiarising themselves with and accommodating themselves to each other's position, thereby rendering it less strange.

Luke Bennett, is professionally from the world of the urban development system (that assemblage of lawyers, planners, owners, financiers and myriad other professionals and practices that explicitly make and manage the built environment) but stepped out of it to become an academic in 2007, thereafter encountering the strange-to-him world of cultural practice. His involvement with the case study project was limited to the initial site acquisition and clearance phase in 2013, and comprised a detached, observational stance, combined with reflection upon prior professional experience of many other such projects, and their stranger/familiarisation dynamics. Meanwhile Amanda Crawley Jackson, an arts and humanities academic, lived and breathed the case study as its project manager, stepping into the strange-to-her world of the urban development system, and directly experiencing the process of familiarisation with it.

Our case study presents a view of place as 'a rich and complicated interplay of people and the environment', rather than a set of 'facts and figures' (Cresswell, 2004, p. 11). Our account will show how a drift towards familiarisation built over time, as a combination of external (the urban development system) and internal (habit and acquaintance forming) influences took hold, even within an avowedly 'loose' project characterised by an ever-shifting assemblage of multiple actors and their varied project-affiliated trajectories, played out upon what – at least categorically – appeared to be 'dead space' (Doron, 2007). But, importantly, our experience on this project has emphasised to us that whilst these drivers towards familiarisation are strong and palpable, places are not simple, stable or inevitably knowable, they cannot be effortlessly 'called into being'. Place-making is not assuredly linear. In particular, we will show that sites themselves can be the stranger

at the heart of the encounter, not just the venue for it. Indeed it is our site's sub-surface that proved to be the most recalcitrant stranger in our project, ultimately resisting even the powerful familiarisation drives of the urban development system.

Introducing the case study: Furnace Park

In June 2013, after more than a year of negotiations with Sheffield City Council, the University of Sheffield was granted a three-year lease enabling it to develop an arts- and education-led community park on an acre and a half of brownfield scrubland in the Shalesmoor area of inner city Sheffield. Named Furnace Park by the project stakeholders after the 19th-century cementation furnace that now stands at the edge of an office car park on the other side of the road, the site is surrounded by a variety of small businesses, a University warehouse, artists' studios, underground nightclubs and derelict, abandoned buildings.

Although the group worked with (and ostensibly 'improved') a site that many people locally had described as 'an eyesore' and a beacon for anti-social behaviour (e.g. drugs and sex workers), our aim was not specifically to contribute to the regeneration of the local area. Our project was not intended as an aestheticizing intervention: we were not seeking to be the catalyst for a 'creative class' (Florida, 2003), arts-led gentrification. Nor were we setting out to make a park in any conventional, civic amenity, sense. Furnace Park would not be a childrens' playground; it would not be a carefully planted urban oasis; nor would it be a readymade space for leisure and the consumption of culture. Instead, the aspiration was for it to be something looser, less determined, a flexible mix of an events/exhibition area, a semi-curated urban wildscape, a vacant space for live research projects, residencies, talks, performances and other kinds of public intervention. There would be no permanent structures made or provided, but instead what was needed for any project would be improvised by volunteers from found, recycled and re-used materials and facilitated by SKINN, a local community organisation. Thus Furnace Park was envisaged as a site of collective agency that could, bring together groups and individuals interested in exploring what can be done with a brownfield site, based on the view that in the present day the most 'salutary changes in our world [might] come from a creative social body rather than from the political sphere' (Andermatt Conley, 2012, p. 109). The group's aspirations also chimed with Ava Bromberg's 'Mess Hall' project in that Furnace Park was intended to be an open 'possibility space', a type of 'non-economic neighbourhood space' that in its openness to 'unexpected and provisional encounters' (Bromberg, 2010 p. 224) would be facilitative of a participatory dissemination of possibility. Thus, the aim was that Furnace Park (as a place and as a collaboration) would be community-enabling, grounded in a commitment to shared work rather than a shared identity; to difficult and provocative conversations

rather than consultation and consensus. Furthermore Furnace Park was conceived as an arts-led space, in the sense that we adopted and embraced the methodologies of art as a critical and engaged practice that enables alternative perceptions and understandings of the real (Locas, 2010), to growing – through the chance afforded by localisation, simultaneity and encounter – a radical imaginary that might construe and produce the urban (even if always provisionally) beyond the hegemonic agendas of regeneration, tourism and economic leverage.

The pressures of familiarisation

So, Furnace Park was conceived as a laboratory space in which collaborators might dynamically explore the strangeness of processes, artefacts, taken-for-granted assumptions and ways of doing encountered in the urban realm and is avowedly loose in both aim and method. But it was never an 'anything goes' space. Loose space, like any other, is a type of space, a categorisation that both permits and delimits. As we increasingly discovered, 'our' loose space needed to be defined, to become 'known', if our project was to be realised. Accordingly, even during the initial site acquisition and preparation phase covered by this case study, we found awkward questions arising. At the birth of Furnace Park as an idea, the bold, theoretically informed talk had been of 'process not product' but suddenly there was an alien world of consents, leases, risk assessment, insurance revealed to us, embodied in new professional communities (and their attendant *strange-to-us* ways) that we then had to engage with. The project thus became affected by this encounter with – and accommodation of – the mainstream urban processes that have enabled the project to come to fruition but which could so easily have prohibited it.

We had made the decision early on that rather than occupy the site in a clandestine way – to trespass or squat, or make an ephemeral intervention – we wanted to have the experience of making space differently, but to work also within the urban development system in order to test its edges and push its boundaries. The Furnace Project was therefore not a 'guerrilla' project, and was intentionally situated within the urban development system rather than aspiring to stand outside it[2]. Thus the project was based on a lease, the obtaining of planning permission and has had the powerful support of an academic institution. All of these factors increased the feasibility and longevity of the project, but they also promoted the emergence of certain ordering impulses, which then started to shape the project and its performance. To make Furnace Park, we had to put in place public liability insurance, undertake first aid training, provide water and toilet facilities, produce and approve a risk assessment for all stages of the project (including construction, events and dismantling), agree the terms of a lease and seek planning permission. We had to commission environmental (contamination) surveys, topographical surveys, assets searches and an unexploded

bomb (UXB) survey. We had to work with the police to think through safety issues and the problems of metal theft and vandalism. All of this generated a project folder running to over 200 pages of tabulated data, diagrams, maps and protocols. Furnace Park (as idea, as team and as a material site) thus – necessarily – entered the urban development system's world of ownership, law, risk, safety, assessment, measurement, valuation, sponsorship, improvement, naming, structuring and controlling. This *strange-to-us* world had to be navigated (and accommodated) in order to gain long-term access to our site, the deep irony being that this 'firmness' was needed in order to secure a site upon which a 'loose' semantic liberation of its wider potentialities could thereafter be performed.

This brought forth many encounters with strangers, upon or in regard to our site. Construction industry professionals, academics, researchers, engineers, artists, surveyors and so on were all necessarily involved in bringing Furnace Park to fruition. There is no reason why our working lives would have crossed were it not for this project. We became then, through this project, a 'creative assemblage' (Mar & Anderson, 2010), comprising 'a series of discrete and separate – even conflicting – collections of actors, pressures and networks that nonetheless results in a convergence of phenomena' (Muller, 2010, p. 41). Our assemblage found University managers, city planners, engineering companies (as sponsors) and local businesses working alongside the enthusiastic – but ever shifting and unstructured – core Furnace Park promoters, principally artists and University of Sheffield academics and their assortment of desired projects, uses and theoretical spurs. Our necessary encounters became negotiations: pragmatic, provisional and time-limited constructions of common meaning and purpose. That process was not always easy: sometimes it seemed that we were speaking different languages and we become all too aware of our differences. We muddled through, learning new skills and new insights into others' professional worlds as we did so.

But the Furnace Park project's avowal of looseness (both in spatial and anti-organisational intent) did not readily translate to all stakeholders. We have concluded that there is little prospect of fully contaminating the 'professional' sphere with Furnace Park's free-form spirit. The lawyers may take off their ties, the engineers may dress down for the site visit but fundamentally it is unlikely that their ways of doing are going to change. For them, this is just a single project, one amongst many. This won't change their world, their epistemologies or ways of doing. The loose, the disorderly, the strange-to-them, will invariably have to yield to their standard, normalised processes and expectations. These are important actors, 'nomospheric technicians' (Delaney 2010, p. 157) with privileged access to the formal processes (and related discourse) by which places are formally made, and they have very particular ways of performing their roles.

But the urban development system is also very adaptive. We have discovered that it has the ability to absorb our art-led strangeness, and – to an extent – its loose aspirations. An instructive example of this is how our planning application was dealt with. The UK planning system works upon a plan-led principle ascribing permitted use classes to designated zones and in the city-wide development plan the Furnace Park plot was zoned for office / commercial uses (known as D1/D2). Attaining planning consent for any other use required a clear case, to justify departure from the designated approved uses. Early in 2013 the University of Sheffield applied for planning permission for the Furnace Park project, but it is clear from the publicly available documents that all sides struggled to find a suitable way of describing the loose 'art park' concept for the purposes of satisfying the planning application formalities, and their need for clarity around the categorisation of the proposed use. However, the eventual granting of planning permission accepted the application as consistent with D1/D2 usage and waved through a 'loose' definition of the intended use:

> the space would be continually transformed by the introduction of temporary low scale structures that are created by the students as part of their studies. The exhibitions created could then form a focal point for some community events such as readings and exhibitions (Sheffield City Council, 2013, p. 1).

And, intriguingly, the planners revealed that as a fall-back (if D1/D2 could not have be made to fit) the proposed use could instead have been treated as '*sui generis*', as a use falling exceptionally outside the use class classification scheme as a whole. Thus, we learned that the planning system's ability to normalise the strangeness of Furnace Park, is powerful indeed, for it even has a classification for the *un*classifiable.

Familiarisation and change

Place-making projects aspire to bring about change to their subject sites, but this change does not happen instantaneously. Instead, like familiarisation, it occurs incrementally. The (re)formation of any place is the outcome of interplays of many actors and agencies. As Allan Pred (1984) argued – and Thomas Gieryn (2000) and Doreen Massey (2005) reiterated – the production of place is processual; it never ends and it is not reducible to any dominant causal agent. Matter, social and individual action, representations and practices all combine to affect and transform each other and at multiple levels, such that across time we can witness 'the intersection of individual paths and institutional projects' (Pred, 1984, p.282), both being instances of practices implicated in place-making (and themselves being made in some degree by encounters with place). But places (and the matter arranged in them) are not the only things that are changed over time.

The improvisational, exploratory nature of Furnace Park's creation challenged participants to step beyond the confines, stabilities and certainties of their disciplinary identities, whether they sought this or not. Initially this made participants strangers to themselves. This was particularly extreme in Amanda Crawley Jackson's case as she, in her new role as project manager, found herself for the first time in her ten years at the University working in close collaboration with her University's professional services team, commissioning environmental surveys, supervising the construction team, advising on health and safety and liaising with the police. This brought her into new relations, with people, functions and ways of seeing – with strangers – that she would not normally encounter as a humanities academic. But while in many ways this estranged her from her own discipline (a question often posed: what on earth has this got to do with French cultural studies?), this project – a detour – compellingly, brought her back to her discipline, making her question its boundaries and borders, its relevance and application in a critical and positive way. In short, it helped to re-strange her existing disciplinary identity.

For her, Furnace Park has lent a new sense of purpose to her scholarship, demonstrating in its complexity and resistance to cognition the possible valence of the arts in beginning to encourage (and to implement at ground level) radical imaginaries of other futures particularly with regard to the damaged urban topographies that emerged from our industrial past. And yet Amanda's change was not all self-willed; she was not fully in control of how Furnace Park acted upon her, and her biographical identity become entwined in the project and its responsibilities. It changed her, just as she worked with others to 'change' that place. The urban development process and its actors may still frustrate her and her creative aspirations for the site, but – because of her familiarisation attained through prolonged engagement with this project – these entities are no longer strangers to her, for she has become part of their realm, having (perhaps inadvertently) now learnt how to dwell there as a project manager.

Encounter and accommodation

Furnace Park is the product of encounters between strangers (and of their attendant collaborations and familiarisations). But where and how are these encounters actually performed and the park's 'common ground' formed? In her research into the negotiation of parallel use of everyday public spaces by cyclists and other travellers, Katrina Brown (2012) talks of each type of user developing an embodied attunement to the presence of each other, thereby making dispositional accommodations to each other's anticipated key spatial needs. At Furnace Park this attunement, the process we describe in this article as 'familiarisation', was not only played out live and embodied upon the site, but it was also negotiated symbolically in a variety of more or less distant spaces. It was also a

process riven by ‘power/knowledge’ (Foucault 1980), in that those for whom what was going on was already familiar had a situational advantage over those for whom it was still disorienting and strange.

For much of the time – and the daily experience of it – our project was largely mundane and anchored in iterative accommodation to the project’s and the site’s ‘materialities, modes of inhabitation and atmospheres’ (Koch & Latham, 2012, p. 516) (and, we would add, prosaic bureaucratic routines and concerns). These ubiquitous, prosaic aspects of public space making and use have tended to receive less scholarly attention than excessive, confrontational or exceptional place formations.

The encounters through which our place was formed occurred in a variety of places – and certainly not just upon the surface of the site itself, for the desks and meeting rooms of council and university offices, and the landscape-surfaces of application forms, newspaper feature pages and computer screens equally played their roles too, each being the ‘home turf’ of one or more of the actors within this place-making project. These venues were strange, unfamiliar places for others called to engage there in some vital part of the project’s process. Therefore progressing the project required familiarisation with new sites of encounter, as well as with a succession of new human strangers.

These places (whether they were an application form or the scrub-surface of the site itself) were points at which strangers enacted familiarisation; they were ‘boundary objects’ (Wenger, 1998, p. 105), interfaces between two or more communities of practice. Etienne Wenger’s work on communities of practice emphasises that such communities have a powerful shaping role around setting the worldview and actions of particular stakeholders. However, whether driven by the translocal habitus of planning professionals (Hillier, 2005), or the locally distinctive policy milieu set by the municipality of Sheffield, planners (for example) are part of a web of interdependent communities of practice and all such communities (necessarily) have such points of overlap and/or interaction with other communities. These diverse sites of encounter need to be studied in order to understand how different communities of practice find ways of making ‘common ground’.

In his own study Wenger shows how medical insurance claim forms work as translation devices, passing between different communities of practice and conveying meaning between them. Their usefulness and success (and their capacity to marshal polyvalence) depends on their making abstractions from reality and ordering information and/or use (a familiarisation process). At Furnace Park we can see this, for example, in the fate of the planning application for the park and the way that a categorisation was found to accommodate its ‘looseness’. Here, the planning application forms were designed by the planning department in response to the structural command of the law;

they sought the information that the planners needed in order to perform their duties in a compliant (and 'professional') manner. But to some degree accommodation had to be made to the interpretive world of the 'lay' applicant, in order that a conceptual common ground could be framed in the application. The process entails a degree of joint familiarisation about the nature of the Furnace Park proposal. It transpires that there is a certain, necessary looseness within the planning system and its forms. The place of encounter that these forms represent, then, is a space of a mutual familiarisation.

This accommodation of the difference of others was a common feature of the encounters that we witnessed and it is characteristic of the adaptiveness found by Mariana Valverde (2012) in her studies of the everyday application of municipal law to the urban realm (for few communities of practice have the ability autonomously to impose their will unaided or unhindered upon the world). Instead, in the practice of their communities, a further degree of accommodation – a helping hand – is made to the 'stranger' unfamiliar with the rigours of the host's world. Small – but noticeable – procedural indulgence may be offered up in order to attain that mutually desirable outcome from the interaction, each leaving with their communities' main goal achieved. This is how familiarisation is nurtured across groups who start out as strangers to each other, and it is how strangers adjust their position towards each other in order to establish enough 'common-ground' to enable them to purposively progress their overlapping projects. Likewise, for Setha Löw (2013), places become meaningful and shared as agreed, stable objects through processes of 'conjunctive experience' (p. 899), and the 'intrinsic logics' (p. 904) that arise from them: in our words, a familiarisation.

Acknowledging the materialities of the encounter

The strangers we met in the early stages of the project were not all human. The debris we cleared from the site pointed to other human strangers, whom we never met. Through the broken lawnmower, nappies, syringes, condoms, food wrappers, padlocks, keys, shoes, make-up compacts, cigarette packets, a blank application form for housing benefit, empty bottles, railway sleepers and traffic cones, we glimpsed (but only faintly via these cyphers) the sex workers and their clients, the fly-tippers and others whose debris offers up no clear clue to their identity.

But above and beyond this, we quickly learned of a 'more than human' (Whatmore, 2006, p. 606) dimension to the matter comprising our site's made-ground. Jane Bennett (2010) has written of sensing this 'vibrancy' whilst gazing upon a gutter and its accumulated dross, and of how that matter shimmered 'back and forth between debris and thing […] as existents in excess of their association with human meanings, habits or projects' (2010, p. 4), refusing to yield a stable identity, a fixed set

of characteristics by which that matter could be rendered fully familiar. It thus remained strange, not fully knowable, ontologically withdrawn into the shadows (Harman, 2010).

In the Furnace Park project the ground challenged us in ways – and to an extent – that we never anticipated. As we sought to physically engage with the site, we soon found that it had the ability to resist our desire to both 'know' and to 'work' it. 'Our' ground – via its uneven, damaged topography full of bumps and holes, root balls and tree stumps, debris and detritus – stubbornly *got in the way* of our project. Thus, to our surprise, the site itself became the most resolute stranger within the mesh of encounters that made up the project's opening phase. The limits of our mastery were revealed to us in the mirror of this ground; we learned that it was not, and never would be, a blank canvass. We therefore had to get to know the site as best we might, to see what it would actually allow us to do (particularly given the meagre resources available to us to wage an aggressive war-of-change against it). Therefore, in order to move the Furnace Park project forward we needed to render the ground familiar (i.e. to find a way to eliminate – or at least to reduce – its strangeness).

But whilst our need to get-to-know the site was born of the pragmatic exigencies of 'doing physical works', there were other drivers urging us to de-strange the ground of our 'brownfield' site: these were the deep-rooted anxieties within the urban development system that urban sites may have chemical contamination from prior uses, posing the risk of both public danger and liability. Our non-invasive contamination survey had deemed the site to have a low risk of such contamination on the basis of a review of historical mapping, a surficial visual inspection and our professional adviser's experience of other similar sites. But (as is commonly the case with sites of this type) the actual cleanliness of the matter beneath the surface of our site could not be proven because of the impracticality for our modest project of conducting full-blown invasive ground investigation.

Because the condition of our sub-surface had never been directly proven (and probably never could be because any extent of sampling has inferential limits, given contamination's spatial randomness) we had to resort to risk management based precautions: the damaged ground could not be broken, root balls could not be removed, tree stumps could not be dug out, stakes could not be dug in. Our subsurface sat beneath us as an unknown – as a stranger – an indeterminate zone of contingency, that shaped (and limited) how we could use the surface of 'our' site. Accordingly our site ironically became less loose through its residual strangeness.

The following account of our troublesome encounter with 'the hole' speaks of our many formative experiences, of being repeatedly unsettled by the stranger-like character of 'our' ground.

The hole was discovered in an early site walkover, a man-made void revealed to us through a small surface fissure. A glimpse inside found an elderly looking pipe and a cavity of unknown size. Necessary conjecture followed on the heels of this discovery. Was it still part of a live system? Might it be a gas pipe? We had to think through the implications. A succession of contractors was invited to peer into the hole, each giving a different interpretation of its likely origin, purpose and significance. Various strategies were proposed for 'solving' the problem. Eventually, we accepted advice that infilling the hole was the best way forward. As we stood by the hole on the day appointed for its filling – the satisfaction of a decision finally made, a plan coming to fruition, welling over us – the ground suddenly gave way beneath one of the tree surgeons working on site that day, his foot sucked down into a different part of this void. Almost simultaneously, the contractor inspecting the original hole discovered it contained a wasps' nest and pest control operatives had to be called in. That day was deeply unsettling as an instant event, as a reassertion of the strange resistance of this site and a cause of further delay to our site clearance works programme. Once the wasps' nest was cleared and stakes had been pushed into the area surrounding the hole to determine (again) its extent, suitable fill material was brought to the site and poured into it. But, upon re-inspection the following day the hole had unexpectedly reappeared, the fill having settled overnight down into the void. A second load was ordered. The hole was filled again and capped with concrete. Eventually the hole stopped consuming the votive matter offered up to it. The strange agency of the hole was quelled, but to this day our experience with it has left us destabilized – humbled to the possibility that our ground, anywhere upon the site, may not be unquestionably firm or unquestionably fixed in form.

As the example of the hole shows, our project required the co-option of many alien-to-us practices and bodies of knowledge, and all of which sought to create familiarisation – a de-stranging of and a seeking of certainty for – the site's ground conditions, but none of which were as unequivocal as we might have expected. There were many views on what to do about the hole, each sensible-sounding in their own terms. We found ourselves fascinated by this 'other' discursive realm, an action-oriented world in which 'problems' are to be encountered and made sense of through touch, smell, peering and prodding. Here, standing at the threshold of a void, there was no text, there was no document in which the answer to the hole (or its origin or solution) would be found. Instead, the hole was dealt with through trial and error, by processes of deliberation and local experimentation, which often left a residual uncertainty and attendant anxiety. Portions and aspects of our ground remained stubbornly strange.

Our project encountered a particularly resonant example of this when, during the acquisition process a suggestion emerged that as central Sheffield was bombed in the war, there might

therefore be unexploded ordnance on the site. A ghost – a fear attached to a contingency – thus rose up out of the ground and the only way to quell it (and this reverberation of the strange/dis-orderly) was to commission an unexploded bomb (UXB) survey. Consequently, an issue was on the table. It had to be made to go away, and so a professionally defensible search technique was applied to the surface of the site, a report written and order restored to the process. It still doesn't prove that there are no UXB on the site, but everyone is now happy that that this is very unlikely, largely because it is very rare for UXB to be encountered in ground clearance works in the UK.

But such encounters where they do arise (here with the bomb as the stranger) have de-familiarisation effects. As site that was known, becomes unknown. Gabriel Moshenska (2010) has written of the subtle ways in which a 'fragmented' commemoration of the London Blitz is performed in that city through a process of 'counter-memory', following the occasional emergence of UXB and other subterranean fragments (both physical and symbolic) of the Blitz into the 'everyday life' of the city. The unearthing of these bombs stop the 'now' in its tracks and force us to confront the alien 'past' of what may until then have been regarded as a safe, mundane and inherently 'knowable' site. Such disturbances – the sudden apprehension of dangerous matter from another place and time – have an unsettling, estranging quality. And this spectre cannot be fully assimilated into the sober world of the order-seeking professionals, for bomb-fall paths have little predictability and few records. Through such material traces (or fears of them), brownfield sites like Furnace Park show themselves to be uncertain, and thus disorderly, strange and potent. And because this possibility for irruption (and if not of bombs, then of contamination or undocumented subterranean infrastructure) exists potentially at any site, these sober processes of land management and development are at their core haunted by something that cannot fully be laid to rest within orderly techno-professional rational expertise.

Much of Sheffield, like the East End of London, is a 'damaged topography' (Sinclair, 2011, p. 61), 'bad turf' with a 'suppressed history' (Sinclair, 2003, p. 71). The environmental survey we commissioned concluded that the Furnace Park site represents a low risk. We have a voluminous report that presents reams of data. It purports to describe the site, and yet fundamentally we are left not knowing it, because we are left knowing that there are aspects of its past and its condition that we simply cannot know. That surplus unsettles as much as it reassures.

Our experience with the 'stranger' nature of our own ground at the site has emphasised to us how we too often ignore the ground, or take its certainty for granted. In so doing we miss the framing role of ground and background to a project (Dripps, 2005). Furnace Park's backstories leaked messily into our present, the 'memory-mud' (Sinclair, 2011, p. 59) clogging all transcendental ambition and

lending the site its own agency. We worked around root balls, because we could not remove them. We couldn't drill down into the concrete or rubble in order to secure our temporary constructions and we couldn't lay any foundations, so we had to find other ways of doing things, working around problems, being creative in our engagements with these recalcitrant strangers. But it was through our engagement with these difficulties that we are perhaps became most aware of the interface between our own embodied presence and the site's dynamic materiality.

But this revelation of the uncertain nature of ground is not – as we have already sought to show in our account of engagements with 'the hole' – news to everyone. To 'ground workers' this restlessness is an intrinsic portion of their knowledge and practices. Even the built environment professionals have a sense of it, as we see when a lawyer specialising in construction writes of ground's commonly encountered strangeness thus:

> Over and over, projects have been affected by unexpectedly bad ground conditions [...] running silt or sand, hard rock or inherent groundwater are typical culprits in this project quagmire. (Bailey, 2007, p. 1).

Works contracts routinely parcel up and allocate so-called 'ground conditions risk'; pre-acquisition surveys are conducted to attempt to 'know' the site before it is purchased. And yet, the industry is painfully aware that it can never fully know the sites that it seeks to redevelop. Time and cost overruns due to encountering adverse ground conditions are common, and indeed is the most common cause of cost and time overruns on brownfield site based redevelopments (ICE 1991). As Martin van Staveren (2006) shows, the industry thus seeks to minimise, manage and contractually allocate, rather than to eliminate, such risk factors.

Thus, that ground is a stranger is common knowledge amongst those who work and advise upon such sites, but it is managed within a *workaday* matter of fact register. It is acknowledged as ever-present, but it is not subjected to theoretical (and/or affective) reflection. Much has been written about techniques of site treatment, but little on this uncertainty of ground itself – of its presence as a stranger – or how it is encountered or accommodated within brownfield regeneration. Thus, at Furnace Park – as an academic, arts and humanities-led project – we have had the novel opportunity to explicate processes of encounter with ground-as-stranger that normally take place unremarked upon in other, more pragmatic, place-making realms. Accordingly we have sought (in this article and elsewhere) to try to find ways to engage and evocatively portray ground's awkward presence on a mundane site, using narrative to capture the contingent and stratigraphic character of ground's materiality (Mitchell 2011). In pursuing this our aim has been to contribute towards a rebalancing of the geo-humanities' (Whatmore, 2006; Bennett, 2010; Bogost, 2011; Mitchell, 2011; Ellsworth &

Kruse, 2012; Woodard, 2013) tendency to dwell – in fairly dis-located terms – upon the geologic as apocalyptic or as a stranger because of its vastness (e.g. as one of Morton's (2013) 'hyperobjects'), by instead focussing in on an empirical, pragmatic and 'everyday scale' example of ground's strangeness, thereby offering a *localised* questioning of 'the coherence of the human as a territorialising force of the Earth' (Yusoff, 2013, p.779).

Conclusion: Can strangeness remain?

The site acquisition and clearance phases of our project gave us the opportunity to witness the on-site meaning-making practices of professional advisers and in particular to notice the restless surplus produced by attempts to eliminate strangeness from their operations. As these professionals traipse across derelict sites, they seek to make the objects found there conform to the interpretive schema they bring with them. They methodically work their way around the entire perimeter, peering up close, long and hard into every hole, pit, disturbance and mound that comes into their path, imprinting order upon scrubland. Considerable time is spent on this shuttling back and forth between the scrubby, messy, assemblage of mineral, organic and hybrid stuff that is the site in 3D, the individuated structures noted on the black and white maps and the corralled, ordered, assigned and labelled data. Through this purposive reading sites become known and tamed *for a purpose*; they become familiar by cross-reference to the experience of other sites and projects such that only the true anomaly is left unassimilated. In this process these professionals try to find a way to eliminate strangeness.

But how can our project's 'loose' aspirations fare against these professional practices? The call to familiarisation, to a normalisation of any site is a strong one. Even in the project's initial site clearance and preparation phase – a phase that we mistakenly thought would be brief and uneventful – some structures of control, leadership and accountability emerged as we strove to necessarily render the site familiar. This experience suggests that there are limits to the preservation of copious 'looseness' within projects actively creating spatially fixed sites of (and for) encounter, such as Furnace Park. To take land on – to enter into a formal relationship with it and assume legal responsibility for it – reveals a strange world of unfamiliar urban processes and strange forms of encounter. Through the pragmatics of doing – of committing to a project such as this – sites inevitably become made less strange, stakeholders become less strange to each other and ambitions become more focused on the achievable and the communicative, for to be sustainable a project like this has to be made meaningful to wider communities. Through such processes, played out upon a variety of surfaces of encounter (scrubland, paper, offices) and across disparate communities of practice, Furnace Park appears nudged towards a relatively stable identity and set of expectations

that are capable of being shared across the communities of those once strangers to it, and to each other.

And yet we still strove to preserve something of the dis-order found at this site, to find a way of curating it as a loose order, 'everywhere punched and torn open by ellipses, drifts, and leaks of meaning: […] a sieve-order' (De Certeau, 1984, p. 107). In moments of exasperation and obstacle, the prospect of an *anti*-project, a *leaving-things-exactly-as-they-are* loomed in our minds as the ultimate transgressive deliverable for our project: a confounding of a productivist logic that assumes that time, money and effort applied produce *something.* But once underway, we soon found that doing nothing – making no impact upon the site – was not a feasible option, given the weight of stakeholders' expectations. There was an expectation that a specific something – a creative and experimental place – would be formed. Thus, we increasingly came to realise that a 'loose' space is itself a type of place, and one (like any other) that must be made and maintained by active intervention in the world.

Having become reconciled to doing *something*, we have sought through our curation of Furnace Park to create narratives of uncertainty rather than domesticating the site. But inevitably in our site acquisition and clearance we have to adjust the site to our will, render it familiar, safe and usable *to a degree*. We acknowledge that even a 'loose' arts-led occupation of this space shapes and affects it. We have cleared the site of weeds and detritus to make a stage and other useable areas; we have demarcated zones within the ostensibly amorphous site, ascribing future activity and purpose. So, to an extent, ordering seems unavoidable. Even the most emancipatory use of a site requires a narrowing of its potentialities. As Grosz notes, artists engage with matter by working within 'self-imposed constraints' (2008, p. 4) that enable the work to be effective and meaningful. As she puts it: 'framing is how chaos becomes territory. Framing is the means by which objects are delimited, qualities unleashed and art made possible' (p. 17).

Thus Furnace Park became made; it became a location and through that transformation became enmeshed in the forces of development, regeneration and ordering. Ours is a case study of 'the practical challenges of intervening' (Koch & Latham, 2012, p. 526) in urban place-making. It is not inevitable that this project will produce a recognised and accepted typology of place, but the pressure urging us towards this was palpable. Nonetheless, our experience thus far has suggested that we will never lose our site's strangeness entirely, for we have found that more we seek to master the site through knowing it, the more that it slips away from us and that residual uncertainty and strangeness are a by-product of our desire to know and master it through our sustained place-making encounters.

Note

1. Email: a.j.jackson@sheffield.ac.uk

2. And in contrast, see Iveson (2013) for a consideration of the political prospects of a rebel 'Do-It-Yourself' urbanism in which the urban development system is directly and explicitly challenged through spatial acts of uncovenanted appropriation and subversion.

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