

Assemblage urbanism: the role of heritage in urban placemaking

Assemblage
urbanism

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Abstract

Purpose – The paper explores the potential value of urban assemblage theory as a conceptual framework for understanding the role heritage has in social sustainable urban placemaking. The authors conceptualise urban placemaking as a dynamic and complex social assemblage. Heritage is one of the many dimensions of such a complex and dynamic urban assembly. Based on the approach to urban assemblage theory, the authors aim to uncover how postindustrial city-making unfolds. When approaching the case studies, the authors ask the following: Whose city for which citizens are visible through the selected case studies? How is social sustainability achieved through heritage in urban placemaking?

Design/methodology/approach – The main research material is derived from theoretical literature and the testing of an assemblage methodological approach through three Norwegian urban regeneration case studies where heritage partake in urban placemaking. The three case studies are the Tukthus wall (what is left of an 19th century old prison), the Vulkan neighbourhood (an 19th century industrial working area) and Sørengaika (an 19th century industrial harbour area) in Oslo, Norway. The three case studies are representing urban regeneration projects which are common worldwide, and not at least in a European context.

Findings – The paper reveals the dynamic factors and processes at play in urban placemaking, which has its own distinct character by the uses of heritage in each of the case study areas. Placemaking could produce “closed” systems which are stable in accordance with its original functions, or they could be “open” systems affected by the various drivers of change. The paper shows how these forces are depending on two sets of binary forces at play in urban placemaking: forces of “assemblages” co-creating a place versus destabilising forces of “disassembly” which is redefining the place as a process affected by reassembled placemaking.

Research limitations/implications – For research, the authors focus on the implications this paper has for the field of urban heritage studies as it provides a useful framework to capture the dynamic complexity of urban heritage areas.

Practical implications – For practice, the authors state that the paper can provide a useful platform for dialogue and critical thinking on strategies being planned.

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Social implications – For society, the paper promotes the significance in terms of fostering an inclusive way of thinking and planning for urban heritage futures.

Originality/value – The paper outlines dynamics of urban regeneration through heritage which are significant for understanding urban transformation as value for offering practical solutions to social problems in urban planning. The assemblage methodological approach (1) makes awareness of the dynamic processes at play in urban placemaking and makes the ground for mapping issue at stake in urban placemaking; (2) becomes a source for modelling urban regeneration through heritage by defining a conceptual framework of dynamic interactions in urban placemaking; and (3) defines a critically reflexive tool for evaluating good versus bad (heritage-led) urban development projects.

Keywords Urban regeneration, Urban heritage, Power relations, Assemblage theory, Deep cities

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

This work explores the links between the urban assemblage approach and social sustainability in the context of historic urban environments. In doing so, this paper proposes new strategies to analyse the social value of urban heritage transformations in placemaking. In urban planning, policies fostering the idea of “commercial cities” (cities that improve incomes, jobs and profits) with “smarter cities” (cities that are technological, digital and interactive) and “greener cities” (cities that are environmentally friendly) have been a way of accommodating strategies for more economically, culturally and environmentally sustainable urban development. Such policies also emphasise a desire to create social sustainability, which involves not only individual and group identity but also social cohesion, community building and participation, as well as the continuity of social life ([Cultural Heritage Counts for Europe \(CHCFE\), 2015](#), p. 1). Among the various sustainability approaches, social sustainability challenges ‘remain vague and complex to operationalise [...] and consist of hybrid sets of hard-to-measure “soft” indicators and emphasis on ambiguous concepts such as governance, community and culture’ ([Landorf, 2019](#), p. 78). A key aspect for understanding the sustainability of cities is to examine from an assemblage and multilayer perspective the transformative nature of cities over time, their complex processes and driving forces and how urban heritage, here as a product of changing cities, endorses a series of social values that can be activated as a resource for making present urban development more sustainable. Equivalent to the concepts of “smart cities” and “green cities”, the idea of “deep cities” (the deep layering and transformative and transtemporal characteristics of cities) will be a suitable instrument for unpacking the dynamics of what makes a place a “good” place for people when assuming the role heritage plays in socially inclusive and sustainable placemaking ([Fouseki et al., 2020](#)). In this context, it will be socially wise to draw on a concept regarding “deep cities”; that is, how the transformative and temporal past defines a way of thinking about historical change and a materiality that is relict and fragmented and will become a resource in urban planning.

In placemaking, social sustainability focuses on the dynamic practices and networks that contain material and nonmaterial factors, including social capital, community involvement, participatory engagement, cultural traditions and the inclusion and mitigation of social inequalities ([Dempsey et al., 2011](#), p. 290); it involves establishing the physical spaces and social conditions that create environments conducive to quality of life ([Landorf, 2019](#)). A socially sustainable city can be defined as a “liveable city” (for an overview of this concept, see [Kaal, 2011](#)), and by including the social use of heritage in the blending of historically and renewed urban environments, we can support factors such as identity, belonging, happiness and health for all citizens. Thus, it can be argued that community involvement and participatory engagement in urban planning allow for negotiation and dialogue among the various groups that have an interest in a place leading to the development of heritage-led regeneration projects. In this vein, participation can be considered time consuming, but it could potentially be a fruitful

way of mediating between divergent interests, especially in urban heritage areas, where the interests of developers may clash with those of archaeologists, conservators and surrounding communities (e.g. Fouseki, 2015; Pastor Pérez and Ruiz Martínez, 2018). However, debates still rage over the use of the term “community”, and there is a general lack of knowledge on how decision-making and participatory planning processes actively integrate heritage-related interests in the placemaking framework (Rey-Pérez and Pereira Roders, 2020; Sánchez Carretero *et al.*, 2019). Smith and Waterton (2013) discussed the notion of community in the context of heritage. What is a community? How is it defined and by whom? These are important questions to ask before implementing participatory processes in planning projects. Lusiani and Zan (2013, p. 113) indicated that local communities often represent the main threats to heritage preservation (e.g. in cases of speculative, political or even criminal interests) and that not all communities, nor local practices, align with democratic processes. Similarly, Berger *et al.* (2020) suggested “a more self-aware, self-reflective and critical use of the concept of community”, which means that participation would benefit from relational perspectives that could allow the “recognition of the power of representations of social relationships in a particular place and time and provide an analytical frame for their political rationalities” (p. 345).

Urban transformation often involves heritage conservation, and the use of heritage in urban placemaking is one of the many drivers of change (Zeren Gülersoy and Gürler, 2011, p. 11). A term commonly used in urban transformation projects of heritage areas is “heritage-led regeneration”. This term connotes initiatives in which the driver for the social, economic and cultural (including social) revival of a declined urban (or rural) area is the heritage that makes a local place distinct (Fouseki and Nicolau, 2018, p. 230; Fouseki *et al.*, 2020, p. 3; see also Fouseki, 2022). According to Fouseki and Nicolau (2018, p. 232), studies evaluating the impact of heritage on sustainable development often adopt one-dimensional methodological approaches by using social and economic indicators separately rather than connected. To address this one-dimensionality that underpins many theoretical, practical or evaluative studies, in this article, we attempt to bridge strategies on social sustainability with studies on the social value of urban transformations for analysing the processes and dynamics of urban placemaking through heritage. We will achieve this through a methodological approach informed by urban assemblage theory. Finally, we introduce an innovative conceptual framework for analysing the role of heritage in socially sustainable placemaking. To this end, we argue that by using “urban assemblage theory”, which we will return to below, we can better understand the dynamic and complex processes of urban regeneration that involve the uses of heritage for achieving socially sustainable cities and analysing the dynamics at play in urban placemaking involving heritage (for a similar argument on urban conservation planning, see Yadollahi, 2017). To test some key principles in urban assemblage theory as a methodological tool for analysing how urban heritage interacts with the driving forces, processes and dynamic relationships that occur in today’s urban placemaking, we will analyse the planning processes of three Norwegian case studies in which heritage has been adapted in urban regeneration. In line with the intentions of the critical urban theory introduced below, we aim to find a path from policy on urban social sustainability to how cities work in practice. Finally, building on the results from the case studies, we hold a discussion of the meaning and implications of viewing urban redevelopment as an *assemblage* in urban placemaking, thereby concluding about which areas of application the use of assemblage methodology can bring to urban heritage studies.

Assemblage urbanism

In critical urban theory (also called critical urbanism), there are several slogans, such as “right to the city” and “cities for citizens” (see, e.g. Jacobs, 1965; Harvey, 2003), which direct attention to the reinvigoration of community involvement and participatory urban civil societies.

Brenner wrote that a “more democratic, socially just and sustainable form of urbanisation is possible”, which “involves the critique of ideology and the critique of power, inequality, injustice and exploitation, at once within and among cities” (Brenner, 2012, p. 11; see also Brenner *et al.*, 2012, p. 5). Critical urbanism refers to responding to societal needs in cities by critically reflecting on how the intersection of different disciplines brings new methods to urban planning (Herz *et al.*, 2022), resulting in practical solutions to social problems in urban placemaking. With reference to critical urbanism, “[m]apping the possible pathways of social transformation [. . .] involves, first and foremost, understanding the nature of contemporary patterns of urban restructuring, and then, on that basis, analysing their implications for action” (Brenner *et al.*, 2012, p. 3). In other words, critical urban theory explains contemporary modes of urbanisation and counter inequality in cities (Sendra, 2015, p. 820). It is concerned with making cities inclusive for all regarding citizenship and well-being, thereby becoming a vital theoretical asset for approaching social sustainability.

Taking this a step further, a distinct theoretical approach within (critical) urbanism is assemblage urbanism (McFarlane, 2011), which, from the empirical, methodological and ontological levels of knowledge, seeks to combine urban trajectories on human and non-human interfaces, networked interdependencies and the production of sociomaterial infrastructures, as well as human agency and social forces, in social transformation processes (Brenner *et al.*, 2011; see also McGuirk *et al.*, 2016; Munthe-Kaas, 2017). Assemblage urbanism focuses on overarching power structures that influence city life and politics by studying the concrete and situated practices of the sociomaterial and sociospatial ordering of urban space and the complexity of social space in placemaking (Kamalipour and Peimani, 2015, pp. 406–407). This involves a focus on both the structural and dynamic conditions in society, as expressed by the concept of “planetary urbanisation”, for understanding “urban heritage systems” from place-specific situations to comparable processes of urbanisation worldwide. Brenner and Schmid argued:

Today, urbanisation is a process that affects the whole territory of the world and not only isolated parts of it. The urban represents an increasingly worldwide, if unevenly woven, fabric in which the sociocultural and political-economic relations of capitalism are enmeshed. This situation of planetary urbanisation means that even sociospatial arrangements and infrastructural networks that lie well beyond traditional city cores, metropolitan regions, urban peripheries and peri-urban zones have become integral parts of a worldwide urban condition (2014, p. 751).

This planetary perspective on urbanisation does not exclude the dynamic relationships in local urban environments (e.g. see Plate 1).



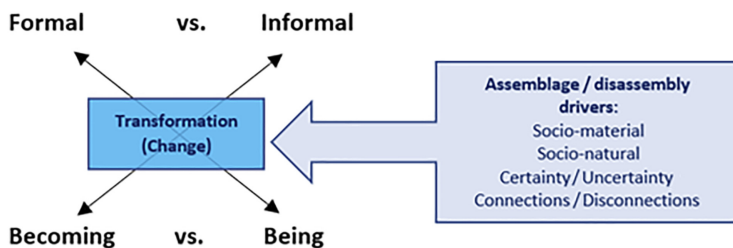
Note(s): Writing “Stop the gentrification” (of our neighbourhood) signed by the symbol “A” for Anarchists, a social activism protest movement against global capitalist gentrification, which is believed to promote stereotypical places and the loss of uniqueness, hence promoting alienation. Photo: Torgrim Sneve Guttormsen, NIKU

Plate 1.
Tagging at a Nordic “Starbucks-like” coffeehouse chain at Grünerløkka in Oslo, Norway

The “urban assemblage” concept builds on Deleuze and Guattari’s “rhizome” and “agencement” theories and Latour’s “actor-network theory” (ANT), describing not only “the coming together of heterogeneous elements within an institution, place, built structure or art form” but also “careful attention to the multiple materialities of socio-natural relations” (Brenner *et al.*, 2011, pp. 227–233), which brings into focus the active agency of material elements in the social life of cities (from objects, buildings and their materials to infrastructural grids and sensor and social networking data), as well as on how nature, technology and humanity are dynamically interwoven components in social life (de Certeau, 1985). These theories are particularly relevant to our goal of unpacking the complex dynamic urban transformation of heritage places and the interaction between heritage and social sustainability. This social space is assembled across multiple “fields” ranging from physical neighbourhoods to the lives of humans and non-humans. Similar to ANT, assemblage theory includes attending to the more-than-human perspectives on heritage that account for both human and non-human agency (Bonacchi, 2021; Sterling, 2020; Fouseki, 2022). Since our focus is on unpacking the dynamic complexities of urban heritage assemblages, we can draw on system thinking theories and critical realism, which approach reality as an “open system” that defines both stable and destabilising forces, uncertainty (new possibilities through, e.g. spontaneity and improvisation) and disconnections (“failure” according to intention, unbound points and dissonance; see Figure 1). Based on the above, the process of “urban regeneration” and “urban transformation” is a dynamic and systemic process consisting of dynamic dimensions, such as heritage (Fouseki, 2022). Heritage-driven urban transformation is thus imbued with both stability and instability, certainty and uncertainty, connections and disconnections and linear and non-linear relationships.

In addition, for assemblage thinkers, twofold binary concepts, such as being/becoming, formal/informal, tree/rhizome, striated/smooth and hierarchy/network, have been a valuable cognitive resource for understanding the socio-spatial assemblages of urban places and the spatiotemporal (and sociomaterial) interactions in which new interactions might create novel use of places and materials. The formal/informal twofold can, for instance, elaborate on the ways in which the formal “strategies” of the state collide with the everyday informal “tactics” of the citizens. The twofold concept of tree-like/rhizomatic is another valuable contribution for understanding urban places. Kamalipour and Peimani exemplified this as follows:

Tree-like structures are hierarchic and rigidly stratified, while rhizomatic and meshwork-like structures are often loosely structured. In a sense, rhizomatic structures contribute to the



Note(s): This includes the historicity of place and variable actions and intentions in placemaking for creating sustainable urban environments. Placemaking is an open system affected by the various drivers of change, depending on two sets of interrelated design concepts: assemblage and disassembly (and thereby, as a process affected by reassembled placemaking)

Source(s): Model made by the authors

Figure 1. An assemblage approach directs attention to the dynamic relationships in placemaking where there is a criss-crossing between “formal” and “informal”, as well as between “being” and “becoming” in urban transformation processes

generation of resilient and flexible assemblages as intensive networks of multiplicities with external/internal relations. In other words, the differences between “strata/tree-like” and “rhizome/self-consistent aggregate” are about the articulation of homogeneous and heterogeneous elements. Hence, the hierarchical city (central place structure) is distinguishable from the meshwork-like one (network system) since the former gives rise to rigidified pyramid-like and homogenised cultural structures, while the latter advocates for interlocking heterogeneous elements. Nonetheless, the dichotomy of strata and rhizome is a continuum with two ends: the most hierarchic and the most intense and de-stratified matter. [T]he experience of everyday urban life encompasses a variety of rhizomatic and hierarchic practices in relation to the public and private spaces. (2015, p. 404).

This notion of twofold conceptions, such as the tree-like/rhizomatic (thereby on the homogeneous versus heterogeneous city), in assemblage theories is contextualised as a vivid conceptual framework that stresses the ability to capture the sociomaterial and sociospatial complexities in cities.

Assemblage theoretical approaches are vague and diffuse and, hence, function more on an ontological level as a critical reflection on cities, in other words, a door-opener to think in new productive directions. This has been an important source of inspiration for our study, but we agree with Neil Brenner, David J. Madden and David Wachsmuth that “the power of the assemblage approach may be most productively explored when its conceptual, methodological, empirical and normative parameters are circumscribed rather precisely” (2011, p. 229). Moreover, from the viewpoint of heritage studies, the idea of assemblage allows us to work from different positions, both systemic and discursive, understanding the urban as a multivocal and diverse space where histories intersect, reproduce and transform.

In this paper, we begin by defining how urban placemaking involving heritage is constructed and represented in our selected case studies, which include a discussion of the intentions and results. For this purpose, we implement an assemblage theory concept that includes the dynamic twofold process of “becoming” and “being” in placemaking, where “becoming” defines a continual process of both the past changes (history) and possibilities for future changes (Kamalipour and Peimani, 2015, pp. 404–405; Sendra, 2015). Rather than perceiving placemaking as a movement from design (management and planning) to a finished ready-to-use product – thereby measured as a success or failure depending on the intended purpose – an assemblage perspective involves studying the complex placemaking mechanisms at work in the continuous process of becoming and being “reassembled”; that is, moving out of the control of a singular plan. Within this perspective, we also include another twofold concept – the “formal” and “informal” – to analyse distinctions between the planned (strata/tree-like) and the unplanned (rhizomatic): the ways in which the strategies of experts (urban planners, architects and heritage managers) may collide with or nourish the everyday “tactics” and unauthorised discourses of citizens (Kamalipour and Peimani, 2015; Russell *et al.*, 2011; Sweeney *et al.*, 2018).

However, the interpretations “sanctioned” by a heritage management agency may result from the co-workings of site managers and volunteers, for example, with each bringing their own personal and professional “personae” to the heritage-making process. Therefore, the distinction between “formal” and “informal” and between “authorised” and “unauthorised” is less sharp than is often claimed in the heritage literature. Assemblage theory can help us understand such nuances and complexities. As an open system, urban placemaking is based on the drivers of both “assemblage” and “disassembly”, which provide opportunities for informal, unplanned activities to unfold into new types of assemblages that could become formal when included in the policies they were not originally intended for. This perspective addresses the view of urban (heritage) placemaking as unruly and unfinished, where the possibilities for new adaptation based on public participation are open to reassembly. This means that the study of placemaking should not only focus on the planned (certainty,

intended connections and expected outcomes) but also on what provides an opportunity for the unplanned (uncertainty, disconnections and unintended consequences).

Based on our approach to urban assemblage theory, we aim to uncover how post-industrial city-making unfolds from a critical urbanism perspective. When approaching our case studies, we ask the following questions: Who has the rights to the city? Whose city's citizens are visible through the selected case studies? In other words, how inclusive is the place? How is social sustainability achieved through heritage in urban placemaking? Applied to urban regeneration, we ask if and how heritage is involved in our selected case studies. Although there is a dynamic relationship among the actors involved in urban regeneration, power relationships are always involved. We can distinguish among (at least) three dimensions of power: 1) to get someone to do something against their will; 2) to keep certain issues away from the political, social and cultural agendas and 3) to get someone else to desire the same as you (e.g. [Lukes, 2005](#)). Thus, power includes both overt and covert dimensions as part of the assemblages.

Three case studies in Oslo, Norway

In our case studies, we drew on the conceptual assemblage framework described above ([Figure 1](#)). We selected three cases that represent the various transformation processes through urban regeneration that involve cultural heritage in different parts of Oslo, Norway: (1) a ruin wall from a demolished eighteenth-century prison that is today part of a new urban quarter in downtown Oslo, (2) a nineteenth-century industrial site that has become a food market and is part of a newly created city district by the Aker River, which divides Oslo East from Oslo West, and (3) the transformation of a nineteenth-century industrial harbour area. The data analysed consist of field observations, planning documents, historical photos and technical reports and interviews with the heritage management sector and people at the respective sites.

The Tukthus Prison's ruin wall

The historic Tukthus quarter [*Tukthuskvartalet*] from the eighteenth century covered two blocks between the streets of Storgata and Torggata. 'Tukthuset' was finished in the autumn of 1741, as a forced labour institution for the unemployed and poor. The prison house was built on two floors, with a Church in the centre. It originally had two dormitories: one for men and one for women. From the beginning of the 1880s, the prison was exclusively used for female prisoners. An open courtyard beside the Church was used as a cemetery. Within the high walls surrounding the quarter in the middle of the city were workshops the inmates used for tanning, weaving woollen fabric, colouring and tobacco spinning. Tukthus first acted as a house of correction or discipline (Norwegian *tukt*), as was common in Norway, following the Danish model of correctional facilities of the time. The aim was also to combat begging and loose moral values – mainly women's – and to correct the behaviour of lazy or uneducated children. The state believed that Tukthus could solve the poverty problem and that the country's economic crisis could benefit from a free labour force. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, the city also began to place convicts in Tukthus (petty criminals, burglars and thieves). Over the years and throughout the 1800s, Tukthus increasingly became a place for punishment (also corporal) rather than a place for improving the moral principles of citizens and socialisation through work.

The history of the place as a prison has witnessed a dark heritage that is associated with a difficult, shameful and painful past. This negative history was perhaps one of the reasons why people did not oppose the demolition of the buildings, which was announced publicly in the media in 1938. During the 1930s, the property was gradually separated, and the buildings were demolished.

The interfaces between “being” and “becoming”, as well as between “formal” and “informal”, in the urban transformation processes are evident in several ways in the case of the Tukthus quarter. When the main prison building was demolished in 1938, an era of about 200 years of use as a prison site was concluded. A process of heritage then began in the “becoming”, which culminated in a new master plan for the area during the 1990s and a new quadrature “being” renewed, with the “reassembled” heritage as part of the new urban design. The new plan differed from the original quadrature structure of the prison complex, thus adding a new historical layer to the city. Only parts of the prison walls remained, which, with its ruin-like appearance, yielded an anecdotal storytelling materiality that concealed a monumental dark heritage associated with pain and shame. In 2000, the new buildings were completed, with the restored ruined wall of the prison integrated as part of a new restaurant and traces in the asphalt crossing the local street. It continued through a large, new office building complex containing a police station and more restaurants (Guttormsen and Simon, 2018; Guttormsen and Skrede, 2022).

The dynamic twofold process of “formal” versus “informal” in the placemaking of the new quarter is evident in the fact that the planning process of the Tukthus quarter has largely been an expert-driven “formal” and “authorised” process in which there have been discussions and disputes among urban planners, architects and heritage managers. A central part of the debate has been on the influence of conservation on the development of urban design. In particular, the discussion has been about the preservation of the ruin in the new architecture, where the ruin wall as a fragmented heritage primarily has aesthetic value and limited public access to the heritage, which is mostly closed inside the new buildings (Guttormsen and Simon, 2018). After the construction of the new buildings was completed in 2000, more ruined heritage was gradually covered by buildings added to the area, thus further restricting public access to the heritage. In the case of Tukthuset, the function of ruin heritage in continual placemaking has been to demonstrate a good example of the processes of “becoming” versus “being” in the area and where the “informal” stakeholders’ interests are represented by property owners who push for improvements in the area for their business interests.

Today, people eat in a restaurant, feeling nostalgic about the aesthetic beauty of a ruined past without knowing that people suffered and died behind these walls (Plate 2). The silhouette of the entrance to the prison building, which was destroyed in the 1930s, is used semiotically to brand the restaurant. Heritage has become purified and transgressed, becoming part of the contemporary life of the area’s vibrant nightlife, where heritage is used anecdotally, staged and branded to create a suitable atmosphere for consumers socialising in nearby cafés and squares. In the 1990s, archaeologists excavated the skeletons from the prison’s graveyard and dismantled them and, through conservation techniques, “reassembled” the ruin wall for integration into the new architecture.

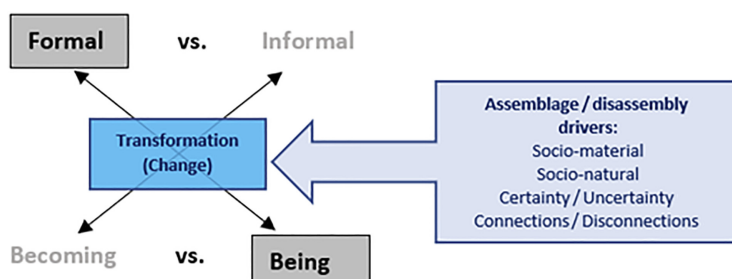


Plate 2.

A citizen passing by the Tukthuset ruin wall. Photo: Torggrim Sneve Guttormsen, NIKU

Despite these cultural heritage practices and their dark history, these heritage assemblages are not crucial for developing the area. Heritage has a marginal function in the urban regeneration of the area, but it is there, although “hidden”, filling a space for the visitor’s curiosity but largely unnoticed by people passing by (based on [Guttormsen and Simon’s Street interviews, 2018](#)). Perhaps it is possible to talk about a certain “unconscious” heritage experience because the heritage is like a silent background fused into the new architecture. It is uncertain what would have happened to the quarter in terms of social well-being and identity if the dark heritage was more pronounced, for instance, by displaying text and pictures about the history of the prison and archaeological excavations and heritage assemblages that have contributed to shaping the area.

When referring to the “assemblage” and “disassembly” drivers ([Figure 2](#)), the Tukthus quarter can use heritage as representations of “disconnections” and “unbound points” for a redirection towards creating a more inclusive social space based on stronger public participation for innovation and alternative experiences of the area. A communication strategy that increases public awareness about the divide between dark prison history and how the area is being used today as a vibrant café life could be a tool to achieve this. However, it is the formal processes and a more static urban planning situation of “being” that dominate the placemaking today at the Tukthus quarter.



Note(s): The model shows strong emphasis on formal processes with assemblage drivers connected to uses of heritage as a static “being” (postindustrial city functions such as restaurants, office buildings, etc.). The urban heritage at the Tukthus quarter is, to a lesser extent, connected to informal processes that relate to a dynamic city in the “becoming” (continual transformation)

Source(s): Model made by the authors

Figure 2.
Tukthus
assemblages model

The Vulkan industrial complex

Vulkan is an industrial complex located on the southwest border of Grünerløkka, one of the first industrial neighbourhoods in Oslo. The neighbourhood has been subjected to redevelopment and revitalisation. The Vulkan case also illustrates the interfaces between “being” and “becoming” and between “formal” and “informal” in urban transformation processes. Located on the Aker River, Vulkan was initially an iron foundry in 1873. In the process of “becoming” a place of heritage in urban regeneration, the building and surrounding areas have faced two stages of land-use changes and transformations. From 1968 to 1999, the area was a rental for mixed industrial uses, and during the 2000s, it underwent several regeneration projects. Today, the site includes nine public areas and pedestrian pathways that benefit from a view of the river. Two historical industrial structures

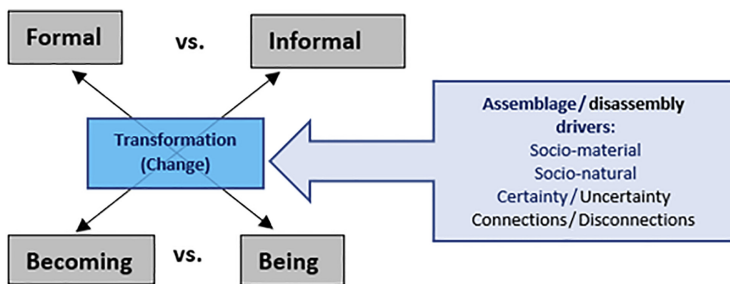
host an indoor food market and a national stage for dance. The remaining surroundings provide spaces for recreation, business, housing, parking, sports and educational institutions. Thus, users of the site include local dwellers, students and people visiting numerous establishments: a hotel, restaurants and bars, a supermarket, a health centre for women, a college and various sports clubs. From “being” a remote and little-visited area, Vulkan is now “becoming” a distinct and colourful district of the city (Plate 3).

The redevelopment plan for Vulkan has demonstrated participatory processes involving culture, higher education and municipal authorities, including the heritage sector (Swensen and Stenbro, 2015). Private entrepreneurs, state and municipal agencies and, to some extent, NGOs have all played a central role in the early planning stage. An inclusive planning process was developed with heritage expertise to frame heritage attributes and values in the service of broader societal interests. Studies in the area have demonstrated that the dialogue between heritage managers and the food market expressed a win-win situation, resulting in both parties fulfilling most of their expectations (Berg, 2017, p. 308). The urban regeneration project included a combination of “socio-material” and “socio-natural” assemblages (referring to the “assemblage” and “disassembly” drivers, Figure 3), with urban policies targeting the nature-culture park of riverbanks. Furthermore, heritage conservation strategies for the industrial site created relational conditions for assembling a well-functioning planning framework (e.g. Berg, 2017). Such assemblage complexes have allowed for the combination of utilitarian, cultural, social and historical values in the urban regeneration process. As a result, stakeholders who participated in the planning process have attributed much of the success and uniqueness of the project to “the location of the sites, the potential tenants and the customers expected to use the area” (Berg, 2017, p. 308).

Swensen and Stenbro (2015) argued that citizens appropriated Vulkan’s new spaces partly as planned and partly as a result of change. The authors explored the “appropriation” and “porosity” concepts (Clemmensen *et al.*, 2010) to emphasise “formal” (authorised) and



Plate 3.
A vibrant “informal”
Vulkan. Copyright:
Finn Ståle Felberg/
Aspelin Ramm



Note(s): The model shows uses of heritage with a strong emphasis on all structural sides and dynamic assemblage vs. disassembly drivers, which is creating a vibrant placemaking that can balance the “being” and “becoming” of place (urban transformation within stabile urban planning intentions of the area)

Source(s): Model made by the authors

Figure 3.
The Vulkan assemblages model

“informal” (unauthorised) dynamics and explained how these concepts were interrelated and needed to be considered in social inclusion and sustainable urban spaces. At Vulkan, the economic dimension can be interpreted as a “formal” dynamic. For instance, a precondition of the Vulkan planning scheme prioritised the adaptive reuse of two industrial buildings, featuring heritage attributes such as red bricks, large windows and spacious rooms (Berg and Stenbro, 2015). The conservation of such material elements provides continuity to the industrial building while creating historical and cultural significance in the landscape. In the process of branding Vulkan, the idea was to create an attractive, visitable area in the city that allowed for diversity and various “urban possibilities” (Berg and Stenbro, 2015). The promotion of such diversity can be seen as an example of an open system approach in assemblage thinking, where the urban space invites “informal” practices (Plate 3 and Figure 3) to operate “formally” within the formality of urban infrastructures (McFarlane, 2019). Swensen and Stenbro (2015) attributed “informal” dynamics to indefiniteness in the planning and design of public spaces. Architects and designers leave areas for undefined purposes, thereby allowing flexibility in urban design for fixed and movable landscape furniture.

Sørengkaia

The interfaces between “being” and “becoming”, as well as between “formal” and “informal”, in urban transformation processes are evident in the Sørengkaia case as well. The Fjord City project embodies the most extensive urban development scheme since the Norwegian capital was burned to the ground in 1624. Initiated about 30 years ago, the project involved the construction of a new city district, representing a part of the city under development dominated by processes of “becoming” (Figure 4). By freeing up the waterfront previously used as a harbour, Fjord City contained a new national opera house, the new Munch Museum, a sequence of high-rise office blocks and several restaurants and private apartments, to mention but a few (Skrede, 2013). Staging such a comprehensive urban development scheme created some tension among the stakeholders, such as architects, private developers, politicians and residents, both new and those already living in the neighbourhoods. What is considered “sustainable” or “nonsustainable” development has been a pivotal topic in the

public debate. The uses of culture, including the social value of heritage, were discussed in terms of generating capital and tourism, although this approach received criticism for being superficial and not really interested in culture *per se*, apart from its economic potential (Skrede, 2016). One area that has been recently developed in Bjørvika is Sørengkaia, which contained a vibrant harbour area in the nineteenth century. Sørengkaia used to be filled with cranes and ship containers until it was transformed or “reassembled” into a new residential area in around 2010, including cafés, restaurants and a large public outdoor pool at the southern end of the peninsula.

In terms of heritage, there are almost no remaining physical structures at Sørengkaia, apart from some moorings and wooden quay structures. The heritage dimension is primarily represented semiotically in black-and-white pictures and textual signposts. This has been done to inform citizens and potential apartment buyers that they are on historic ground. Heritage is, in other words, used by developers to market an area. The semiotic representations function as “disconnections” and “unbound points” (referring to the “assemblage” and “disassembly” drivers) for reimagining the heritage that is lost and not physically there anymore, contrasted with the totally renewed urban space. In several of the entrance halls of the private apartments, there are images of old buildings on the walls. One example is a photograph of an industrial structure that has been “resemiotised” from a tangible red brick building into timeless, two-dimensional photography (Iedema, 2000, 2003).

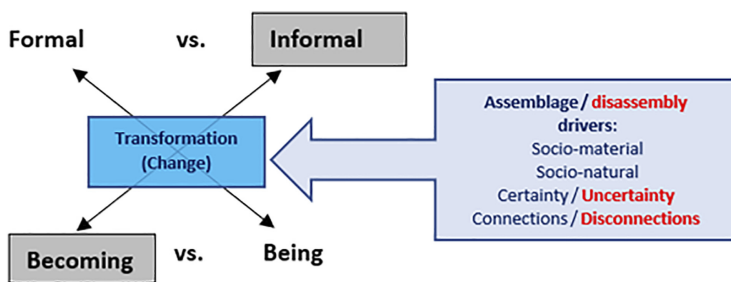
“Connections” and “bound points” are also visible through continued usage. Walking towards the southern end of Sørengkaia, which today contains a beach and bathing jetty with diving and swimming areas, visitors encounter a large signboard with text and images. It informs them about how people used this area as a swimming pool in the 1800s, with separate time slots for men and women. The resemiotisations demonstrate how both lost buildings and historical social practices are still used for their heritage value. Heritage is both distanced and detached and, at the same time, is identified and used in visual communication as a component of belonging (Crouch, 2010, p. 57). Although the heritage component is neither physically present at Sørengkaia nor a primary driver for urban regeneration, the semiotic dimension is present in urban regeneration and partakes in the processes of new assemblages that are dynamically intervened in “becoming” versus “being”.

In the “formal” planning of the urban space, the area is supposed to be both a private space for the people who live there and a public space for visiting citizens who want to use the restaurants and outdoor swimming facilities. The semiotic heritage addresses both spaces, with signposts in the pool area and black-and-white pictures of the old harbour in the entrance halls, which are not accessible to anyone besides those who live in the apartments. The apartments are very expensive, and several are owned by private investors and rented out for economic reasons, not for social purposes. There have been some disagreements between residents and visitors about who has the primary right to the area, because the facilities are not designed to receive large numbers of the city’s inhabitants. The restaurants and swimming area have become an attractive part of the city; especially in the warm summer period, there is a kind of carnivalesque atmosphere and a vibrant social life, with vegetable gardens, kayaks and an audio-visual cityscape filling the air, of loud sunbathers, music and barbecues (Plate 4). However, this bustling social life has had a negative effect, with the police and ambulance personnel handling bathing accidents, disorderly conduct, theft and violence. In other words, “informal” (unauthorised) social activities are evident in the conflicts among the various users of the area. Despite all disagreements, Sørengkaia has become part of the social identity of the city and is an attractive place to visit. It constitutes an example of a partly private and partly public, urban common area that is open to use and continuously redefined in the ongoing rapid processes of urban transformation (Figure 4).

Assemblage urbanism



Plate 4.
Picture of the carnivalesque Sørengkaia. Copyright: Katrine Lunke, Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International licence



Note(s): The model shows uses of (semiotic) heritage with a strong emphasis on the informal structural processes creating dissonance and user conflicts, showing a placemaking of “becoming” with great emphasis on dynamic disassembly drivers that direct attention to the place as open and unintentional when viewed based on the strategies when originally planning a new living area and neighbourhood in the city

Source(s): Model made by the authors

Figure 4.
The Sørengkaia assemblages model

Discussion

The first lesson learned from the three case studies presented above is that through a conceptual model for mapping urban assemblage formations, we became aware of how urban placemaking works, which would be valuable knowledge in urban planning and heritage management. Through the case studies, we illustrated the benefit of a conceptual assemblage methodological framework for understanding the dynamic processes of urban placemaking by using heritage and its social value. Analysing urban assemblage complexities can lead to improved dialogue strategies between stakeholders, bringing together formal and informal visions, strategies, practices and networks. This can create a common ground for potential collaborations between stakeholders that can be analysed to determine which indicators may influence decision-making regarding the preservation and uses of heritage in social sustainable strategies of urban placemaking. In the case studies, the “informal” processes

represented by public engagement were included with a variety of efforts and successes in “formal” urban regeneration processes, with the Vulkan case being the most successful in terms of heritage. The three case studies showed that heritage has been used in several ways, from being more passively present at Tukthuset and Sørenskaia to being more actively used at Vulkan. However, as noted, especially in the Sørenskaia case, urban placemaking is an “open system” based on the drivers of both “assemblage” and “disassembly”, providing opportunities for the “informal” (rhizomatic) and unplanned activities to unfold into new kinds of assemblages that were not originally intended. A series of new assemblages can emerge as a response to the regeneration project. However, how new assemblages are constituted depends on power relationships. Although assemblage theory emphasises the symmetrical relationships between stakeholders, whether they are human or non-human, we can distinguish among different kinds of agency.

The second lesson learned from the case studies is that with an awareness of the dynamic factors in urban assemblage mapping, we can obtain a tool to model and simulate influencing factors and development trends in urban placemaking, both by looking back in time at what has influenced the place and through scenarios to assess what will affect the place in the future. An essential factor in this respect is the inclusion of participatory methods. All the cases demonstrated a discussion of the politics of public engagement, for instance, the result of implementing participatory assemblages in urban regeneration. This approach has parallels with similar European cases. For instance, in the article *Rotterdam: Do-It-Yourself Assemblages in Urban Regeneration* (Boonstra and Lofvers, 2017), urban regeneration history is described as “innovative assemblages for urban regeneration”, which comprise bottom-up initiatives and stakeholder cooperation alongside local politicians’ abilities to bend local protests towards productive forms of cooperation (ibid:16). The innovative assemblages are defined by participative, community-oriented, differentiated and place-specific planning approaches that would fit an increasingly diversified set of stakeholders and interests. These dynamic relationships again open up the search for innovative – and situational – assemblages for urban transformations. The Rotterdam case illustrates that placemaking encompasses two distinct yet related conceptualisations: the formal practices of urban planning and redevelopment and informal practices such as those identified as do-it-yourself urbanism, tactical urbanism or everyday urbanism (Sweeney *et al.*, 2018, p. 574). However, participatory assemblage in urban regeneration is not without conflicts and power dissonances, especially when assemblages are defined by competitive stakeholder groups and by “local politicians’ abilities to bend local protests towards productive forms of cooperation’ (Sweeney *et al.*, 2018, p. 574). This approach requires the methodological inclusion of questions such as who the community is and what the stakeholder’s interests are for participation in an urban assemblage conceptual framework.

Finally, our third recognition is about reflexivity. An urban assemblage conceptual framework provides access to a critical reflexive approach to understanding the underlying symmetrical relationships in the formation of urban assemblages, hence power relationships, which in turn can be a source for illustrating good-versus-bad urban placemaking through heritage. That would be a lesson learned about what works and what does not work in strategies for socially sustainable urban placemaking. An interrelated aspect of this critical reflexive cognition is the role of heritage in human agency. Although several scholars have argued that the relationship between the human and non-human is “symmetrical” (see, e.g. Harrison, 2013; Latour, 2005), symmetry is not always an accurate description of the relationship between the built heritage and human decision-making. The latter is typically more powerful than the former because it involves human agency. Elder-Vass wrote the following:

(. . .) scallops, motors, and other non-human objects are significant in sociological explanations because they have causal powers – just as human agents are significant in

sociological explanations because they have causal powers. But scallops have different causal powers from humans, and different causal powers from motors. Scallops have the power to attach themselves to rocks or to the collectors used by researchers; they do not have the power to negotiate. Motors have the power to drive vehicles in certain conditions (but not in others); they do not have the power to be interested, to allow, to forbid. These are all powers that depend upon mechanisms possessed by humans and not by non-human objects. The differences in structure between these different sorts of entities lead to them possessing different capabilities, and the terms we use in describing them need to be sensitive to the capabilities they possess. We achieve symmetry in the treatment of human and non-human actors, not by treating them all in the same terms, but by treating each in the terms that are appropriate to its own particular structure and properties. (2008, p. 469).

Human and non-human actors differ in their ability to act, and humans are the possessors of powers that must be treated differently from non-human objects (Elder-Vass, 2008, p. 456). Thus, we ask the following question: Who decides which structures and properties are the most relevant in cases concerning heritage? Urban assemblages are “open systems” left unfinished and constantly adapting depending on power relationships. We must accept change as a natural part of urban regeneration, taking shape through the dynamic processes of “formal” versus “informal” and “authorised” versus “unauthorised” social domains and the “being” of place as a status quo, along with its continual dynamic change towards “becoming” new socially vibrant urban places. However, this also implies asking, as mentioned in the Introduction, who has the power to get someone to do something against their will or to have the power to keep certain issues away from the political, social and cultural agendas. It also implies having the power to get someone to desire the same as you (e.g. Lukes, 2005). Power includes both overt and covert dimensions as part of its assemblages. Thus, awareness, modelling and critical reflexive cognition regarding the complex, dynamic and systemic processes in urban placemaking logically involve attention to power relationships, especially in times where many aspire to create socially sustainable urban environments. Such reflections could put us in a better position to further model urban areas.

Conclusion

In this paper, we argued that critical urban theories can inform the development of critical theoretical and methodological approaches to urban assemblages. We contended that by adopting an urban assemblage approach in historic urban environments, we can enable a diverse range of stakeholders involved in historic urban development to comprehend the significance of how the social value of heritage converges with social diversity, community involvement, participatory engagement and power relationships in urban placemaking, in other words, the ingredients in socially sustainable urban placemaking that define the social just city. The urban assemblage methodological approach directly responds to these societal needs by critically examining urban transformation as value, which can offer practical solutions to social problems or social aims in urban planning. Using urban assemblage theory as a theoretical lens for understanding urban placemaking through heritage will enable a more profound understanding of social challenges, such as social conflicts and dissonances, dynamics of bottom-up versus top-down social interactions, intersectional inclusiveness, socially diversity and divisiveness in cities.

By creating an urban assemblage conceptual framework with various parameters, we established a sound methodological approach for understanding what the drivers, processes and dynamic relationships in urban placemaking would be when involving the uses of heritage. The dynamics of urban placemaking through heritage were tested in three case

studies in Oslo, Norway. Through the case study analysis, we managed to visualise the link among political intentions about social sustainability, the uses of theory through the lens of assemblage urbanism and how placemaking works in practice. The focus on the urban assemblage methodology provided us with at least three points of recognition or lessons learned for practical implementation. (1) Awareness: Assemblage urbanism provides us a conceptual map for understanding the variables of structures and processes at play in placemaking by the uses of heritage, thereby increasing our awareness of how placemaking is connected to social sustainability as a political goal in placemaking. (2) Modelling: Urban assemblage theory would be a valuable methodological tool for understanding the status quo and for future scenario modelling calculating the structures and structural changes, dynamic relationships and processes at play in placemaking by the uses of heritage (e.g. by connecting to system dynamic modelling). (3) Reflexivity: Urban assemblage theory provides access to a critically reflexive approach for defining good-versus-bad (heritage-led) urban placemaking. By pinpointing the conceptual framework based on urban assemblage theory, we learned how complex processes of placemaking work and what does not work.

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