

Rethinking urban public space: assemblage thinking and the uses of disorder

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Abstract

This paper aims to connect to recent debates in *City* (2011) regarding what assemblage thinking can offer to critical urban praxis. It proposes assemblage as a tool to take Sennett's (1970) 'uses of disorder' in city life from theory to practice. The main reason for this is the consideration that Sennett's early thoughts about providing non-regulated spaces for interaction have not been implemented in urban practice to their full potential. Planners and architects have not been able to counter the overdetermination of functions and the social segregation resulting from modern urban developments. Assemblage can offer tools for urban practitioners to combine definition and indeterminacy when intervening in the public realm. In order to do so, the paper looks at similarities between recent contributions on assemblage thinking and Sennett's notion of disorder: the influence of sociomaterial associations on how people perceive strangers, the interest in indeterminacy, and public space as an open process. Based on these findings, the paper proposes two sets of concepts as approaches for intervening in public space: 'assemblage' and 'disassembly'. The first group of concepts proposes three tools to design associations introducing certain planned urban elements that give rise to an unplanned use of public space: 'reassembling', 'convergence of diversity' and 'complex connections'. The second set of concepts offers two tools that propose to leave unbound points in public space: 'open systems' and 'failure and disconnections'. These concepts address different uses of disorder proposed by Sennett and serve as guidelines to propose interventions in public space.

Keywords: assemblage, Sennett, disorder, public space, critical urbanism, urban design

Introduction

This paper aims to connect to the debate on what ‘assemblage’ thinking can offer to critical urban praxis, which was addressed in the special issues of *City* (2011) 15 (2), 15 (3-4), 15 (5) and 15 (6). Despite their different approaches, the various contributions to this debate aimed to use critical urban theory to explain contemporary modes of urbanization and to counter inequality in cities. Assemblage theory has also been presented as a tool to understand the relationship between formal and informal urban processes (Dovey, 2011; McFarlane, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c; Simone, 2011). Building on this body of work, the objective of this paper is to further explore the potential of assemblage theory to propose urban interventions that encourage informal uses of the public realm, create non-regulated spaces where improvisation can take place and provide an urban milieu that facilitates sociability and tolerance.

Sennett (1970) criticised overdetermination in planning in his early book *The Uses of Disorder*, stating that modern urban developments had created an alienating public realm where social interaction is not possible and where encounters with strangers become threatening. To counter the effect of the imposition of order in the modern city, Sennett held that ‘certain kinds of disorder need to be increased in city life’ (Sennett, 1970, xxiii) so that people can be better prepared to face unexpected situations in urban space. Although Sennett warned of the effects of excessive order in cities in the 1970s, contemporary modes of urbanization have moved towards imposing even more order. Sennett’s early thoughts about providing ‘fields for unpredictable interaction’ (Sennett, 1970, 98) have not been implemented to their full potential in urban practice. While his first individual book was quite influential in its time and has inspired his own work and that of many other authors, its effect on urban policies and on urban design practice has been more limited (Minton, 2009, 142). Sennett (2008) has recently explained that indeterminacy is still regarded as impractical in architecture and urbanism. This makes it necessary to look for tools to help practitioners combine definition and indeterminacy when intervening in the public realm.

Assemblage theory as a tool for understanding and rethinking the relationship between formal and informal urban situations (Dovey, 2011, 352) can be useful when revisiting

Sennett's notion of disorder, defining which kinds of disorder can benefit city life and putting them into practice.

The main objective here is to offer conceptual tools from assemblage thinking to help practitioners, architects, planners, policy makers and other actors involved in the construction of public space to implement strategies to counter the overdetermination of functions in modern urban developments. The conceptual tools proposed aim to introduce the different kinds of urban disorder invoked by Sennett into the public realm of these urban areas: expressive public spaces that encourage people to interact, a public realm that catalyses the emergence of unplanned activities, an urban space that inspires tolerance towards difference, and a built environment than can easily adapt to changing situations (see Sennett 1970, 1977, 1990, 2007, 2008, 2011).

In order to achieve this, the paper initially explores how assemblage thinking can be helpful for revisiting Sennett's notion of disorder. Based on these findings, it identifies certain instrumental concepts of assemblage that can provide clues to design the associations public space requires to provoke these positive uses of disorder. These concepts are explained using examples of public space and urban situations where these sociomaterial associations take place in different ways: Gillett Square in the London Borough of Hackney and Stockwell Skatepark in Brixton, London Borough of Lambeth¹. These are not explained as exemplary urban design interventions, but rather as descriptions of physical places where different kinds of urban assemblage take place.

Assemblage and urban disorder

The assemblage debate published in *City* (2011) included contributions that understand assemblage as a tool to understand the relationship between formal and informal processes in cities and are particularly useful for revisiting Sennett's uses of disorder and proposing urban interventions (Dovey, 2011; McFarlane, 2011; Simone, 2011). The interest in the relationship between urban design and informality makes it necessary to focus more on McFarlane's (2011) and Dovey's (2011) contribution, concentrating on micro-level social interactions in urban space, rather than on those by Brenner, Madden and Wachsmuth (Brenner, Madden and Wachsmuth, 2011; Wachsmuth, Madden and

Brenner, 2011), critical of McFarlane's stance as not attaching enough importance to the structural aspects of political economy and the relationships of power, neglecting social and economic inequality. The focus on McFarlane's and Dovey's contributions does not imply denying the socioeconomic inequalities, but explores what the design of public space can offer for tackling spatial inequality and provoking social interaction, acknowledging that further action is needed on a larger scale to counter socioeconomic inequalities generated by neoliberal modes of urbanization.

The body of work on assemblage thinking examining the relationship between formal and informal urban situations contributes three concepts that can help to revisit Sennett's work and further explain which kinds of disorder are positive for urban life, proposing planned urban design interventions that encourage the *unplanned* use of the public realm. These three concepts are: 'sociomaterial symbiosis', 'uncertainty' and 'disconnections'.

Sociomaterial symbiosis: Sennett (1970) stated in his first book that the experience of diversity in urban neighbourhoods would make people better prepared for encounters with strangers. In his later work, Sennett's position evolves towards considering the importance of material elements and urban design on how people perceive strangers. He states that there is a 'consciousness of material objects which can resonate to the consciousness people have of one another in cities' (Sennett, 1990, 213). This concern with the active role of material elements in cities is present in the assemblage debate. McFarlane (2011a, 215) argues that it is the assemblage of both social and material agents that produces cities. Understanding the relationships and interactions that produce tolerant sociability as a sociomaterial symbiosis—an assemblage of both people and material elements including urban infrastructure, spatial configurations, vegetation, and other physical features of the built environment—can be useful when proposing types of urban disorder to encourage tolerance towards difference. Considering how urban design interventions in public space may 'assemble' the people—and how these sociomaterial assemblages may be constantly changing—is vital for the reconstruction of the public realm as a place for social interaction, spontaneity and urban life.

Uncertainty: Sennett (1970) also brought up another important question: whether too much order in cities hinders spontaneity and improvisation. This debate between ambiguity versus definition in urban life (Sennett, 1970, 2009) has also been present in

assemblage theory. Rather than attributing a fixed function and a pre-given definition to the different urban elements, assemblage thinking attributes functional capacity: different possibilities of co-functioning that will depend on how they interact with the different elements of the system (McFarlane, 2011d, 653). This connotation of uncertainty in assemblage thinking means that the interactions between the different elements are not predetermined either, in the spirit of Sennett's (1970) advocacy of unplanned public spaces. As McFarlane explains, assemblage connotes 'indeterminacy, emergence, becoming, processuality, turbulence and sociomateriality of phenomena'. In recent essays, Sennett (2007, 2008, 2011) has made proposals on how to build the city as an open system, as a process, by exploring construction technologies that allow additions and adaptations. Assemblage theory can be helpful in exploring how to create spaces rich in functional capacities which can generate new assemblages and encourage unplanned use of public space.

Disconnections: For the creation of public spaces that allow improvisation, Sennett (2007, 2008, 2011) recently proposed leaving the design of public space unfinished, so that different collectives or individuals may use it in different ways. This is linked to the concept of disconnections: Graham and Thrift (2007, 7) argue that social theory has focused on the study of assemblage while paying less attention to disconnections. The importance of disconnections has been present in the concept of assemblage since its origin. Deleuze emphasises the importance of these points of disconnection when he argues that '(t)here is no diagram that does not also include, beside the points which it connects up, certain relatively free or unbound points, points of creativity, change and resistance' (Amin and Thrift, 2002, 108, quoting Deleuze, 1986, 44). Graham and Thrift (2007) argue that failure and disconnections are key to the construction and reconstruction of infrastructures that can be constantly upgraded. Understanding disconnections as opportunities for adaptation and improvisation (Graham and Thrift, 2007, 5) can help to transform Sennett's notion of urban disorder into interventions in public space.

Concepts for designing the uses of disorder: assemblage and disassembly

Building on this reflection on the usefulness of assemblage theory to understand non-regulated urban processes, there are two possible sets of design concepts that use

assemblage and disassembly as tools for proposing uses of disorder in public space. These concepts use assemblage to *describe* certain urban situations where these interactions take place in order to *propose* how to encourage these assemblages in public spaces in the modern city.

The first set of concepts—*assemblage*—builds on the first two readings of assemblage presented: the sociomaterial nature of urban assemblages and their uncertain character. The second set of concepts—*disassembly*—builds on the third reading presented: disconnections. However, the design concepts presented here are interwoven: they may even produce overlapping assemblages to provoke the desired social interaction and improvisation in public space.

Assemblage

Many of the modern urban developments built in the second half of the twentieth century were conceived aiming to over-determine functions and uses of public space. As a result, many of the open spaces of these urban areas do not encourage spontaneous use of public space or support sociability.

Assemblage thinking focuses on the interaction between the different elements rather than on the resultant whole (McFarlane, 2011a). This reading of assemblage is useful to rethink rigid urban spaces which were conceived as rationally finished whole structures. The city as assemblage contrasts with the Athens Charter's concept of the city as a machine where every function is rationally distributed. In contrast, assemblage theory is interested in the process and how different situations emerge in the city (McFarlane, 2011a, 206).

Building on the explained readings of assemblage, this section proposes three design concepts—'reassembling', 'convergence of diversity', and 'complex connections'—which propose urban assemblages that encourage different uses of disorder in the public realm.

Reassembling

The concept of reassembling is defined here as the capacity of the urban designer to identify the still-latent emergent processes in the public realm and to produce new and innovative ways of rearranging things so that these processes can be strengthened and new associations and possibilities take place. This concept addresses Sennett's proposal for introducing mutations into the neutral urban grid to make it expressive and provoke new situations. Sennett (1990, 216-219) proposes using certain techniques already used in art such as 'repetition' or 'simultaneity' in visual design in the city.

This design concept builds on McFarlane's reflection on the '*process of reassembling*' in the city, which is to think 'how urbanism might be produced otherwise, [...] how an alternative world might be assembled' (McFarlane, 2011a, 211, original emphasis). One of the main tasks of critical thinking is to analyse the existing relations of power in order to think how they might be produced otherwise (Brenner, 2009): to look for certain gaps in these hierarchies, to look for and to build spaces for alterity (McFarlane, 2011a) which can produce different relations of power. Ultimately, it seeks to describe the city to look for alternatives. This means that it does not only have a descriptive aim, but is also propositional. Dovey argues that 'design [...] is a process of assembling possibilities out of actualities' (Dovey, 2011, 350). Urban designers should use their skills to produce different ways of arranging the urban elements, ways that will surprise citizens and arouse their creativity.

This act of reassembling is akin to the notion of 'assemblage' as used in art. The technique was first described by Jean Dubuffet in 1953 to describe an '(a)rt form in which natural and manufactured, traditionally non-artistic, materials and *objets trouvés* are assembled into three-dimensional structures' (Cooper, 2009, n.p.). The term was brought to the public in 1961 with the exhibition in the New York MOMA *The Art of Assemblage*, which included the work of Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray, and Pablo Picasso, among others. Assemblage as an art form bears similarities to Deleuze and Guattari's (1980) notion and to the way it has been used in critical urbanism: according to Cooper, assemblages, '(a)s much as by the materials used, [...] can be characterized by the way in which they are treated' (Cooper, 2009, n.p.). This idea connects with what the concept of reassembling proposes for interventions in public space: rearranging the urban elements in unexpected

ways and attributing new functional capacities to them. This can be seen in the ready-mades of Duchamp and also in some of the works of Surrealist artists, who use the technique of juxtaposition to create distorted images of reality (Cooper, 2009).

Urban art and Urban Guerrilla have also attempted to induce change in people's perception through alteration of public space. On some occasions, urban art is full of political intention and activism, while on others it just seeks to create a more expressive public space. In all of these cases, the interesting thing about these actions is the effect that they have on different collectives and individuals. A recent example of an action with no initial political intention but with great socio-political impact was the painting of a public stairway in different colours by a retired man in Istanbul. The author of the painting did it to make the public stairway more expressive and to 'make people smile'. The colours of the rainbow were identified with the gay and lesbian collective, prompting two kinds of reactions: the government repainted the stairway grey, an act of repression that was widely denounced in the social networks and prompted a chain reaction that encouraged people to paint many of the public spaces in colours. This caused the government to rethink its repressive action and agree to paint it back in colour (Arsu and Mackey, *New York Times*, September 3, 2013). What is fascinating about this action is that the very fact of painting a stairway in colours can produce certain sociomaterial assemblages between: a socio-political claim—equal rights for gays and lesbians—, a specific situation in the country after the Gezi Park protests, a material transformation of the public space, a government's repressive attitude towards the action, the identification of the action with an act of solidarity and tolerance towards a vulnerable collective, and the use of technology to denounce repression and to promote a wider urban action of disobedience to change the urban landscape. This is a clear example of how reassembling the public space can suddenly include other human and non-human agents such as people, socio-political claims, technology and urban action.

Following Dovey's (2011) argument that architects have the task of thinking how the city might be assembled differently, the question now would be how to reach outputs similar to those of the urban guerrilla actions using urban design: how to apply the concepts of disassembling, assembling and reassembling to architecture.

An excellent example of the capacity of urban design to reassemble public space and encourage citizenship and sociability is the process of transformation of Gillett Square in the London Borough of Hackney. It is an open space that used to be a car park and has been brought back to life. What is interesting in this process is that design has had a very important role in transforming this space into a public realm where improvisation takes place and where people interact with strangers. This process gives relevance to one fundamental question: Can design help to transform public spaces into places for social interaction and improvisation?

The process of bringing this place back to life started in the 1980s and was developed jointly by Hackney Co-operative Developments (HCD) and the London Borough of Hackney (LBH) (Hart, 2003, 238). HCD detected a lack of public space in the area and saw that this derelict area could become a place for collective use. They therefore worked with designers Hawkins/Brown to transform this space into a public square. This need may not have been noticed by locals, who were using the vacant space as a car park. However, it was the act of reassembling the public realm that made the need for a place for social interaction visible.

The first act of reassembling was the refurbishment of the workspaces and the installation of the kiosks in 1996 (Hart, 2003, 238) (figure 1). The kiosks hosted local businesses, many of them run by Afro-Caribbean people from the area. The presence of the kiosks encouraged people to start gathering between the stalls and the car park. This made the need for public space evident, and the change all the more natural. The process continued with the design of the square, a collaboration process between HCD, LBH and the designers—the architectural practice Hawkins/Brown. The design of the square was carried out with public consultation, but this alone would not have sufficed to achieve the present vitality of the square. One of the keys to this success was reassembling this derelict space by introducing new material elements to provide an urban surface that people can engage with. An urban infrastructure is provided in the form of kiosks for starting local businesses, an urban surface to develop activities and storage for temporary structures, equipment for sports and games such as table tennis and many other urban ‘props’ that can be arranged in different ways by the people who use the square. In this way, the square is assembled and reassembled every day for different purposes.



Figure 1: The installation of kiosks for local businesses (1996) brought life to Gillet Square (London Borough of Hackney) and facilitated the transformation of a car park into a public square. Photograph by Estrella Sendra, April 2012.

This example illustrates how urban designers, local organizations, diverse actors and people can collectively imagine how public space might work otherwise. Instead of just identifying the problems, designers should propose new situations, new arrangements of the public realm. To do so, the first step should be the identification of processes and activities already taking place in the area. The strategies should aim to incorporate urban objects, new spatial configurations, mutations on the urban grid to make it expressive, promote existing activities and encourage the emergence of new ones.

Convergence of diversity

This concept addresses the relationship between the atmosphere of place and the way people perceive and interact with strangers. Looking at this reading of assemblage can help urban designers build the 'inclusive urban commons' that McFarlane (2011a, 220) invokes. Amin (2008, 2010) argues that whether diversity is successful or not in an urban

space depends not only on the ethics of interpersonal encounter, but also on the assemblage between people and their environment. This means that in order to create spaces which provoke constructive conflicts, practitioners should think of public spaces that create an atmosphere of place where encountering difference prompts positive feelings, thus addressing Sennett's demand for public spaces that prepare adults to face unknown situations.

Sennett (1970) argued that people would become more tolerant through the everyday experience of diversity. However, the simple idea of throwing diversity together will produce social interactions which lead to policies promoting diversity without qualifying public space sparking off social tension and antagonistic conflict (Amin, 2008). In turn, these contribute to the destruction of public space, achieving the opposite of the desired result. Amin explains that the virtues of diversity in public space are subject to certain spatial arrangements: 'open, crowded, diverse, incomplete, improvised, and disorderly or lightly regulated' (Amin, 2008, 10).

Gillett Square is a good example of the 'inclusive urban commons' that McFarlane talks about. It is a place where different people meet, interact and share a common ground. People do not feel threatened by the presence of strangers and interaction might or might not happen depending on the situation. The place is frequented by young skaters, by local children who play with the available games, by people who stand around the kiosks, by people playing table tennis or drinking on the benches. They all share the space and interact on specific occasions (figure 2). This feeling of 'conviviality' (Amin, 2008) has been possible due to the sociomaterial processes that have taken place: the affordable kiosks have meant that collectives that otherwise would not have been able to afford to rent a place in the area have been able to develop their business in the square. This has allowed these people to be a key part of the process and has made the place welcoming for everyone. This was combined with the location in the square of the Dalston Culture House cultural centre and the jazz bar Vortex, which attract other types of public, adding diversity to the square. The management of the square also plays a very important role in making it inclusive. Volunteers are in charge of opening the containers that are on the side of the square and taking out the different props used for activities such as table tennis, children's games or film screenings. This has made people responsible for the place and created a real sense of responsibility for the maintenance of the square.



Figure 2: ‘Conviviality’ in Gillett Square: people from different cultural backgrounds share the same space and feel comfortable in the presence of strangers. Photograph by the author, June 2013.

The case of Stockwell Skatepark (figure 3) is very different from that of Gillett Square, but it shows what a place can provide when this is associated to a shared activity or interest. It was built next to Stockwell Park housing estate in the 1970s, on a piece of vacant land of the kind that typically surrounds council estates in London. While in other cases these open spaces lie empty or are used as car parks, this skatepark is teeming with activity. From the beginning, it became very popular for skateboarding and BMX. Over time, the surface deteriorated and the skatepark was recently resurfaced after many requests from local skateboarders.

Although in this case the urban surface is aimed at very specific activities—skateboarding and BMX—, it is actually used by a wide range of people, including families with children playing and other passers-by that stop to watch the skaters. They go to the same place because they share a common activity, a common interest and a common space. This responds to one of the new forms of sociability that Amin and Thrift (2002, 47) talk

about, one that stems from the shared enthusiasm for a particular activity or subculture. It is a sociomaterial assemblage that encourages people to share a space: an assemblage between urban surface, a common activity or sport, equipment—the board or the bike—, the people and the place. Another important factor in this sociomaterial assemblage is the self-regulated space: it is always open and entrance is free of charge and not controlled in any way. It is not only used by skateboarders, but also by children who play in it, neighbours who stand outside watching people practising sports or developing occasional activities around it. It has become very popular and has attracted skaters from outside the neighbourhood, thanks to its original ramps. Currently, this space next to Stockwell Park estate is one of the most intensively used spaces in the area.



Figure 3: Stockwell Skatepark (London Borough of Lambeth) is frequented by skateboarders, BMX riders, families, children and also passers-by who stop to watch skaters. Panoramic view made up of various photographs. Photographs by the author, June 2013.

Gillett Square and Stockwell Skatepark are good examples of places qualified for diversity. They respond to Amin's (2010) proposals for creating conditions for diversity: 'multiplicity' and 'common ground'. Gillett Square is an enabling public space where diverse collectives and individuals can participate. It provides public infrastructure in the form of kiosks, spaces for businesses, concert venues, bars, new paving in the square and urban elements that can be stored in the two containers that stand on the side of the square. Stockwell Skatepark is a public space for a shared activity that provides users, locals and visitors with a sense of commons, where shared assets, activities and interests can encourage tolerance and sociability.

These two public spaces exemplify how a space can become a shared place for everyday life and for specific activities. In both cases, the urban surface becomes a 'patterned

ground' (Amin, 2008) due to its use by the people, where the hierarchies of power and domination fade, where people feel comfortable with the presence of strangers, a sense of comfort which can lead at times to social interaction and other forms of citizenship.

Complex connections

This concept addresses how the planned and the unplanned city interact. It looks at how urban surface and urban life interact to create unpredictable situations (Simone, 2011). Simone (2011, 360) explains how the formal and the informal city are assembled and fit together as surfaces that act simultaneously. To encourage these complex connections and informal situations to happen, it is necessary to consider building a platform, an urban surface, which will add to the space, supporting and encouraging people to think about different ways of using public space. This can help practitioners to design *planned* interventions that give rise to the *unpredictable* interactions championed by Sennett (1970, 98).

Assemblage does not only deal with the separate part, but pays special attention to the study of interrelations. It is precisely the nature of these interrelations, of these complex connections, that can produce the unplanned use of public space and encourage the emergence of process. Since assemblage thinking does not attribute a fixed function to the different elements but rather functional capacities depending on the associations in which they participate, this gives rise to an infinite number of possibilities of associations enabling limitless possible uses of the public realm.

Different authors have identified how these complex connections take place in informal settlements such as the slums or the favelas or in conflictive areas (Simone, 2011; McFarlane, 2011d). In many cases, the emergence of these informal settlements on the edge of big cities is a product of hierarchies of domination and the processes that take place within them are the product of necessity or conflict. The study of these informal settlements in assemblage thinking does *not* aim to be a celebration of neglect and misery. What these studies seek is to highlight how the planned and the unplanned city interact and how these complex connections can have unpredictable outputs. The question here is how to encourage these connections to happen with urban design interventions. How can

informality be provoked in public spaces with no urban life? Sennett (2011) proposes intervening on borders rather than in centres, since the ‘border condition’ can provoke social and cultural exchange between different groups of people.

The examples of Gillett Square and Stockwell Skatepark can explain how a designed intervention can encourage unpredictable or informal uses of public space. Both are interventions in borders: Gillett Square is located close to a high street but is in a side street, among workspaces, car parks, private houses and close to council estates. Stockwell Skatepark is located next to a council estate, which makes it to some degree a border.

What is interesting about the case of Gillett Square is that design plays a very important role in encouraging informality. Normally, in the examples used by different authors to describe informality (Simone, 2011; McFarlane, 2011d), the role of design is almost insignificant and the unplanned activities are the product of other kinds of assemblages. In contrast, in Gillett Square the provision of an urban surface, of urban infrastructure and of other material objects are some of the actors that enable new assemblages and prompt situations that may not have been planned by the designers. The conception of the square, the activities that take place in it, and the human relationships that occur there would not have been possible without a design intervention. This case illustrates how the provision of an urban surface makes the intersection between urban life and the urban surface possible.

The case of Stockwell Skatepark is slightly different. In this case the surface is provided for a specific activity, so its main function is actually planned. However, this does not mean that the place has a single fixed function, since it prompts different kinds of assemblages, meetings, encounters, affinities between very different kinds of people and even activities other than skateboarding and BMX as well. The fact that a particular subculture or urban sport occupies a space makes people stop around to watch. It also attracts other activities associated with this subculture, such as certain kinds of music, which can produce other uses of public space.

In both cases, the urban surface—its materiality, and its multiple possibilities—play a very important role in generating new assemblages. Urban design interventions that seek

to create urban disorder as informality in public space should design a surface where different activities, urban elements, and situations can be assembled.

The design concepts explained here assess the importance of looking at the sociomaterial relationships and connections in order to propose new possibilities for the arrangement of public space. As explained, it is from these connections that unplanned use of public space can emerge. However, some of these processes may also arise from disconnections in the systems, points that are not designed or that are on the edge. This leads to the creation of spaces where not all elements are rationally connected or function in their traditional position, allowing disconnections to happen by leaving public space unfinished and adaptable to change, as Sennett (2007, 2008) suggests in his recent essays. Consequently, it becomes necessary to introduce another set of concepts to explain how to incorporate certain types of disorder into public space: the set of concepts that work on ‘disassembly’.

Disassembly

Failures and disconnections are necessary to keep the city in a continuous state of adaptation and upgrade (Graham and Thrift, 2007). According to Graham and Thrift (2007), it is when there is a failure that infrastructures are repaired, improved and upgraded. They also argue that infrastructures that are built bit-by-bit are more susceptible to adaptation—which makes them more resilient—than those that are conceived as a whole. A recent debate published on *City* (2015) go beyond Graham and Thrift’s (2007) argument about the contact with infrastructure when it breaks down and analyses how interaction between individuals and infrastructure at a micro scale can be useful to explain macro social and political contexts (Angelo and Hentschel, 2015).

This debate on repair and maintenance of urban infrastructure can be applied to the intervention in public space in the modern city. As Sennett (2007) argues, the rigidity of

modern urban environments has made it very difficult to adapt to changing conditions, a fact which makes public space in these urban areas ‘brittle’. This rigidity has made it very difficult to intervene and to adapt them to new needs, something which has facilitated their obsolescence and decay. To reverse this character of modern urban environments, interventions should improve the capacity of public space to adapt to changeable conditions.

Using the notion of ‘disassembly’, two design concepts that introduce certain positive uses of disorder into public space are proposed: the first is to transform public spaces into ‘open systems’ (Sennett, 2007, 2008)—which are built bit-by-bit, evolve daily and experience constant additions—and the second is to accept ‘failure and disconnection’ as natural to the public realm and as an opportunity to upgrade.

Open systems

The modern city was conceived as a machine, as a stable entity where everything is functionally arranged and works properly. The Athens Charter proposed the ‘functional city’, where the four functions of the city—dwelling, work, transport and leisure—are fixed to specific places or zones. This concept of the city is what Sennett (2007, 2008) defines as a ‘closed system’. Comparing urban complexity to nature, he defines closed systems as being in ‘equilibrium’, while open systems are in ‘unstable evolution’. In modernist urban developments, all functions are predetermined and there is no room for improvisation or for the uses of disorder that he advocated in his earlier book (Sennett, 1970). This rigidity has facilitated the obsolescence of these urban areas, since they have not been able to adapt to current social and cultural needs. To reverse this stagnation, Sennett (2007, 2008) proposes turning public spaces that work as ‘closed systems’ into ‘open systems’. He suggests that this transformation is possible through architecture and urban design: he proposes the provision of a ‘skeleton’ composed by adding different pieces (Sennett, 2008), meaning that public space is actually built piece-by-piece, as Graham and Thrift (2007) suggest for urban infrastructure.

This idea of public space composed of the assemblage of small elements that can be substituted, re-plugged into other places and continuously modified depending on people's use, can transform the rigid public spaces of the modern city into places with the potential for continuous adaptation. This involves leaving public space partially *unfinished*, allowing constant adaptation. Sennett's reasoning suggests a direct relationship between public participation and physical public space and its design, expecting participation beyond urban governance and making it into a physical experience that comes with the design of public space. This experience is possible when the design is left unfinished.

Designers can add elements to public space in order to transform it into an open system that allows more additions. As Graham and Thrift (2007, 6) argue, the addition of 'small increments' can produce 'large changes' for urban infrastructure and for innovation in knowledge. This means that urban design is a pure act of assemblage of small interventions that interact between each other, the sum of which affects the urban life of the public realm. Public space can be transformed into 'open systems' by rearranging open spaces and converting them into 'colonisable ground' (Sennett, 2008, n.p.) where different elements can be added over time.

The example used here to illustrate the different design concepts, Gillett Square, is a good example of creating an open system through small additions and leaving the process open. The success of Gillett Square lies in its conception as a process. As explained, the first steps taken—installing the kiosks with affordable rents for local business and refurbishing the workspaces—made the need for the square evident. This made the urban transformation follow a step-by-step process which included years of research, public consultation, the involvement of local organisations and businesses, and the assistance of designers (Hart, 2003, 239).

However, this initial process for the construction of the square is not enough to keep the space alive. The key to keeping space in continuous use is to leave the process open and unfinished. The urban design intervention has provided an urban surface and a set of temporary structures, equipment for sports, games, facilities, and different urban elements stored in containers and managed by local volunteers (figure 4). This very simple system makes it possible to reinvent the use of the square on a daily basis, while simultaneously

involving locals in the management of the square, which can bring collective empowerment. The infrastructure includes networks of exchange, human organization and management (see Tonkiss, 2015) It also allows different collectives and minorities to participate: groups of school children, the elderly, locals, young people from the area. This makes it possible to develop *organised* activities such as markets or film screenings (figure 5) and other *improvised* activities such as skateboarding, table tennis and other kinds of meetings and encounters in the square.



Figure 4: Containers storing temporary structures and equipment at Gillett Square (London Borough of Hackney). Photograph by Estrella Sendra, April 2012.



Figure 5: Gillett Square during the screening of a documentary film. Photograph by the author, July 2013.

Failure and disconnections

Modernist projects based on the Athens Charter tried to keep everything under control using urban design. Nowadays, institutions still avoid uncertainty (Sennett, 2008), feeling threatened by unpredictable activities that may emerge, and prefer projects where everything is precisely defined and monitored spaces where all is under control. However, contemporary urban thinking has experienced a shift that acknowledges failure as a condition of the city (García Vázquez, 2004, 134). Accepting failure and disconnection as conditions natural to the public realm implies seeing discontinuities as opportunities for upgrading public space. Thus, urban interventions should not aim to remove the failures of the city, but to redirect them into something positive. Failure is what causes infrastructure to be constantly upgraded (Graham and Thrift, 2007). In the same way, failure in public space should be seen as an opportunity to conceive things differently, to

look for opportunities for upgrading and allowing uncertainty. This concept contributes to materialising Sennett's positive uses of disorder by addressing the following question: how can failure and disconnections provoke innovation and alternative uses of public space?

Two positive uses of failure can be applied to urban design interventions: firstly, failure as an opportunity to upgrade and improve public space and secondly, failure as a factor that allows uncertainty and provides urban spaces that are outside the control of city.

Identifying failures in urban public space is an opportunity to think about how it could work otherwise. This disjunction between the actual and the possible is one of the main points of assemblage and critical urbanism (McFarlane, 2011a). Graham and Thrift argue that '[r]epair and maintenance does not have to mean exact restoration' (Graham and Thrift, 2007, 6), but it can also serve to think about how this infrastructure might work otherwise, to think it differently following new conditions. Dovey argues that architects and urban designers are among those thinking how the city might work differently. He also argues that, although they have gone wrong on many occasions, 'the challenge is to get better' (Dovey, 2011, 350). Urban designers should assume that there is a possibility of going wrong. To overcome this fear, they should make their intervention reversible, providing possibilities to improve and add other interventions to it. Interventions should allow disconnections, without trying to plan for the rational connection and operation of everything.

The second positive reading of failure deals with allowing uncertainty and providing spaces that escape the forces of power and domination in the city. Here the question would be how to build the 'unbound points' and the 'points of creativity' that Deleuze (1986) talks about. Amin and Thrift propose 'providing space-times where practices of power either do not reach, or are heavily contested' (Amin and Thrift, 2002, 106). Creating spaces where uncertainty is possible is one of the main challenges that Sennett proposes in *The Uses of Disorder* and in more recent works. Modern urban developments on borders have a great potential for escaping the forces of domination. Their peripheral condition makes them an opportunity for urban designers to think how they could work in a different way.

Gillett Square and Stockwell Skatepark can also explain the positive uses of failure described here. In the case of Gillett Square, identifying the lack of public space in the area was what prompted the different agents to consider that this place might work differently and be upgraded. In the design of the square, it has also been important to leave some unbound points, realities that are not designed, which keep the place on the move and allow improvisation take place. However, the place is not totally immune to the forces of domination of the city. Certain interests are trying to remove deviancy from public space—the installation of CCTV, the frequent presence of police in the square. However, the interesting thing about this place is that despite these attempts to avoid ‘inappropriate’ behaviour from public space, the square is still resisting as a place where different kinds of people can meet, which is felt as a common asset by locals and visitors and where conflicts do not necessarily lead to forms of violence.

Stockwell Skatepark is also an example of the use of ‘unbound points’ as ‘points of creativity’ and resistance (Deleuze, 1986). This urban surface, which has recently been repaired, is located on a vacant site among council housing. It has leaky and badly defined margins, patches of grass around it that provide space for other activities outside the skatepark (figure 6), for children playing around it or for people stopping to look at the activity inside the skatepark. This non-delimited urban space and its non-regulated character make this facility an area which allows informality and where the forces of domination of the city are limited.



Figure 6: Margins of Stockwell Skatepark, London Borough of Lambeth, June 2013. Photograph by the author.

Conclusions

This paper has argued that assemblage thinking can be a tool for the introduction of the positive uses of disorder into the rigid public spaces of the modern city. Sennett's uses of disorder can be summed up in four categories: building meaningful places that arouse cultural expression in public space, generating citizenship that prompts tolerance and sociability, creating productive atmospheres that encourage the emergence of unplanned activities, and building a flexible public space that can easily mutate and adapt.

As regards transforming public spaces into meaningful places, the design concepts explained have addressed how to introduce mutations into the urban grid to make it expressive, which is one of Sennett's (1990) proposals. To do so, the concept of 'reassembling' proposes the rearrangement of public space with existing elements, introducing new ones in a way that encourages people to be more active in public life.

Another challenge posed by Sennett's notion of disorder is how to create spaces that encourage tolerance towards difference and generate sociability. The design concept of 'convergence of diversity' proposes the construction of enabling public spaces that allow that create an awareness of the commons, which can make people more tolerant towards strangers.. A further proposal was to provide spaces that escape from the forces of control and domination in the city: non-regulated inclusive spaces at the boundaries that originate other forms of self-regulation.

For converting urban surface into a productive atmosphere, into a fertile ground where informality and improvisation take place, the design concept of 'complex connections' proposes working on the sociomaterial associations between the planned and the unplanned city. The paper has shown that to let the unplanned happen, it is necessary to leave the public realm partially unfinished, with no fixed functions.

This notion of leaving the public realm unfinished leads to the fourth use of disorder: building a flexible public realm that can constantly be upgraded, an idea that Sennett (2007, 2008) proposes in his recent essays. The set of design concepts that respond to the notion of 'disassembly'—'open systems' and 'failure and disconnections'—have proposed designing the public realm as the sum of different elements that can be assembled, disassembled and reassembled. It has also shown that 'failures' in the public realm can be seen as opportunities to rethink and upgrade it.

These four uses of disorder have been addressed through two sets of design concepts: assemblage and disassembly. These design concepts are guidelines that can help urban designers, architects, planners and other actors involved in the design of public space to transform the city and build a more inclusive public realm.

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¹ Both sites have been visited on different occasions. Gillett Square was first visited in November 2011 during the event 'Inspiring Cities', where the participants of the event had a lecture and a Q&A session with Adam Hart of Hackney Cooperative Developments, a key actor in the development and management of the square. It was also visited in August 2012 and more systematically between April and August 2013, carrying out participant observation in the square. Stockwell Skatepark was first visited in November 2008 and was visited systematically between May and June 2013. Observations have been made on the use of the skatepark.