FINDING DEPTH

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INTRODUCTION

... a city ought to grant - a depth that accommodates with dignity the diversity of its people and their histories. (Carl 2012, 1)

High streets are very much on the political and media agenda. Mary Portas and her *review*, the Mayor's *Outer London* fund and numerous articles in the mainstream press scream 'clone town' and 'ghost town' in catastrophic tones (NEF 2004). This paper seeks to examine the way we understand high streets through a review of the available literature, and to propose an alternative, more layered and complex understanding of the depth of city that underlies and supports them. High streets are both strong (as major arterial traffic routes) and fragile (the businesses they support have tiny margins, and can disappear in a heartbeat). They also serve people excluded from more prestigious public realms and are the common place or territory for those who are increasingly excluded from public life. It is no coincidence that Peckham, Walworth and Tottenham high roads were also the sites of the 2011 riots. Maintaining the high street's metabolism is an ethical as well as an economic project and I propose that understanding their complexity will enable their preservation.
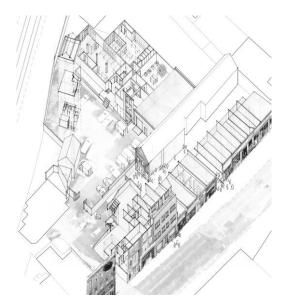

Fig. 2 'Depth' of case-study block in Tottenham. Author's research drawing.

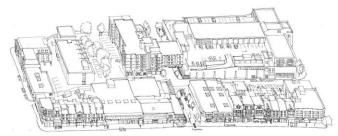## FINDING DEPTH IN THE LITERATURE

The literature on high streets falls into two broad categories; those which views high streets as an economic landscape those which views them as a site for social interaction. Yet a uniting theme is a focus on the high street as what Suzie Hall (2011, 2546) calls "a linear aggregation of mixed uses and mixed users". This is a view of the high street primarily as the publicly accessible uses at ground floor level, predominantly shops and the idea of the high street as little more than a row of shops is ubiquitous in both the academic literature and the mainstream media.

But high streets are more than this: the shop fronts are a skin wrapped around a much more complex and deeper metabolism. According to Vaughan et al. (2013) it is the presence of small units behind the façade of high streets, containing manufacturing, light industrial and office space which "serve as an ensemble to generate movement around and through the town centre". Gort Scott et al. (2010) also note that behind the frontage are what they describe as more 'transient and temporary' units, of a small size which allows for adaptability. Retail is not in itself a source of vitality, but rather its presence is a symptom of the high street's ability to sustain civic activities.
UCL and Gort Scott's *High Street London* provides a useful and relevant typology for defining what a high street is, which runs counter to the idea that they are just rows of shops. They identify 'connected' high streets, running outwards from central London, linked by 'concentric' high streets around central London. They also identify 'detached' high streets, which are not linked to the network, and 'blobs' of retail activity, where high streets have extended their reach and form part of identifiable town centres (Gort Scott and UCL 2010, 57). A 'healthy' town centre needs to recognise the relevance and interconnectedness of all types of uses (Ravenscroft 2000; Gort Scott and UCL 2010; Vaughan and Griffiths 2013). There is a deep spatial, social and economic structure *behind* the facades. This structure includes business, manufacturing, civic or social buildings. In addition, this depth also contains residential streets, which have a reciprocally supportive and reproducing relationship with the high street.

The physical depth of the high street is most clearly addressed through Fiona Scott's in *High Street London* (2010). The drawings capture the spatial depth relationship and layering of space adjacent to the high street quite effectively, yet there are some key elements which appear elsewhere in the literature which are absent. No study uses a system of identification that reveals the complexity of the depth which begins to be revealed above.

The depth of a block sketch. Author: Fiona Scott (2010 p. 68-69) Here, the entrance to a supermarket in an Ealing block is unassuming from the high street, but to the rear of the façade is a library and block of flats – hidden behind a video shop, pound shop and clothing store.

Understanding the urban through temporality is an important but neglected element of the study of cities and 'adaptability' is the persistence of the high street in some (changing) form over time. Temporal rhythms as an element of depth make an appearance in the literature, although their complexity is rarely addressed. For Amin and Thrift (2002), daily rhythms allow the city to be 'known and negotiated'. In enormous cities there is relatively little chaos because of the predictable and regular nature of occupation. They include Lefebvre's (1996) notion of rhythms which 'present themselves without being present' (p.223); such as opening times and traffic movement and control, and Allen's (1998) definition that city rhythm is not related to coordination of routines in a citywide sense, but rather the daily movement of people in a 'process of renewal'. This conception neglects the layered nature and varying pace of temporal rhythms (both cyclical and ongoing) embodied in the physical form of the city and high street. For example, although there is a daily rhythm in a cafe, the frontage or interior layout may also change every five to ten years as owners change, or upgrade their property. The shop as premises changes only very infrequently, as extensions to the rear are made, or two shops are knocked together to make a larger space.

A brief view of planning applications granted on Tottenham High Road since 1950 shows very few major developments. Instead, the majority are incremental changes; change of use, construction of single storey buildings in yards, erection of signs, changes of shop fronts. For Batty (2002), cities are primarily 'spatial *events*' (my italics), with variation in events in terms of duration, intensity, volatility and location. He argues that the element of time may be the missing link which brings together the spatial and social analyses which frequently occupy different academic spheres. This is useful, because one of the components of *depth* is the varying temporality of different structures, but Batty's notions of 'volatility' and 'intensity' are illusive concepts; is a child going to school more or less 'volatile' than a driver loading a van? To make a hierarchy of 'events' in this manner reduces the complexity of temporal phenomena and does not go far enough in the exploration of the layering of embodied activity articulated by space and place.

While many social accounts of the high street document the presence of 'social interaction' between different social groups, the only one which begins to acknowledge the depth and complexity of these relationships in terms of *when* they take place is Suzi Hall, in her excellent and detailed ethnographic study of the Walworth Road (2009a). Her description of activity in 'Nick's Caff' close to grasping the nature of the problem:

> The rhythm within Nick's Caff was integral to its space…The Caff opened between six thirty and seven in the morning and closed approximately twelve hours later. It was open seven days a week, but closed on Sundays before lunch… The rhythm of the Caff across the day brought moments of intensity and relative quiet… delineated not only by the physical layout of the tables, but also by the fluctuating patterns of use throughout the day, ushering in the waves of different kinds of clientele at particular time intervals. (Hall 2009a, 125)

There is something particular about the nature of high streets that engenders peaceful co-existence, which may not necessarily be found in other spheres (Dines et al. 2006). A theoretical view which sheds light on this is the notion of 'boundaries', or the way in which people identify and categorize others both socially and symbolically, from the discipline of social psychology (Michèle Lamont and Molnár 2002). For Hall (2009a), the 'caff' was a bounded place, symbolically different to other places that its regulars might inhabit, in which friendships could exist across racial and class lines which might not penetrate into other places – making spatial the social boundaries between ethnicities. This echoes Oldenberg's (1997) notion of the 'third place', an accessible, local place (beyond home and work) in which people can socialise. According to Mehta and Bosson (2010) who examined 'third places' on main streets in the USA, such places tend to be distinctive and recognizable, permeable to the street, and with provision of seating and shelter – just like the 'caff' on the Walworth Road. Yet the notion of 'boundaries' cannot adequately contain the physical and social complexity of the high street and its depth. It is significant that those who have come closest to revealing the true nature of the complexity (Scott and Hall) of depth are both trained architects, because this is fundamentally a phenomenon which exists the physical dimensions, of space and time.

REVEALING DEPTH: A HERMENEUTICS OF PRAXIS

In the light of the brief survey of literature on high streets, we now turn to a examination of theoretical and philosophical ideas which will help to find and understand *depth*. Depth is a metaphor, but could also potentially serve as a concrete term to be investigated, the question is: how?

Hermeneutics is a branch of phenomenology, a philosophical stance about the nature of knowledge and the means of human access to it which seems to offer an appropriate methodological approach. Although in the social sciences the impact of doubts about the positivist project really started to hit during the 80s and 90s, in philosophy the storm had started brewing a long time before. In the early 20th century. Husserl, the 'father of phenomenology' (Polkinghorne 1983), revolutionised epistemology by developing the distinction between the natural and phenomenological forms of understanding the world (Husserl & Hardy 1999). He challenged the previously accepted Cartesian dualism of reality and argued that the lived experience consists both of the external world and the internal perceptive experience of that world. One cannot exist inside the world and observe it objectively, as though from outside (Husserl & Hardy 1999). After Husserl, Heidegger considered the nature of being, in that the person's being-in-the-world cannot be separated from the world. Therefore he called human beings *Dasein* or 'beings in the world' (Heidegger 1967).

In *Truth and Method* Gadamer re-coined the name 'hermeneutics', questioning 'method' as a means of accessing 'truth', instead appealing to the hermeneutic interpretation of history (or tradition), as a means of finding the truths which are absent from the epistemological world of

'method'. Gadamer characterised the involvements of Heidegger's beings-in-the-world as reciprocal, akin to a conversation. This involvement requires creativity, or interpretation, in order to structure the whole from the available parts, and have access to the parts from the whole.

However, creativity is not the same thing as ultimate freedom within an unbounded 'space' or Carl's (2012) 'freedom-from'. Instead, it draws on the latent order (*depth)* which offers a structure of references of the world, a layered and articulated structure of embodiments to which the ultimate reference is *physis* (nature or earth) (Vesely 2004). Gadamer's exposition of the nature of play sheds light on this and is a helpful metaphor for understanding. Once a person is within the 'field of play' (*Speilraum)*, all of their actions are then within the game. They may have personal aims such as winning (or cheating), but all actions serve the game, and the only way to escape is by leaving the field altogether (an impossibility in the case of the embodied world). The game does not control what people in it do, instead it offers a set of structured possibilities (rules, place, objects – ultimately with reference to a shared sequence of embodiments which ends with the most common-to-all - *physis*) within which choices can be made (Gadamer 2013). This is Carl's (2012) 'freedom-for', and hermeneutics is the creative interpretation required for involvement-in-the-world.

> *As the world has its epistemological expression in the concept of self consciousness and the methodologically developed rule of certainty, of 'clear and distinct perception', so also the human sciences of the nineteenth century felt a comparable foreignness with respect to the traditional world… The spiritual creations of the past, art and history, no longer belong to the self-evident domain of the present but rather are objects relinquished to research, data from which a past allows itself to be represented* (Gadamer 1975, 58)

CONCLUSION

It is impossible to inhabit the entire city simultaneously, yet this is what city theoreticians attempt, through maps and aerial views. The rendering of the city into a containable, flat image of itself (which can be numbered, organized, and ultimately controlled) is a Cartesian split which suggests that people can stand outside the city and view it as a complete entity. Observing the 'natural world', for Vesely (2004) (to which our only access is being-in-the-world) from the outside to gain understanding of its order is impossible, because we are always inside it. As such, the city itself is the only way to truly contain *depth*, and access to the deep structure is only available through interpretation of fragments, such as the French café or high street. To reveal the order of time, space and culture, the 'text' must be carefully interpreted in the context of the interpreters own experience and life world, as a hermeneutics of praxis.

Rather than trying to engineer social justice as many major planning projects and high street studies seek to do, understanding in terms of *depth* allows us to ask questions about ethics at a fundamental level. City life is the inhabitation of a series of settings, supported by the structure of

claims outlined above. *Depth* is a constituent of the 'common ground', and what is common-to-all is inevitably also concerned with ethical understanding, so depth and ethics are part of the same ontological order. Freedom is only meaningful if it is structured, with the structure allowing the city's inhabitants to make sense of the natural conditions and to be free within a given range of possibilities. In short, depth allows for places in the city for all the things that need to happen. Only then can they happen.

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