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## **more on 'big things': building events and feelings**

### **abstract**

This paper begins by reviewing a range of recent work by geographers conceptualising buildings less as solid objects and more as performances. Buildings, it is argued, are not given but produced, as various materials are held together in specific assemblages by work of various kinds. This has led to a range of studies looking at the diverse sorts of work that make buildings cohere: the political institutions they are embedded in, the material affordances of their non-human components, the discourses surrounding particular kinds of buildings, and, in particular, the experiencing of buildings by their human inhabitants, users and visitors. However, this experiencing has been poorly theorised. Those geographers inspired by actor network approaches to buildings acknowledge human experiences, but in very limited ways; while those geographers inspired more by affect theory evoke the 'feelings' that buildings may provoke but evacuate human subjectivity from their accounts of buildings' performances. Through a case study of two buildings, this paper argues that both approaches are flawed in their uninterest in the human, and proposes that more attention be paid to (at least) three aspects of human feeling: the feel *of* buildings, feelings *in* buildings, and feelings *about* buildings.

### **key words**

Milton Keynes; walk-alongs; architecture; affect; experience; practice

## **introduction**

This essay joins a number of others in recent geographical work by exploring what Jacobs (2006) calls "big things". Most often, "big things" are large buildings – residential tower blocks (Baxter and Lees 2009; Jacobs 2006; Kraftl 2009; Llewellyn 2004), airports (Adey 2008a, 2008b), skyscrapers (McNeill 2005, 2007), shopping malls (Degen, DeSilvey and Rose 2007), office blocks (Jenkins 2002), flyovers (Robertson 2007), plazas (Allen 2006) and libraries (Lees 2001) – although ships have recently been categorised as "big things" too (Gregson, Watkins and Calestani forthcoming). The importance of 'big things', however, is not what they are, but a conceptual emphasis on the processes of how they become and remain what they are – or indeed how those processes fail and the big thing becomes something else (Gregson, Watkins and Calestani forthcoming; Jacobs, Cairns and Strebel 2006). Jacobs (2006) uses the term "things" in order to emphasise that an object's status as a 'building' – or, as we will note in a moment, a building's status as 'architecture' or 'shopping centre' – is not given but is produced. A 'thing' becomes a particular sort of building as various materials are held together in specific assemblages by work of various kinds. For Jacobs, then, the aim is "to bring into view how the coherent given-ness of [a] seemingly self-evident 'thing' is variously made or unmade" (Jacobs 2006 3; and see Kraftl 2009).

This understanding of built forms draws primarily on the insights of actor network theory (ANT); Jacobs (2006; Jacobs, Cairns and Strebel 2008) cites Latour and Law, for example. It argues that a building is not a self-evident form, but rather becomes such through a diverse range of more-or-less elaborate, human and non-human, processes: discourses, for example, everyday routines, condensation, conversation. The materialities of the built form thus become incorporated into a range of human and other practices, and Jacobs (2006) calls these hybrid human-buildings "building events". As Llewellyn (2004, 230) notes in relation to a housing block, this approach means that "architectural spaces... are not 'consumed' – they are 'reproduced' by individuals living therein according to their everyday lives". Geographers have thus emphasised "questions of everyday practice, embodiment and performance" in their accounts of 'big things' (Lees 2001, 71), as Lees suggested they should, in one of the earliest essays to advocate this approach (see in particular Adey 2008a; Baxter and Lees 2009; Degen, DeSilvey and Rose 2007; Jacobs, Cairns and Strebel 2008; Kraftl 2006, 2009; Kraftl and Adey 2008; Llewellyn 2003, 2004).

This paper contributes to this literature by exploring in some detail one particular aspect of the 'practice, embodiment and performance' of buildings: their 'feeling'. Clearly, the 'feeling' buildings is an enduring concern of human geographers; for example, the phenomenologically-inspired work of Tuan (1974; 1977), Relph (1976) and Seamon and Mugerauer (1985) explored the interactions between space, place and experience and, hence, the feelings elicited by particular places or buildings. This paper addresses other more recent work, however, on feelings and buildings, work which draws on affect

theory (Adey 2008a, 2008b; Allen 2006; Amin and Thrift 2002; Kraftl 2009; Kraftl and Adey 2008; Latham and McCormack 2004), yet which shares ANT's emphasis on the performing of buildings. The first part of the paper introduces our case study as a building event, and argues that central to the making of this particular big thing is a feeling experienced as being 'inside' the building. The second section suggests that the burgeoning geographical literature on big things – whether inspired by ANT or by theorisations of affect – has not so far paid adequate attention to the complex work that 'feelings' of different kinds do in the making of (some) building forms. We then discuss our methodology and our empirical findings before drawing some conclusions about building events, and affective and other feelings.

### **the case study: Milton Keynes's centres**

Our case study is the shopping centre at Milton Keynes which, when it opened in 1979, was the biggest such centre in the UK (see Figure 1). It follows the classic shopping mall 'dumbell' design first expounded by Walter Gruen in the 1950s, albeit with not one but two parallel arcades running the length of its rectangular plan between major anchor stores; it was extended in 1993 in a style more or less in keeping with the original design (at which point it was claimed to be the longest shopping mall in Europe) and joined by another centre in 2000. This second centre is called Midsummer Place. As Figures 2 and 3 suggest, its design is in some ways rather different to that of the original centre. However, both buildings look inwards, with almost all their shopfronts facing inside rather than the surrounding open spaces, and both

their managements focus on increasing footfall, spending and rental income (Goss 1993). Security guards police both centres, and, as in so many shopping centres, homeless people are excluded, busking and leafletting are forbidden, and large groups of teenagers are not allowed to congregate (see also Amsden 2008; Holbrook and Jackson 1996; Manzo 2004; Matthews *et al.* 2000; O'Dougherty 2006; Shields 1989; Vanderbeck and Johnson 2000; Voyce 2008).

As a building event, this shopping centre is produced through a diverse range of work, all of it performed by various alignments of the human and the non-human. Other accounts of this work could, for example, examine how the original centre is assembled, not simply as a 'building' but also as 'architecture', by a number of different kinds of work: the discourse of architecture critics, in noting the centre's "cool lines, gridded rationalism, and pure rectilinear forms of Miesian design" (Jewell 2001, 321-2); histories of architecture, in describing the original centre as a key building in Anglo-American modernism (Fraser and Kerr 2007); and by the fact that the building is currently awaiting confirmation as a Grade 2 listed building by English Heritage. Or we could discuss its making as a 'shopping centre' by exploring the marketing strategies of the centres' owners to increase footfall, their repeated efforts to improve signage and wayfinding in the centres to the same end, and the shopping practices that take place there.

However, in this paper our focus is specifically on the importance of a certain 'feeling' experienced by visitors to the centre, a feeling that makes the building what it is for them. Here is one of our interviewees describing entering the centres:

"You walk in from a grey leaden English skyline like we have outside at the moment, and rain on your car, windows, and you scurry across the car park with your jacket pulled up to keep you dry, and then you go through the doorway and you've got this smooth, dry... it's not like an ordinary pavement, and then you've got these plants around you, so even if you're only really heading for the shops they're kind of there, so, yeah, you feel as if you've entered a different place". (Mike, follow-up interview)

Like many of our research participants, Mike is describing a 'feeling' – "you feel as if you've entered a different place" – which happens when "you go through the doorway". This paper focusses on what that feeling is (it is several things, as it turns out), and why paying it attention is important for geographies of big things. This is not to ignore the importance of other ways in which the inside of these buildings is demarcated from the outside: they are privately-owned spaces, which are policed to exclude certain sorts of people and behaviour. Nor is it to ignore the ways in which the buildings could be understood as part of networks that connect them to a range of other times and places (Jacobs 2006; Jenkins 2002), or the way that these buildings are workplaces for many people and how that might inflect the building event (Brody 2006). However, as the next section will argue, in the currently burgeoning literature on big things, relatively little attention is being paid to the constitution of the human in building events. We argue that this is a serious

absence, and suggest some ways in which the notion of the 'feeling' of a building might be unpacked in order to address this absence.

### **'feeling' and building events**

Several geographers of big things are interested in the way that 'feelings' of various kinds might be part of building events. Some are more interested than others, however, and different theoretical positions are evident. This section discusses two somewhat distinct understandings of 'feeling' in relation to buildings.

In the work of those geographers more inspired by the work of Bruno Latour and other actor network theorists, 'feelings' tend to be understood as emotions and are acknowledged rather than explored (Becker 2002; Degen, DeSilvey and Rose 2007; Gillespie 2002; Jacobs 2006; Jacobs, Cairns and Strebel 2006; Jacobs, Cairns and Strebel 2008; Lees 2001; Llewellyn 2003, 2004). The work of Jacobs and her collaborators on the high-rise housing blocks on Red Road in Glasgow, for example, shows little analytical interest in how feelings might be part of what holds big things together, or in how feelings might be enrolled in the unravelling of those things as they were condemned to demolition, even though their empirical work offers ample evidence of a range of emotions felt by residents in relation to their homes (see in particular Jacobs, Cairns and Strebel 2008). This neglect parallels the uninterest in human subjectivity displayed by much of the literature in science and technology studies (Routledge 2008). Baxter and Lees (2009) have also noted the conceptual uninterest in the feelings of Red Road residents in

Jacobs's project, and they respond with a study describing what residents of high-rise blocks in London feel about their housing. Their account is mostly phrased in terms of what those residents like and dislike about high-rise living; like Llewellyn (2003, 2004), their account assumes clear, if often emotional, opinions delivered to the interviewers in unambiguous ways by reflective interviewees, which are taken at face value by researchers. What these accounts share is an acknowledgement of the human imbrication in building events, but none have given the human sustained attention and explored how the relation of human subjectivity to the materialities of big things might be complex, multiple or ambiguous.

In contrast, multiplicity is key to at least some accounts of a different sort of 'feeling': affect. Anderson (2005, 647), for example, insists on "space-time animated by multiple logics of affect", and several theorists of affect have paid sustained attention to buildings recently (Adey 2008a, 2008b; Allen 2006; Amin and Thrift 2002; Kraftl and Adey 2008; Kraftl 2009; Latham and McCormack 2004; Rose 2002). Thrift's book on cities, written with Amin, for example, discusses architecture in ways that sound very similar to that of the geographers of big things (indeed, Amin and Thrift cite Lees: Amin and Thrift 2002, 49). Exciting architecture, they say, attempts to enhance the inherent restlessness of the contemporary city; it is "constantly being transformed by use" and open to "tactile appropriation" by everyday spatial practices (Amin and Thrift 2002, 49). Their emphasis on constant assemblage of urban forms is echoed by Latham and McCormack (2004). Writing on "the materialities of urban geographies" and following Massumi, they argue that the materiality of the city – the cars that traverse it, the psychoactive substances taken by its

clubbers and depressives, its bricks and mortar, its inhabitants, to use their examples – are themselves processually emergent. Hence, the material is itself "always coming into being" (Latham and McCormack 2004, 705). It is emergent. For Latham and McCormack, the affective materiality of the urban is constantly (re)assembling both buildings and bodies. This emphasis on the constant co-assembling of materials in order to constitute both buildings and bodies bears some resemblance to the work of more ANT-influenced geographers. However, the resemblance is superficial.

While not elaborating in any detail the human 'feeling' of big things, the work of Jacobs, Lees and Llewellyn consistently at least gestures towards the importance of human emotion and embodiment (as well as politics, economics and discourse) as they play out in relation to the various non-human actants in building events. Affectual geographers, instead, inspired by "the phenomenality of practices" and "philosophies of becoming" (Amin and Thrift 2002, 4, 27), heavily emphasise the configurability of the human body (Latham et al 2009, 113) and "that whole realm of human life that is outside consciousness" (Amin and Thrift 2002, 28). That realm is constituted both by the senses but also by the various and many "reflexes and automatisms", which are not conscious and which constitute "the bulk of [the city's] activity" (Amin and Thrift 2002, 28; see also Amin 2008). These habitual practices are productive of a city's times and spaces, and they are ordered, or diagrammed (McCormack 2005), through "mundane instruments of encounter" (Amin and Thrift 2002, 83). The city is thus a pulsating, rhythmic force-field of encounters and practices (Amin and Thrift 2002, 84) which precedes any individual body or subjectivity, and in which cognition, interpretation and

motivation are rather minor processes. In this city, buildings are assembled through the prepersonal force of "a multiplicity of nonrepresentational forces and practices and processes" (Latham and McCormack 2004, 705). This realm, its vitality and its push, and in particular its ability to enhance or reduce the capacities of bodies (Anderson 2006) is what Thrift (2004a) has described as "affect".

While the multiplicity of affects is an important claim, a key paper by Kraftl and Adey (2008) uses 'affect' in relation to buildings in two ways, both of which sidestep questions of human subjectivity. The first of these is a strong concern with "the bodily connection with architecture" (Kraftl and Adey 2008, 214). Kraftl and Adey define this connection as affect itself when they write about "the push that the particular relationship between a body and a building could bring about: an affect" (Kraftl and Adey 2008, 216-217), and claim that buildings orchestrate the possible human movements within them by "supplying the perceptive body with a set of possible actions or movements to perform" (Kraftl and Adey 2008, 227). Secondly, 'affect' is used to refer to the sensory 'feel' of a building, as when Kraftl and Adey (2008, 214) write about a building's "affective, tactile, sensual effects". They are concerned to specify how certain architectural features can invoke specific affects among the human users of a building through "a combination of architectural forms that should direct the active dwelling and performance of inhabitants, memory, and emotion" (Kraftl and Adey 2008, 218). Hence, they say, a building can be designed to feel 'welcoming' or 'homely' or 'tranquil', and induce appropriate behaviours in its human occupants as if it had "an unwritten code of conduct" (Kraftl and Adey 2008, 224). This then can be another way in which human

bodies are incorporated into that thing; there can be "a particular atmosphere, a specific mood, a certain feeling – that affects how we experience [a building] and which, in turn seeks to induce certain stances" (Allen 2006, 445).

It could be argued, then, that the geography of big things is currently reflecting the same distinction that Pile (2010) argues is evident elsewhere in the discipline: that between emotion and affect. Some, inspired by ANT, are exploring 'feelings' in terms of the emotions expressed by human subjects, while others work with a version of affect that creates bodily behaviour and sensory perception with little or no mediation by subjective processes. Rather than adjudicating between these two positions, however, this paper takes inspiration from a number of recent essays that work with 'affect' as just one element of complex and subtle geographies, both human and non-human (Cloke, May and Johnsen 2008; Hutta 2009; Sidaway 2009). This paper argues that, in understanding how Milton Keynes shopping centres happen as building events, it *is* necessary to consider the work of affect: that strong feeling of being inside the building which, we will argue below, involves both bodily behaviour and sensory perception. However, we will argue that affects in the centres are multiple; and that emotions and sensations, as well as other aspects of human subjectivity, are also at work in relation to the materiality of Milton Keynes centre; and that, in consequence, all geographers of big things need a more complex account of the human that is performed with buildings. First, though, we will discuss our methods.

## **methods**

How are we to explore the co-constitution of humans and buildings?

Focusing on the *practices* taking place in Milton Keynes's shopping centres allowed us to unravel some of the messy interconnectedness between the diverse elements which constitute particular forms of affect and feelings in these particular places. 'Practice', as theorised by Reckwitz (2002) precisely brings together humans and objects, by considering the co-constitution of "forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, 'things' and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge" (Reckwitz 2002, 249). And as Anderson remarks, places too "are not only a medium but also an outcome of action, producing and being produced through human practice" (2004, 255).

The first step of our research aimed to get an overall sense of what was done in and with the centres. For three months we conducted ethnographic fieldwork to establish what type of practices were shaping the uses of the centres, paying particular attention to the diversity of those practices and their bodily compartments. This was followed by a large scale survey in the town centre, asking 384 individuals about the reasons for their visit and their perceptions of place. By triangulating this data we identified three key practices taking place in the town centre (excluding paid labour):

- a) *shopping*, which can be divided into task-oriented shopping and browsing around shops;
- b) *socialising*, referring to the ways in which people go into town centres with friends and family: meet up for a drink, for example, or the ways in which teenagers congregate in certain areas of the town centres;

c) *caring*, which broadly refers to looking after children or older relatives while using the town centre.

We then developed a second stage of data collection in order to get a more fine grained account of diverse engagements with urban space, that would get as close as possible, and be as open as possible, to the actual experiencing of a space. Based on the three practices identified as shaping the uses of the centre, we sought participants who engaged in these activities, attempting also to recruit a cross section of individuals from a variety of social backgrounds, ethnicity and age. A range of methods have been developed in recent years to harness both the multiplicity and perceptual dimensions of place experience, thereby providing "an explicit awareness of the ways in which ...practices are tied into places" (Anderson 2004, 257). To access our participants' immediate 'feel' for the centre, we amalgamated two of these: the go-along (Kusenbach 2003) and the photo-diary/photo-interview method (Latham 2003), to develop what we have termed the 'walk-along' method. The walk-along consists of the researcher accompanying individuals (sometimes with families and friends) in their routine uses of the shopping centre. The nature of the walk-alongs was diverse: sometimes a hurried 30 minutes with an individual rushing in their lunch break to buy a gift, other times several hours with a family doing their errands and having coffee breaks. We recorded the conversations during the walk-along and occasionally prompted the participant to comment on the environment. We further noted the spatial use and feeling of the space, the participants' actions and observed how they moved and used their bodies. We also asked participants to take photographs of things that particularly struck them on our walk. We used these

photographs as a basis for a follow-up interview in which participants reflected on their experience of the walk and on the town centres more generally. In total we completed twelve walk-alongs and follow up interviews in Milton Keynes that involved seventeen participants.

One of the biggest challenges for research on affect has been how to capture the often evasive nature of affect (Thrift 2004b; Amin and Thrift 2002), so let us briefly reflect on the status of this data. Kusenbach's go-along method consists of walking with research participants undertaking everyday tasks, and Kusenbach argues that "what makes the go-along technique unique is that the ethnographers are able to observe their informants spatial practices *in situ*" (2003, 463). Hence, our walk-along method allows immediate and intensive access to very detailed ways of seeing, talking, touching, hearing – thus accessing the feel of place to participants – over an extended period of time, as bodies move through the town centres. The evidence obtained from our walk-alongs provide access to what is directly felt and experienced both by the researcher and researched, as the knowledge on experience and environment is produced in a "collage of collaboration: an unstructured dialogue where all actors participate in a conversational, geographical and informational pathway creation" (Anderson 2004, 260). As Lee and Ingold also (2006) argue, walking with people, living and moving as others do, can bring us closer to understanding how other people perceive their multisensory environments and constitute place through their everyday practices (and see Heins, Evans and Jones 2008). Moreover, as Kusenbach highlights, this method also helps to distinguish "the perceptual filters which not only create the 'visibility' of objects but also determine how they are

interpreted" (2003, 468). While our presence certainly affected these individual's experiences, it did also allow us to engage, if only temporarily, in their experiential world and to consider this experience reflexively (see also Pink 2008). As Anderson highlights in regards to the practice of walking whilst talking: "the knowledge produced is importantly different: atmospheres, emotions, reflections and beliefs can be accessed, as well as intellects, rationales and ideologies" (2004, 260).

The follow-up interview, conducted about a week after each walk-along, offered a space to conduct a reflective analysis of the quality of experience for both us and the participants. The photographs were particularly important here. They served as a factual reminder of the geography of the walk and also as "reminders and representations of the materiality, sensoriality and sociality" of the walk (Pink 2008, 190). They were crucial not so much in offering a visual reportage of the walk, but in providing prompts for discussion of both particular practices in the centres and the perceptual experiences they entailed. These interviews-with-photographs provided a self-reflexive verbal articulation of how a range of different kinds of 'feelings' collaborate to constitute the centres in Milton Keynes. In particular, they gave us an insight, not only into the strong feeling of being 'inside' the centres, but also, as it turns out, into a range of multiple and overlapping spatial and temporal dimensions of the feelings that happen when individuals are inside the shopping centre.

The next section explores that 'inside' both empirically and theoretically; the following sections then elaborate those other feelings.

## **affect in MK shopping centre**

### *inside the centre*

it's been bit of a drive, and then the search for a parking space. weekends are crowded, parking a nightmare. across the bare car park under the open sky and buffeted by the wind, through the door and we're in. inside. it's warm and there's an ambient quietness – or at least no traffic and engine and wind noise. it's cream. cream and grey. "off-white greyish sort of creamy." light. walking towards the main arcades, joining the flow there. like being back in traffic again, everyone moving in straight lines along the arcade's length. it's big. long. white and grey. silver. modern. high and light. glassy smooth shiny slippy. cold and hard. "like stroking a tile." moving along the channels of flow, heading for where we can buy what we want. straight. square rectangles right-angles. "block block." dove-grey and ivory. slow, slow, crowded, traffic jam. it's alright, bland, restful. it's alright. light and airy. it's just a shopping centre. keep to the lanes. check the maps, aim for the shop. keep an eye on the kids. cream and grey. it's just a shopping centre. alright. all the same. it's monotonous, all that marble. "it's the same." it's all the same temperature too. warm. hot, apart from that bit between the two, there it's freezing. you can't find a separate little space in there to eat a sandwich. it's so uniform. "everything is very same." all the same brands. no smells. the arcades look just like the shops. monotonous marble. cold and hard. no smells, all smooth and glassy. "same-y." all the same. in the flow. moving. "we tend to bounce our way around." not window-shopping really,

the windows aren't very interesting. moving to get somewhere, get to the shop that I know will have what I'm looking for, where even if I don't know what I'm looking for exactly there'll be something that will do. "I try to come with a rough plan of what we are going to do." walking strolling marching along. long. maps. "I kind of prioritise what I need to do in my route." need to check a map, it's a big place, where is the post office? follow my route in the flow.

From interviews with, and our fieldwork observations of, people visiting Milton Keynes's centres, it is clear that the two buildings are being assembled in specific ways, as are the bodies inside them. Across the range of our interviewees, the centres were given a particular glossy texture, a specific sense of light and colour, a particular spatial extent and geometry, a certain olfactory and auditory character. And while this account clearly draws on some of the centres' built affordances – the large rectangular glazing of the 1979 centre, its height and use of natural light, its size, the colours of its marbles and painted steel columns – it is pitched at a very general level. Unlike the other case study town in our project – an old market town with a pedestrianised centre – people in Milton Keynes rarely picked out specific elements of the built environment to us. Rather, they articulated an overall impression, a general sense, an atmosphere, which starts when you enter either of the centres. Descriptions of the buildings were strikingly consistent, regardless of whether we were working with someone on their lunchbreak dash or on a more leisurely shop for a gift after work. They focus very much on the original centre and much less on the newer Midsummer Place, and

they cohere the centres into whole, a "uniform", "monotonous" whole in which bodies are experienced as constantly mobile (even though we have extensive photographic evidence that benches are in constant use for a wide range of sedentary activities). We would argue that this account of Milton Keynes's centres – which emphasises both their sensory characteristics and the entrainment of bodies inside them – is a fundamental part of their experiencing and is clearly affective, entailing both corporeal and sensory 'push'.

Shannon is a long-time Milton Keynes resident and the principal urban designer at the government body that continues to contribute to planning the city's development. She talked about:

"how you contrast the internal and the external spaces... that's the interface with the street but it's blank, the shopfronts are blacked out and you've got no-one moving through those spaces... Now you contrast that with the internalised mall, you know you've got a lot of people moving about". (Shannon, follow-up interview)

The outside of the centres, then, is empty and blank; inside is different, "it's smooth and shiny," says Shannon, "grey", as we've already heard. For Michelle, "it is ok inside. The outside is ugly". The boundary between inside and outside is being made here as a distinction felt between two different sorts of spaces (see Dovey 1999, 130). For Shannon, it is also a distinction between a space that is (relatively) empty and one in which "a lot of people [are] moving about". So if the building's boundaries are materialising quite

specifically in terms of the doors and a certain organisation of the internal affordances of the buildings, there is also something about the people in the mall that is part of its affect.

Indeed, one of the most important "compulsions of the situation" (Amin 2008, 11) is that bodies in the shopping centre are constituted as bodies on the move. "It's like aim, let's just get there," said Jo; "I want to go there to that and there do that," echoed Michelle. Nobody we accompanied on a walk-along took us to sit on one of the many benches in the centres; instead, we were taken on errands or tours. A persistent way in which our research participants described walking in the centres, especially when they were crowded, was to say that walking there was like being in traffic – or a "traffic jam" when it's especially crowded. "There's a tendency for it to be a bit like a two-way street. You find people walking in synch with one another, so if you want to go across it's really hard," said Susan; bodies are also expected to flow in parallel channels, and Susan also said that if people walked in any direction in the mall, that "randomness" got her "really annoyed" (although she was fine with it in the open-air market that sits next to the centre:MK). Jennifer described walking in the centre with her children as if each of them were a car that had to kept on the correct route:

"It's a bit like when you're driving a car and that you have to pay attention to what you're doing and what the other driver's doing around on the road, and all that kind of stuff, but when you've then got the children in tow you have two more cars that you're

controlling but with independent thought." (Jennifer, follow-up interview)

Moving was also implicit in Christopher's discussion of the provision of maps in thecentre:MK. He was particularly exercised by the fact that not all the pillars in the centre had maps, and those that did only had them on two sides and not on all four sides:

"there are people walking this way, but there are also people walking down that way as well, so why choose one angle and not another. The information should just like be there... You shouldn't have to walk up to a pillar wondering if there's information on it".

(Christopher, follow-up interview)

The maps mattered to him because "people walking" need to find their way. It seems bodies in the centres have to be on the move. Interestingly, this is despite the fact that, as both Jewell (2001) and Fraser and Kerr (2007) note, neither centre makes much use of the standard strategies described to keep people moving; there are clocks, you can see the sky, there are long views rather than enticing "tantalizing glimpses" (Goss 1993, 32). Nonetheless, Christopher did make a connection between the material affordances of the centres and its mobility, connecting the tactile smoothness of the centres to this ongoing movement. The smooth walls are designed for people to "move past, or be pressed against if there's a lot of people", while the smooth floors are "like an ice-rink":

"You walk along your shoes will squeak from time to time on this smooth surface. You see people rolling around, they're pushing

trolleys or they're in like those low scooters, like wheelchairs, it's just smooth, you can tell it's smooth just by looking at it".

(Christopher, follow-up interview)

The smooth surfaces are here associated with movement, with walking, rolling, pushing, scooting bodies.

This then is feeling inside, feeling "as if you've entered a different place", to quote Mike again. We have already noted that the doors, the ownership of the building and the security guards act to produce certain privatised and exclusionary 'inside' spaces. Here we have another sort of inside, an inside we will call affective: an inside that is a field of becomings, in which buildings and bodies are assembled in particular sensory and mobile ways and encounter each other in specific ways; here, the doors, walls and ceilings are constituted as the boundary of a certain affect.

### **affect and other feelings**

At this point in our discussion, a question arises: to what extent is the affect of these two centres complicit with the interests of the centre owners? That is, does this affect coincide with their desire to increase footfall, spending and profit? Is the affective materiality of the architecture an example of a "landscape of manipulation" (Thrift 2004a, 66)? Both Adey (2008) and Thrift (2004a; Amin and Thrift 2002) argue that architecture is a technology increasingly deployed in order to encourage certain behaviours in human populations. Thrift (2004a, 64) describes "a tendency towards the greater and

greater engineering of affect", while Adey (2008, 440) sees "the built and architectural terrains that people inhabit and move through as a key tool in the production of affect". So is the affect of these centres just one more way in which consumption is encouraged?

On both empirical and theoretical grounds, we would argue that things are not that simple. Empirically, our data shows that just getting people to move does not guarantee that they will buy anything. Both our ethnographic observation, walk-alongs and interviews show that shop window displays only rarely attract the attention of our participants, let alone induce them to enter a shop (their shopping is usually brand-driven, not display-driven), and in any case, according to our survey, less than two-thirds of people come to the centres intending to shop. More importantly, from a theoretical point of view, we want to insist that the relation between affect and the experiencing of these centres is not mimetic. And in making this argument, this paper wants to both develop but also to move beyond entirely affective accounts of building events, and also to suggest ways in which the more ANT-inflected work on building events might also develop a richer account of the humans implicated in those events (see also Degen, Rose and Basdas forthcoming).

There are three aspects to our argument here. Firstly, affect can be an important part of building events, and ANT-inspired theorists of building events should pay more attention to this in their discussions of what holds 'big things' together. It is important to note, as many theorists of affect emphasise, that affect is not consistent. Amin and Thrift (2002, 28), for example, insist on "a generative multiplicity of divergent and discontinuous lines of flight with their own spaces and times" as part of the becoming of affect. Certainly the

affect of Milton Keynes's centres is not singular. As we will show below, it can be more or less intense, and different affects can interfere with each other. Nonetheless, we would argue that 'affect' is an important term in understanding how some building events entrain their human participants in quite specific ways; affect as a term catches the strong if elusive 'feel' that many places have, and that our research methodologies enabled our participants to articulate in relation to the centres in Milton Keynes.

If the affective 'feel of' a building is one aspect of their experiencing, then, we now want to suggest that there are two more. Following Berlant's (2008, 4) claim that "the structure of an affect has no inevitable relation to the penumbra of emotions that may cluster in the wake of its activity", we want to show that emotions may well be inconsistent with affective feelings; indeed, emotions themselves in relation to buildings may be inconsistent (Hutta 2009). The next section will thus discuss the emotional feelings that people have in Milton Keynes's centres. And finally, following Barnett (2008), we want to insist that affects must be considered not only in relation to emotions, but also in relation to reflective judgements made by humans. Here we will address feelings about buildings.

This paper is thus unpacking 'feelings' in relation to buildings in three ways: the feel *of* buildings, feelings *in* buildings, and feelings *about* buildings. This of course is a highly schematic understanding of how people experience buildings, and as a theory of the subjectivity paid little attention in ANT-inspired work and none in affect-driven work, it is clearly inadequate. It does mark, however, this paper's effort to instate a richer sense of subjectivity in both ANT and affectual geographies of building events, and thus, as a series

of pointers to certain key aspects of human subjectivity, it may be of some heuristic use. Now, thus far, this paper has argued that work on affect and building events is very helpful in specifying the feel of some buildings. However, as Pile (2010) emphasises, in deploying the term subjectivity at this point, we are distancing our project from that of affect theorists, since "affectual geography views the psychological subject with enduring suspicion" (Pile 2010, 12). And indeed, our account of 'feeling of, in and about' is an effort to emphasise the complexity of human subjectivity. This subjectivity, we would argue, certainly includes affects (which, to some extent, in certain situations, can be articulated); but it also includes emotions and reflective thoughts (among many other things). These three are certainly not distinct; and they can be entangled and divided, conscious and unconscious, articulated and sensed, fixed and fluid, ambivalent and straightforward in all sorts of complex ways, which this paper's use of the phrase 'feeling of, in and about' barely hints at. Nonetheless, this is a richer account of human subjectivity than that found either in ANT-inspired accounts or affectual discussions of building events. So let's now return to the buildings in Milton Keynes with this somewhat fuller sense of human subjectivity, and explore what else is going on in complex relation with affect.

*diminishments of the centres' affect*

While all our research participants could articulate the affect of the centres, it was clear that it was not felt consistently all of the time they were in the centres. Affect can be more or (very much) less intense. The doing of some practices could radically diminish the affect of the centre, to the point where it

became simply an awareness that prevented our research participants from walking into things. Our participation in the centres repeatedly showed that certain practices radically reduced its affect in this way. In particular, talking can make that feeling of light, smoothness and creaminess fade; conversations seriously enfeeble the centre's affective materiality. So too does paying attention to children – talking with them, feeding them, tucking in a blanket, picking up a toy, discussing where to go next – all of these demanding and frequent parenting-like activities also erode the centre's light, geometry and extent. Attentive human relations then seem able to push back against the centres' affect. Affect, it seems, is not always uniform, although that is how it feels when it is reflected upon.

*on a walk-along with a woman needing to buy, wrap and post presents to her family in Australia, we keep talking about her family and how she strategizes about sending the parcels as one pack or in groups. She keeps talking fast giving me all this information about how much she needs to get things sent and how she is behind on this. ...During her talks, I realized we passed the Post Office walk. I paused and asked her if we passed the Post Office. She was not sure. We looked back and forth trying to figure it out. Then she approached the map to look where the post office is located and commented on how often she gets lost. (walk-along notes)*

There is then a relation between strong social interaction and the mall's affect reducing to a knowledge of what solid objects are where; people talking aren't

entrained by the centre's intensities of affect, yet nor do they trip over planters or walk into windows. Feeding a baby, talking on a mobile, gossiping with a friend: all of these can diminish the centres' affective materialities. And a great many of these social practices go on in Milton Keynes's centres: as with other ordinary shopping centres, going there is "an intensely social activity that involves far more than the simple purchase of goods" (Holbrook and Jackson 1996, 202; Jackson and Holbrook 1995; Uzell 1995). The affective power of the centres, then, is rather erratic. Although very nearly all our interviewees agreed on how to characterise that affect, it is also clear that this affect could vary significantly in its intensity. Doing things other than just walking up and down the aisles interrupted it.

This suggests that affect does not produce practice in any straightforward way (cf Adey [2008b] and Thrift's [2004a] manipulation). We found ample evidence of the affective materiality of the centres in Milton Keynes thinning out in moments of sociability, when the bodies of the centres' visitors were no longer constituted in large part with the buildings' materiality but rather more with other things – talk, daughters, food, laughter, phones – when other affects, and other things, are induced. And as these moments happened, the centres' affect was highly attenuated (see Anderson 2005). Affect, then, can be a powerful part of the assembling of building events, but inconsistently so as different human and non-human assemblages are performed and other affects interrupt that of the building; and ANT-influenced geographers of buildings should acknowledge both these aspects of the affectual materiality of buildings.

*emotions and affect*

Both in the walk-alongs and the follow-up interviews, with no prompting from their interviewer, research participants compared Milton Keynes to other places they knew. Sometimes this was with other parts of Milton Keynes, but most often this was a comparison with another city.

"I always have Leeds as a comparison" (Susan).

"If I went to Brighton for a weekend, I would love to walk along the Lanes or whatever and browse the shops then" (Shannon).

"It feels like it goes on for miles and miles and miles, but if I was to compare it with some of the shopping centres in Australia it probably wouldn't be much bigger" (Phoebe).

"There aren't many choices here compared to other places like London and Birmingham" (Jo).

"I lived in Osaka for a while. At night time there was a place with skyscrapers and neon lights" (Stu).

"I'm from Cape Town, there's a big shopping mall there that's over three floors" (Tim)

For all participants, these comparisons were based on memories of other places, and these memories could produce emotions. Samantha, for example, compared Milton Keynes's centres to Northampton's shopping centre, saying that she preferred the former to latter because it was more logically laid out, and with its frequent exits she felt less claustrophobic. Samantha felt safer in Milton Keynes centre, while Stu's comparison of the centre with Osaka made him conclude that the former was "bad, very depressing". Phoebe was talking about the spread of the centre in the context of expressing her frustration at people who walk slowly through it, wasting her time. Clearly, some of these comparisons involved strong emotions for the research participants.

Some of these emotional feelings were quite different from the affect of the centres. Jennifer's eight-year-old daughter, for example, launched into a very evocative account of the "dark and scary" train journey to Paris as she walked past a booth promoting the Eurostar train, when lightness and airiness are, as we have noted, central to the centres' affect. And Stu, for example, who described the centres as "bad, very depressing", remember, also loved the wooden display cabinets in a model shop in the centre because it reminded him of going to museums with his mother when he was a child and being lifted up by her to look into similar display cabinets. Here we can also see how emotions about a place can be inconsistent.

As ANT-influenced geographers of building events acknowledge, people can have a wide range of feelings about buildings. For geographers of affect, however, as we have already noted, there is no such thing as a pre-existing human subject who then encounters human or non-human others and

emotes. There is no Cartesian 'I', ready-made for entry into the world. Work on affect "valorises those processes that operate before (both in an ontogenetic and temporal sense) conscious, reflective thought comes into play" (McCormack 2005, 122). All subjects are constantly constituted performatively, in encounters with other things. Nor do we assume that what experiences these centres emotionally is a Cartesian subject, fully-formed prior to its meeting with building materials or mobile phones or children. However, we do want to argue that the relentlessly presentist performative account of human subjectivity found in the work of geographers of affect is not a fully adequate conceptualisation of subjectivity either, or at least not of the humans inhabiting Milton Keynes's centres. The persistent spontaneism of affect theory in geography makes it very hard for those geographers to grasp the obduracy of past experiences that, for our research participants, could produce a range of feelings about the Milton Keynes centres. In their focus on the "here and now... [and] that which is *not-yet*" (Anderson 2005, 649), affect theorists has little to say about that which has been, or will have been, and its relationships to the present. Both Anderson (2003) and McCormack (2005) conflate memory with affect, McCormack (2005, 121) by quoting Massumi on the 'virtual', which is "that 'pressing crowd of incipencies and tendencies... where futurity combines, unmediated, with pastness'". There is though a difference between things that have happened and things that might happen, and the legacy of past events, carried by embodied human subjects, is much better addressed elsewhere in the affective turn: for example in the work of Patricia Ticineto Clough, who wishes "to welcome bodies haunted by memories of times lost and places left" (Clough 2007, 4).

While memories in Milton Keynes are not the traumatic kind addressed by Clough, it is clear that they nonetheless impact on the affect of the two centres in significant ways. Research participants in this project persistently remembered other places, which could produce multiple emotions in relation to the centres that had little in common with their affect. In their accounts of building events, then, we would argue that both affectual geographers and ANT-like geographers should engage more carefully with the emotional.

### *judging Milton Keynes*

Finally, these different kind of memories almost always entail making judgements about the centres. For example, Tim's comment about Cape Town, and Phoebe's comments about Australian shopping malls, were both about comparing Milton Keynes's size and navigability to other places, and suggesting that Milton Keynes's centres weren't too bad after all: "if I was to compare it to shopping centres at home it's built all on one level so it feels like it goes on for miles... [but] it probably wouldn't actually be much bigger cos we have ones that are like two or three storeys high" (Phoebe). The comparison with Osaka's lights and skyscrapers makes Milton Keynes "bland" for Stu: he repeated, "it is just bland concrete".

These sorts of judgements are similar to those evoked by Baxter and Lees (2009) and Llewellyn (2003, 2004), and judgement is also dissected by Anderson (2005) in his discussion of people deciding what music to listen to. He suggests that music is judged to be good if it augments the listener's experience: if "it gives energy or a boost" (Anderson 2005, 651). Conversely, a piece of music is judged badly if it diminishes the person listening, dulling

their engagement with the world. Here we are back with the concept of affect, and Anderson makes judgements part of specific affects. However, what we are suggesting is that judgements can counter affects. In this case, as well as emotions, memories give rise to diverse assessments of an affect. What we suggest is crucial to this process of relating to affect is the importance of previous encounters with things. For our research participants, judgements were bound up reflections on *previous* encounters with other places, and those reflections were part of what helped them judge Milton Keynes.

So what we are arguing here, with Barnett (2008), is that recent accounts of building events, in their enthusiasm to emphasise affect, materiality, performance and corporeality, should not forget that humans can, on occasion, bring what might broadly be termed 'rationality' to bear on buildings. In this sense, and *contra* Anderson and Wylie (2009), it is not only materiality that is interrogative: so is subjectivity. That is, humans can reflect on what they are co-performing and, in this case, make comparisons in order to assess that co-performance. These buildings are indeed events, and how they feel is not therefore consistent: nor then is people's engagement with them (Becker 2002; Hutta 2009; Jacobs *et al.* 2008, 182).

## **conclusions**

Current work on the geography of big things has two rather distinct theoretical positions: there is an ANT-inspired geography of big things; and there are accounts of buildings written by geographers of affect. All these scholars share an emphasis on the different ways in which 'big things' like buildings

become made as particular sorts of things; all agree that that making is co-constituted by both the materiality of buildings and humans; and all share an insistence on the provisionality of that making. For all of them, then, "the objective is to investigate the process by which certain things cohere to produce 'building'" (Jacobs 2006, 3). The differences between these two approaches become evident in their discussion of the 'human' in that co-constitution, however. For ANT-inspired geographers, humans are bodies and gestures but also, importantly, they are emotions and opinions; they are subjects. For geographers of affect, humans are primarily bodies: humans are conceived as bodily intensities and their interest in buildings focusses on how bodies and buildings interact (Latham et al 2009).

This paper has focussed directly on the human in building events, by exploring a range of different kinds of 'feelings'. Our fieldwork in Milton Keynes revealed 'feeling' to be a crucial component in the human experiencing of the town's centres, but the complexity of those feelings has encouraged us to draw on the conceptual tools offered both by geographers of affect and by ANT-inspired geographers. In so doing, we have suggested that the 'feeling' of Milton Keynes's shopping centres has three key components. Firstly, there is the feel *of* buildings. This is the feel of affect: a more-or-less intense field of assemblages, in which the shopping centres are cohered into a smooth, light, glossy and grey building in which bodies must continually be on the move in linear flows. Secondly, we have asserted the importance of feelings *in* buildings. These are the things that people feel in relation with both the building and their own memories. These emotions can be weak or strong, straightforward or contradictory. And finally, we have

explored feelings *about* buildings. These are the considered, reflexive opinions that people hold buildings, often based on comparisons with other remembered buildings, and which can be bound into their emotions too.

In making this argument, we are suggesting that all geographers of big things would do well to work with richer and more complex sense of the human entrainment in buildings. This is particularly important, we would argue, if, as Allen (2006), Adey (2008b) and Thrift (2004a) argue, the management of affect is increasingly important part of the way many contemporary buildings and urban spaces are being designed. Allen (2006) has described the Potsdamer Platz in Berlin as just this sort of building. Allen suggests that the power of this place rests not on its ability to exclude (as so much of literature argues about shopping centres and malls), but on its ability to include people in its seductive spatiality. This is a modest form of power, which is suggestive rather than directive, and utilises elements of the built environment to soothe and guide people. He describes it as affective: "a particular atmosphere, a specific mood, a certain feeling – that affects how we experience [a space] and which, in turn seeks to induce certain stances" (Allen 2006, 445). Allen comments that this form of "ambient power" is becoming increasingly important in the management of urban spaces, but he also raises the possibility that "the characteristics of the space can go unrecognised and, more pointedly, people can opt out from the experience. They can walk away" (Allen 2006, 451-2). We would argue that, if affect is to be a useful term for understanding new (and not-so-new) forms of urban space, this possibility must be addressed more directly by those working with accounts of building events. For while Allen (2006) does not elaborate on

why people might 'opt out' or 'walk away' from an affect, our work in Milton Keynes is suggestive here. While we found little evidence of direct 'resistance' to the shopping that is so central to these spaces (*cf* Brody 2006; Goss 1993; Shields 1989), we did find considerable evidence of the re-assembling of things and subjects in the practising of everyday sociability which entailed a diversity of affects, many of which diminished the affect of the shopping centres. Moreover, not only is affect more or less intense, and interrupted by other affective assemblages, it can also be disrupted by emotions and by judgements, performed by humans remembering and reflecting. Affectual accounts of buildings thus also need to acknowledge the qualities of the human that ANT-inspired geographers emphasise, in order to understand more fully the work that is holding big things together.

However, we would also suggest that ANT-inspired geographers of big things could also learn from the emphasis on multiplicity that characterises accounts of affect. The human participation in buildings is complex, and involves many processes of making. As affect induces certain kinds of bodily and sensory participation in buildings, an 'inside' is felt; but that is not all that is felt. Talk and memories reach out to other places and times, with other objects; emotions play with and against affects and each other; and judgements and reflection intersect with all these. And this suggests that the focus in ANT work on big things on the moments when they apparently no longer hold together is perhaps somewhat misplaced. Jacobs in particular theorises from moments when the work that has been making certain big things ends, and those things fall apart: high-rises are demolished. For her, this marks the failure of that making and makes the work of that making more

visible (Jacobs, Cairns and Strebel 2006). However, as Kraftl (2009) suggests, it isn't always so easy to distinguish between things holding together and falling apart, between success and failure, or between the ordinary and the extraordinary. We would argue that the big thing in Milton Keynes is both highly successful in its ongoingness: affectively, powerfully felt. But we have also discovered that it is also always failing. Its boundaries are breached, by phone calls and memories of other places; its affect is diminished and judged by thinking and emotive humans who are constituted with and through many things other than (this particular) affect. And if, in focussing here on just three kinds of feelings, we are also guilty of underestimating the human in human-material co-constitutions, we conclude by insisting that a more nuanced account remains a task for all geographers of big things.

## **notes**

- <sup>i</sup> This section is based on the analysis of all our data. Direct quotes from interviews or walk-alongs are in quotation marks; other text is based on the descriptions of the centre from all our research participants collated through surveys, walk-along notes, ethnographic notes and follow-up interviews. The descriptions were strikingly consistent in all these sources. The repetitive form of the text is intended to evoke the feeling of being inside the centre. Another attempt to convey our work in less conventional forms can be found at [www.urban-experience.net](http://www.urban-experience.net) (and see Rose, Degen and Basdas 2009).

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