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Article Title: Being Vertical: Staging the Vertical Subject on the Manchester Salford border.

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Jane Brake is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Art at Manchester Metropolitan University.

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Article: Being Vertical: Staging the Vertical Subject on the Manchester Salford border.

Jane Brake & John van Aitken

Abstract:

Brake and Aitken present artistic work, photography and speculative poetics, which explore the emerging sensorium of the vertical city and its tentative subjects. With reference to the case study of Anaconda Cut, Salford UK, the article considers the development of the housing commodity through its participation in aesthetic capitalism and the role of atmospheres and design in the staging of vertical lifestyles. The research considers photographs and other marketing materials related to Anaconda Cut as they evidence the deployment of atmospheres and the production of affective sensory spaces, highlighting the way renting an apartment is framed within contemporary notions of positional and hedonistic consumption.



Figure 1: View from Anaconda Cut, Salford – Image Credit: John van Aitken (2020)

Dreaming of Amenities

It's me. Catching the lift down to the 17th floor, dressed for the gym, water bottle steadied on hip bone.

While I peddle - insert row, insert run - the city below radiates silence and inertia. You must think I am lucky. Imagine me. Imagine you are lucky too.

Undoubtedly there are figures in the streets below, but they are too slight and fleshy, too camouflaged and dingy. Perhaps one. Lopsided, dragged down by the weight of wet socks and trouser bottoms, which have been shredded over time between shoe and concrete. Rucksack dangling from their left forearm, they round the corner by the art gallery, looking up and around, down and around. I don't really see them. We are on different pages.

A gym is like an insectarium full of insect apparatus. As I peddle - insert row, insert run - sweat starts to trickle down my forehead. I squeeze my eyelids tight to keep out the stinging, salty, sweat. The pain is disturbing. Real.

In the pool I am a machine focused on the return, keeping it smooth, economical. Keeping it to myself. A couple rest at the edge and a single, on the opposite side. Somebody opens the sauna door. I can see calves tighten as toes grip poolside footwear. A figure dives into the deep end. One metre ninety. The impact of body on water shifts a wave in my direction. But I ride it, with a determined over arm, like the swimmer icon.

On the roof garden, I am meeting like-minded people, wearing like-minded clothes. We are smart-casual, discerning and salaried. In a window I catch sight of my life reflected and I think it looks like a holiday. It must look just like a holiday to you.

I am doing yoga. The door to my balcony is open. My balcony is glass. You can see through the glass balcony, through the open doors into the living room. It is tidy, books on the table. Design. Architecture. Consumption. Smooth edges. Neutral.

I am flicking the pages of a lifestyle magazine. I am the figure you see lounging on the furniture I ordered from the developer's interior design catalogue. Grey twill. Grey cushions. Abstract painting. I am giving the impression of elegance. I am speaking to you about luxury.

There is a view, a panoramic sundown. City lights. Transitions on urban advertising screens. Seductive frame rates. Skin. Sun. Mauve. Shadow. Sky. Logo. Skin. Sun. Mauve. Shadow. Sky. Logo.

Ruby wine glows in super-size glasses. Lettuce leaves tumble into a salad bowl on the gleaming countertop. Like my teeth as I chop colourful healthy food with a perfectly sharp knife. Twinkle twinkle blade. Digital glint.

Introduction

The above text is an artistic account of vertical subjectivity in relation to the emerging sensorium of the high-rise block of flats. This is a tentative subject, who inhabits social media platforms and advertisements associated with so called luxury developments. A subject of the atmospheric biopolitics of global finance, day dreamer of vertical imaginaries. Their head leaves no impression on the pillows in the show apartment bed, although their desires are significant when it comes to vertical finance.

Recently our work has explored the vertical mode of the city as a production of varied imaginations, some instrumentalised in the interests of property finance, others motivated by different forms of desire or impulse. We use sensory encounters with spaces undergoing transformation through urban development, as the stimulus for artistic accounts, employing mainly photography and speculative poetics, such as the passage above. We view new developments and apartments by adopting the identities of potential renters or investors. There are no formal procedures here, only a slippage into and subsequent retreat from roles we might easily have inhabited ourselves. These are performative encounters, which are destabilising because we are not immune to vertical imaginaries and not completely inured to the subtle seduction of vertical atmospheres or even the crass signifiers of luxury. We also negotiate access to gyms, building sites, sky lounges and bars which afford us high level views of the city and opportunities to observe vertical atmospheres. We experiment with ways of inhabiting the imagined sensory spaces, which project out from the actual spaces visited and visualised, and these inhabitations generate poetic residues and provocations. Against this wider set of concerns this article focuses on the way the vertical subject is staged in the context of urban development. We use Anaconda Cut, a forty-four-storey block of flats

in Greengate, Salford, as a case study to explore spatial accumulation on the vertical axis. To make a profit requires speculative investment and the valorisation of cheap land, available in places such as Greengate. New modes of consumption around vertical living must be naturalised, rendered rational, positional and sensuous in order to incentivise the subject's investment, both financially and affectively, and in order to bring into being the vertical subject in the first place. We track an evolving entanglement between selves or subjects and consumption in which the commodity is fading as the site of value, superseded by experiential and ultimately atmospheric values. We are assisted by Gernot Bohme's philosophy of aesthetic capitalism in which capital accumulation is achieved by means of the aesthetic labour involved in the staging of atmospheres, as much as, or instead of, the industrial labour engaged in mass production (Böhme 2016).

The geographical context of this research spans the municipal authorities of Manchester and Salford, along the banks of the river Irwell, where central Manchester meets the Salford border. The area is intersected by the rail network on route to the major transport hubs at Piccadilly, Victoria and Salford stations. Two cathedrals, other historic sites and buildings from the city's industrial period remain, but for decades the area has been something of an edge land, with cheap contract carparking, light industries, mechanics workshops, lockups under the railway arches and an independent music scene. International investors looking for better returns than those offered by the London property market have in recent years gravitated to the cheap land and lucrative opportunities in this area of Salford, which came to be known as the 'Salford Fringe' and includes the historic area of Greengate where Anaconda Cut is located (Deloitte 2019). The area's market in residential accommodation has continued to drive record levels of construction, with around 14,500 units, in the Private Rented Sector (PRS), the majority aimed at 'young professionals' or 'Generation Rent' (Dorling 2015, 5-6). The arrival of technology companies such as UKFast, Hewlett Packard, Slalom and delivery giant Amazon, with the combined promise of up to 16,300 jobs by 2021, suggests long term prospects for the PRS. With three large competitive Universities in close proximity and over 100,000 students in the Greater Manchester area, demand for accommodation, supplemented by the hotel and conference industries is deemed to be substantial (MIDAS 2020). During the period between 2018 and 2037 the Greater Manchester Combined Authority anticipate the need for an additional 201,000 homes in the region, 55,000 of which would be in Manchester and 32,700 in Salford (Howe 2020, 22). Trends in the region follow national trends with 63%

of UK households now resident in the PRS, with 25 to 34-year olds representing the largest age group (Office of National Statistics 2018)

Above the Manchester Salford border a line of ‘tall’ and increasingly ‘supertall’ towers, countersigns the dominance of verticality as *the* mode of the emerging city (Council on Tall Buildings and Urban Habitat 2020). In 2019 tall buildings were included in nearly 30% of all major development applications in Manchester, compared to just 13% in 2017 (Howe 2020, 8). Here as elsewhere, the high-rise skyline is understood as evidence of success, advancement and economic confidence. Vertical visibility itself is a mechanism for consolidating the position of global cities (Al-Kodmany 2012, 135; Graham 2016, 149-173). Building upwards is heralded as the most progressive, most ecological solution to population density, because it prevents the development of urban sprawl and the resulting encroachment on greenbelt land (Howe 2020, 7; Graham 2016, 174-179). Vertical accumulation, which is intrinsic to the financial processes of the contemporary capitalist project, is thereby naturalised as the dominant urban process (Shin 2011).

Commodities, Experiences, Atmospheres and Vertical Subjects

A key tenet of consumption studies holds that “identities are affirmed and contested through specific acts of consumption: we define ourselves by what we buy and by the meaning that we give to the goods and services that we acquire” (Jackson and Thrift 1995, 224). The concept of the ‘positional good’ extends this idea further to encompass the way commodities are engaged in social competition and certain conspicuous acquisitions bestow on the owner, value and status way in excess of their use value (Hirsch 1978). The act of purchasing or renting an apartment within the hyped PRS environment is not necessarily a practical or sound financial choice but it can be understood as a key mechanism by which an individual engages in the production of self. The ever-changing connotations or codings attributed to the style, form and design of housing and its spaces are essential tools for consumers in their active attempts at self-expression and identity construction.

Colin Campbell sees the dynamic of contemporary consumption as not only driven by ‘other-directed’, ‘inter-peer competition,’ but guided by pleasure (2018, 97). The consumer is an

‘artist of the imagination’, a ‘dream artist...who takes images from memory or the existing environment and rearranges or otherwise improves them in his [sic] mind in such a way that they become distinctly pleasing’ (132). In this era, which Campbell terms ‘romantic capitalism’ consumers are driven by a form of ‘self-illusory hedonism’ because they do not so much gain satisfaction from the products ‘as pleasure from the self-illusory experiences that they construct from their associated meanings’ (144).

Pleasure-seeking as a basis for consumption underpins the ‘experience economy’, forwarded by Pine and Gilmore (1998). They argue that experience is the fourth ‘economic offering’, following agrarian, industrial and service modes of capitalism and to be successful, leading-edge companies will necessarily be those involved in ‘staging experiences’. This experience economy places the consumer’s identity and desires central to the action of consumption. In this new model it is essential to stage experiences, in which all the environmental and physical cues cohere in order to orchestrate the consumers impressions into an identifiable theme or storyline.

Gernot Böhme reconsiders the role of the commodity as it has developed through its participation in aesthetic capitalism: commodities that would previously have been classed as luxury, are now reclassified as necessities. Although far from universally accessible, this normalization of excess is a dominant force and performs an essential function in its stabilising influence on the capitalist economy, which is ‘profoundly shaped by surplus consumption’ (Böhme 2016, 21). Under this rubric we must perceive the condition of the commodity as increasingly moribund, since it has become emptied of value, in itself, through processes of overproduction. Instead of being valued for their use or even the status they confer in themselves: ‘commodities are primarily appreciated for their staging value: insofar as they help individuals or groups to stage a lifestyle’ (Böhme 2017a, 165). The commodity’s sensory and affective attributes such as attractiveness, glow, atmosphere contribute to the “enhancement of life” (Böhme 2016, 20). Böhme employs the paradigm of scenography, as a means to better appreciate atmosphere as a basic concept of a new aesthetics. The purpose of the stage is to produce ‘the atmospheric background to the action, to attune the spectators to the theatrical performance and to provide the actors with a sounding board for what they present’ (Böhme 2017b, 30). Technological developments enabling increased mobility for sound and lighting have contributed to the liberation of staging from the theatre and its development into an immersive experience (Böhme 2017a, 162). Staging and other forms of

aesthetic labour are now aimed at ‘giving things, human beings, towns and landscapes an *appearance* or *look*, endowing them with a *radiance* or *glow*, an *atmosphere*’ (Böhme 2016: 20). Following Böhme, Rose, Degen and Melhuish argue that “digital visualizations of new urban developments serve to ‘stage, costume and intensify’ particular, sensorially seductive, atmospheric visions of urban life, in order to sell them.” (2016, 107). Staging and atmospheres are employed to enhance product distinction in the highly competitive housing rental market.

Anaconda Cut, A Case Study

We will now consider a residential block called Anaconda Cut, as a way to initiate an exploration of current staging practices aimed at the PRS and the promotion of the urban realm more generally. The forty-four-storey tower, completed by Renaker in 2018, serves as a distinctive landmark amongst the slowly emerging developments in the historic Greengate area. At one hundred and thirty metres, with claims to be the tallest building in Salford and the fifth tallest in Manchester, the building's stature is a key feature of its profile in the housing market. Greengate has experienced extensive urban redevelopment recently owing to the availability of cheap land its central location, proximity to transport hubs and to Manchester's regenerating Medieval and Northern Quarters. Although Salford City Council's Greengate Regeneration Framework document positions the area as ‘more Brooklyn than Manhattan,’ so far mainly high-rise, high-density residential projects have been favoured, especially along the banks of the River Irwell, in the ‘Greengate Riverside’ area (Salford City Council 2018, 5). Between Anaconda Cut and thirty-one storey Greengate One, fifty-five storey One Heritage is under construction, and will soon complete this imposing block of manicured developments, providing approximately 1400 properties for the PRS sector.

A photograph of a dog running in a field; another of bars and restaurants, their colourful painted facades, saturated with sun, evoking summer holidays, appear next to interiors shots of Anaconda Cut in the promotional materials.ⁱ These locations, linked to Anaconda Cut by means of a riverside path, although not exactly on its doorstep, are pulled into association with the block, to assist in its staging as urban idyll. The promise of the neighbourhood to come, stands in contrast to the remaining surface car parks and derelict Victorian structures surrounding the building.

Anaconda Cut commands a prominent position, centre stage, within the newly evolving cityscape, but as well as height it owes its prominence to the manipulation of connotations of wealth and sensuality through the reflective radiance of its exterior cladding. Architects of the block, OMI comment that the gold-green curtain walling ‘is intended to ‘shimmer’ as the sun moves around it’ giving it a distinct visual presence.ⁱⁱ The colour provides Anaconda Cut



Figure 2: Anaconda Cut, Salford – Image Credit: John van Aitken (2020)

with what designer Steve Edge – responsible for rebranding the building, after several misnomers and false starts - calls ‘visual magnificence’, which provides a strong message about the buildings unique qualities as a luxury residential development.ⁱⁱⁱ Its conspicuously ‘designed’ exterior is coordinated to blend in with the regeneration strategy for the area, which ‘seeks to ensure that all new developments in Greengate achieve the highest standards of quality and design’ (Salford City Council 2018, 5). The Greengate Regeneration framework ensures all the developers in the area work concertedly to position this newly emerging neighbourhood, as a distinct residential brand or an ‘urban designscape’ (Julier 2005). Julier examines the orchestration of objects, architecture, urban planning and cultural

events by networks of elite stakeholders in the process of place-identity formation. He notes how stakeholders work together to create and disseminate a ‘loosely coherent, hegemonic network of signifiers’ that create a sense of value and narrative (2005, 869). These ‘designscapes’ frame both private and public consumption within the metropolis and, indeed, provide cues for the performance of everyday life. (885). Brand coherence in Greengate is maintained by the City Council who demand strict adherence from developers to their conception of the area and the need to attract the new upwardly mobile workforce.

In an expanding PRS market with an array of competitors with similar residential products the quality of the experiences being offered becomes a significant factor in the drive for valorisation through rental contracts. Just as the blocks external features are crucial in giving it distinction and presence in the emerging cityscape, so its internal spaces receive coherent theming in order to deliver excited expectations. Anaconda Cut’s marketing brochure and website demonstrate the attention given to the careful co-ordination of materials and colour palette in furnishings and surfaces.^{iv} Interiors marry classic and contemporary styles, signalling individualism without risking alienation. Interior design resonates with the blocks exterior by means of visual and textural coherence. We learn from the website that ‘every aspect of the Anaconda Cut has been carefully curated by considering every last detail’.^v This ‘curation’ emphasizes the sensory invitation extended by the block’s interior to the prospective renter by means of luminescence and tactility. Klingmann notes ‘for architecture to be recognised it has to be aesthetically distinctive, but it must also elicit relevant emotional experiences at different points of contact with its users, by creating an architectural presence that is felt, as well as seen’ (2007, 19). This totalising approach to the buildings design, described as curation -as in art exhibitions or collections of objects- demonstrates the significance of staging as a means to engineer an affective response. Renting an apartment is presented as an affective luxury lifestyle where even young professionals can partake in the fantasy of a cosseted world usually available only for the super-rich.

The aesthetic labour involved in staging Anaconda Cut locates it experientially somewhere between a boutique hotel and an upmarket student hall of residence. With its coordinated, pre-selected ‘designer’ furniture, fixtures and fittings; amenities such as cinema, gym, yoga studio, co-worker spaces and services such as laundry and pet minding, we can sense the attempt at an orchestration of pleasures perfected by the contemporary tourist industry being folded into the PRS offering. In the process of valorisation in a competitive environment

everyday comforts such as watching a film with friends, or activities such as remote working or working out, have been recoded as luxury. Tactile comforts such as woollen or silky furnishings, and even the coat of a small dog are key tropes in the staging of many of the blocks around the Salford Fringe, including Anaconda Cut. Pet ownership and inexpensive furnishings are valuable attributes in the production of vertical desires.

Verticality itself plays a key role in this staging. Contemplating the view from the apartment window, the thrill of being elevated suggests a somatics of verticality we have yet to understand in its entirety. This stomach churning, dizzying, exhilarating feeling contributes to the atmosphere of cosmopolitan chic; it is a stage set which evokes imagined Manhattan lifestyles and media after-images, which help code the experience of living there. In line with Campbell, the pleasure comes from ‘self-illusory experiences that individuals construct from their associated meanings with such imaginaries’ (2018, 144).



Figure 3: View from Anaconda Cut Apartment, Salford – Image Credit: John van Aitken (2020)



Figure 4: Sky Lounge View, Anaconda Cut, Salford – Image Credit: John van Aitken (2020)

In actuality one may look out from an Anaconda Cut apartment at other luxury developments or at Strangeways Prison, the remaining surface car parks or the detritus of new construction projects, but the experience is transformed by luxury coding and carefully scripted affective triggers. The centrality of verticality in the construction of this stage set is further evidenced by the way the space is organised across the different height levels. The 14th floor communal roof terrace with its exclusively designed furniture “with bright bold colour and interesting design shapes” and the residents Sky Lounge on the 43rd floor, emphasize the elevated spectacle of the city as an essential component in the valorisation of high rise, high density living^{vi}. Marketing copy draws attention to the ‘panoramic views across the cityscape’ and the ‘unprecedented views over the city skyline, stretching as far as the Pennines’ afforded by the sky lounge with its informal seating and somewhat homely appeal.^{vii} Structural design facilitates the renters full experience and quotidian celebration of verticality with the aim of convincing them of its value over other forms of rented accommodation in the city.

The web browser scrolls through a gallery of images of the development. The photographs are informal and might almost have been taken by the residents on their mobile phones, or at least they are in-the-style-of. There are views from the block and views of the interior showing communal areas, lobby, gym, cinema, sky lounge and terrace. Individual flats resemble hotels or serviced apartments with rolled up towels and no personal clutter, nor indeed people. The absence of inhabitants certainly helps avoid any confusion between bodies which would normally be chosen by art directors and the projected self-image. We are free to imagine our self-inhabitation of the desired space. As the sequence continues it reveals a preponderance of bedrooms, slightly lopped off so they emphasize the headboard, pillows plumped up, inviting, sometimes doubled up by patterned cushions. These bedrooms are chaste spaces, whose narratives are to do with a functional life, waking up to the city view. The apartment is a stage set in anticipation of Renter, the lead actor, who enters not as a cookie cut-out market profile, but rather shimmering and wavering, a glitch in the developer’s visualisation.

Postscript

We note that since writing this article the future upon which the plan for Greengate is premised; the employment figures and housing needs predicted, the regional economic growth forecast; and also the social environment, communications, fashions, dreams... have been profoundly destabilized, and most likely permanently transformed by the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. We also note that international relations with the People's Republic of China will impact the flow of investment capital aimed at the UK market, with potential repercussions for city plans across the UK.

Declaration of Interest Statement: The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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