

A Third Wave of Receptions: Space as Concrete Abstraction

Łukasz
Stanek
on Henri
Lefebvre

Sten Gromark

1 • Among the flood of similar attempts still the most fundamental book with an inside look on the subject is without any doubt Remy Hess, *Henri Lefebvre et l'aventure du siècle* (Paris, Éditions A.M. Métailié, 1988). It was elaborated in collaboration with Henri Lefebvre. Equally Stuart Elden's *Understanding Henri Lefebvre: Theory and the*

Many of the concepts once forged by Henri Lefebvre (1901–1991) will forever be written into our unconscious when we relate to urban and architectural issues, professionals and laymen alike, whether we are familiar with them or not; when we ask ourselves what the true social nature is of the space-time realities we constantly experience in our lives; when we are confronted with the concrete abstractions of the material world we dwell in. Henri Lefebvre initiated a distinct turn in our ways of understanding the social implications of an overwhelming urban society and of *social space*, as well as the rethinking of social time.

Łukasz Stanek, researcher and teacher at ETH in Zürich, architect and philosopher, with an academic history in Poland, Holland, France and Switzerland, has recently delivered a refreshing and impressive close-up account of this legend of post-war reconsiderations of architecture and the city in a social world. His book, *Henri Lefebvre on Space*, is a thorough re-reading, to be particularly commended, because as I understand it, this endeavor has been executed primarily based on original text documents,

Possible (London: Continuum, 2004), is to be recommended. There is also a quite recent dissertation on the same subject in France by Silvain Sangla with a similar approach and orientation, *Politique et Espace chez Henri Lefebvre* (Paris, l'Université de Paris 8 Saint-Denis, 2010).

extensive archive material and conversations with key personalities formerly related to the philosopher. This attempt reveals so far undetected aspects of the philosopher and presents a broader and far more detailed picture of an astounding actor and voice in twentieth century intellectual discourses, events and actions.¹ The chapters focus on, first of all, *The Production of Theory* and then *Research, Critique*, and finally — symptomatically in the case of Lefebvre — *Project*. The published book is a re-edition of a PhD thesis defended in Delft Faculty of Architecture in 2008 under the auspices and supervision of Arie Graafland.²

This significant achievement is particularly striking for me since my academic career started with the reading — and the constant rereading, over and over again — of *The Production of Space*, originally published in France in 1974, and in English as late as 1991. This book has left a long-lasting impression and has been an inspiration, ever since, towards my understanding of architecture and urban development. And in hindsight I can remember the time when Lefebvre was considered with outright scorn as a “romantic revolutionary” or a ridiculous “social philosopher” by authorities of urban sociology like Manuel Castells, Jean Lojkin or Edmond Preteceille and in particular by the most renowned urban scientist of the older generation: Paul-Henry Chambart de Lauwe. In the contemporary debate he was caught with an unclear position in crossfire between Sartre and Althusser. Commissioned on the one hand by the French Communist Party (PCF) to reveal the disturbing mystique of existentialism,³ and on the other without interruptions fighting the Stalinist structuralist interpretations of Marx, his ideas were therefore simply not valid and would soon be forgotten, even if it was acknowledged they provided some “inspiration” for research orientations.

Stanek rejects these hackneyed arguments and objections, which include the notion that Lefebvre’s qualitative concepts were not based on any objective empirical evidence and thus not passable as reliable and serious research, nor science in a restricted sense. He provides substantial evidence that this is not altogether the case, while acknowledging that Lefebvre’s

most convincing scientific approach remains his focus on extremely creative and valid conceptualisations and qualitative research methodologies, as well as promoting the excessive need for trans-disciplinary research collaboration in order to fully grasp the huge complexities of interpretations related to urban architecture within a social science perspective. As Stanek formulates

2 • *Henri Lefebvre on Space: Architecture, Urban Research, and the Production of Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011); *Henri Lefebvre and the Concrete Research of Space: Urban Theory, Empirical Studies, Architecture Practice* [diss.] (Delft, Delft University of Technology, 2008).

3 • *Henri Lefebvre, L’Existentialisme* (Paris: Editions du Sagittaire, 1946).

Lefebvre's firm conviction, methodologies must be adapted to the fact that "space is not only produced by economic and material practices but also on the level of conceptual, aesthetic, symbolic and phantasmatic appropriation,"⁴ not only of basic objective *needs*, but as much of hidden, unfulfilled, highly subjective *desires*, in Lefebvre's own phrasing. On account of his qualitative approach, he never abandoned his belief in "the irreducible and singular experience," but paid particular attention to it as a vital part in any scientific investigation.⁵

However, I was once among those convinced early on that Henri Lefebvre's writings, along with his actions, would ultimately prevail, and that they had such a level of relevance that in the end they would be resurrected for a renaissance and posthumous celebration in academia, which Stanek's book actually proves.⁶ Another argument for the relevance of Lefebvre in a historical context is, as it is argued in a recent similar philosophical dissertation, that his concepts were confirmed to a large degree while the hardcore Marxist orthodox urban sociology was never empirically confirmed.⁷ That is why it is so stimulating to take part in this serious and successful attempt by Łukasz Stanek, by a new generation, to project a more solid re-reception and a refreshed take on this whole vast and irreducible contribution to urban architectural research. The special value of Stanek's approach is that he provides a reading with a particularly insightful focus on Lefebvre's unique relation with the architectural profession as a philosopher and sociological researcher.

A most interesting, and I believe to many minds also surprising, aspect of Stanek's presentation is the importance he

puts on the key notion and analysis of *dwelling* as the very starting point for the creation of Lefebvre's conceptual universe, besides his early dedication to rural and somewhat later urban studies. The urban and rural realities must be understood from the level of residential experiences, needs and desires in Lefebvre's terms, as the constituent elements of either an urban or a rural culture. As the author argues, one of the most crucial texts indirectly initiating the turmoil following May '68, is a unique research project published by the team led by Henri Raymond, the close collaborator and successor, in 1966 as *L'habitat pavillonnaire*,⁸ which had far-reaching importance for renewed social orientations of residential architecture designs. This extensive

4 • Stanek, *Henri Lefebvre on Space*, 149.

5 • *Ibid*, IX

6 • Cf. Gromark, "A Crucial Moment of Transgression: Henri Lefebvre and the Radical Metamorphosis of Every Day Life in the City," in *Nordisk Arkitekturforskning* No. 4 (1999), and Gromark, "Henri Lefebvre; Vardagligheten och Staden," postface in Lefebvre, *Staden som rättighet*, trans. Peter Einarsson (Stockholm: Bokomotiv, 1982).

7 • See Sangla, *Politique et Espace chez Henri Lefebvre*.

8 • See Henri Raymond, Nicole Haumont, et al, *L'Habitat pavillonnaire. Préface de Henri Lefebvre* (Paris: Centre de recherche d'urbanisme 1966 [1971]); Henri Raymond, Marie-Geneviève Dezès, et al, *L'habitat pavillonnaire. Préface d'Henri Lefebvre* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2001 [1966, 1979]).



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**Les Espaces
d' Abraxas (Noisy-
le-Grand, 1978–
1983), Ricardo
Bofill. Copyright:
Ricardo Bofill
Taller de
Arquitectura.**

research focuses surprisingly on and reveals the life world and perceptions of families in traditional detached single family housing areas, the *pavillon*, conceived as preferred ways of residing “*chez soi*” put into relation to the abstract ways of residing introduced and imposed in large collective housing estates. This work should be put to the forefront and beside the more well-known and often mentioned titles in this period, like *The Society of the Spectacle*, *The Right to the City*, or *The Consumer Society* by respectively Debord (1967), Lefebvre (1968) and Baudrillard (1970).

Stanek also stresses the seldom-acknowledged fact that Lefebvre was a paramount initiator for the redefinition of the architectural profession, perhaps even the main source for a distinct and crucial moment of transgression for a whole generation of architects and urban planners. He was active in project designs, in competitions and competition juries, as well as in the educational reform of architecture schools post '68, alongside his extensive publishing and editing efforts. He also initiated early attempts to develop research as mentioned above devoted to combined architectural and sociological studies focused on residential issues.

Stanek's book is in many regards dedicated to providing evidence for the vital role played by Lefebvre in the architectural design profession's reorientation towards the profound questioning of the profession itself, in the broadest understanding of the word. The vast repercussions from this distinctive leap are far from difficult to identify in contemporary projective practices. Providing background for the numerous architectural

experiments conducted in France in the late-1970s and early-1980s, Stanek writes that “the disciplinary identity of architecture, its formal techniques, conceptual frameworks, and social obligations were revised, providing orientation points for discourses and designs until today.”⁹ This contributed to a radicalization of professional convictions in the architectural community that would by the late 1960s amount to the explicit credo that the ability “to proceed from the real toward the possible” is the sole and specific competence of architectural practice, thus primarily contributing to radical social and cultural *change* through the architectural act and project design.¹⁰ For Lefebvre, “to think the impossible is to embrace the whole field of potential possibilities.”¹¹ On top of that, when Lefebvre on one occasion compares himself with architects, he conceives of them as *intellectuals* of architecture and urban transformations, and Stanek concludes, “this statement pointed to a shift in architectural culture, with the architects claiming the position of intellectuals,”¹² something so far in history rarely advocated with the same emphasis. These events in the transforming self-image of the profession represent a major change of profile from a technical and aesthetic expertise towards the new image of a dedicated actor in cultural and social transformations.

Stanek’s analysis of Lefebvre is based on the presentation of extensive new graphic material, in particular related to projects that Lefebvre was an active supporting partner in, like the early experimental and seminal utopian works of Constant Nieuwenhuys’ *New Babylon*, Ricardo Bofill and the early explorations of the *City in Space (La ciudad en el espacio)*¹³ in the late-1960s in Madrid and later abandoned, before the illustrious and highly questionable *Palaçio d’Abraxas* residential complex in Marne-la-Vallée in 1980, and Jean Renaudie with the much admired radical and seminal Ivry-sur-Seine urban residential project, *Danielle Casanova 1962–82*.¹⁴ During this writing endeavor he also apparently had the occasion to come close to witnessing the events around Lefebvre and his collaborators in their everyday life, drawing on precious accounts gathered in lengthy discussions with key personalities, sociologists and architects, such as Serge Renaudie, Ricardo Bofill, Henri Raymond, Jean-Louis Cohen and Anne Querrien.

The most important point in this refreshed approach

9 • Stanek, *Henri Lefebvre on Space*, XI.

10 • *Ibid*, XIII.

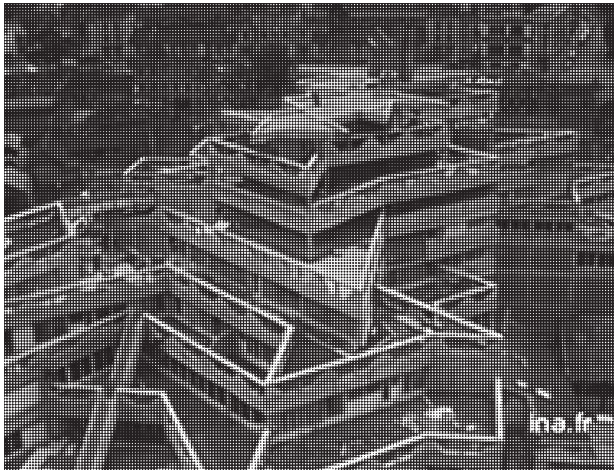
11 • Lefebvre quoted in Gromark, “Guy Debord och Situationens politiska estetik,” in Gromark and Fredrik Nilsson (eds.), *Utforskande arkitektur: situationer i nutida arkitektur* (Stockholm, Axl

Books, 2006), 69.

12 • Stanek, *Henri Lefebvre on Space*, XI.

13 • *Ibid*, 204–219

14 • Irénée Scalbert, *A Right to Difference: The Architecture of Jean Renaudie* (London Architectural Association, 2004).



is the author's ambition to go beyond the first wave of receptions — David Harvey in the 1970s — and the second wave — Edward Soja in the 1980s — predominantly confined to the Anglo-American context of Academia and to situate Lefebvre's venture firmly on European soil and intimately related to French, German and Italian, as well as Central European, intellectual language and academic contexts. This apparently opens up for a more profound and just future implementation of Lefebvre's legacy, making it possible to ground his still most valid conceptual reorientations further and better on empirical investigations.

The most interesting and original aspect focused in the book is the discussion around Lefebvre's concept of space as *concrete abstraction* under the chapter heading of *Critique*, even if it is quite demanding to follow this somewhat obscure reasoning. Departing from Karl Marx and *Das Kapital*, where labor is considered the key object of analysis, in abstract and concrete terms, Lefebvre identifies the notion of space in its concrete and abstract sense as the key object of analysis in researching the intermediating and conditioning character and nature of social practices and societal interrelations. In a society where the material world around us is more and more conceived in abstract terms by social agents with specific agendas, perceived and lived through by the consumer in concrete spaces, in this *urban* society, space as concrete abstraction becomes a predominant aspect of everyday life in structural as well as in symbolic terms. For Lefebvre, the everyday life world's confrontation with abstract space, *l'espace abstrait*, was the result, effect and consequence in spatial terms of a capitalist society, a mode of production, reproduction and consumption, initially attempting to organize social life in an extremely rational manner, as exposed in urban residential projects, the "archipelagos of programmed and imposed space-time consumption modes" and detailed structural analysis optimizing at best the use-value of every single square centimeter in minimal apartments. This capitalist space was considered double-sided: "homogenized but also fragmented," concrete but also abstract. This meant that Lefebvre positioned himself in many regards as an extreme *anti-modernist*, if not a mere postmodernist, next to the devastating critique of modernity delivered by the Situationists and Guy Debord, both refusing to see the emancipatory and liberatory powers, elements and convictions present in the modern movement that he was himself constantly searching for elsewhere.

Another possible interpretation you might make, and that I think Lefebvre also had in mind, could be that *architecture as concrete abstraction* means that architecture obviously is concrete in sensual, material terms, seemingly neutral and innocent, but

◀
Danielle Casanova
(Ivry-sur-Seine),
Jean Renaudie.
Film stills.

that under the surface it carries within itself intrinsically hidden, whether intended, accidental or unintended, abstract messages and mediations of an abstract and profound social and cultural nature, that speak to us non-verbally, without words, but yet sometimes with tremendous and overwhelming seducing or coercive power, whether critically transgressed, perceived intellectually or just lived through on a basic existential level.

Finally we might ask ourselves as Stanek concludes, could Lefebvre be regarded as a theorist delimited, confined to and isolated within his own particular glorious time frame, the dynamic 1960s and 1970s, as an historic and intellectual relic? How relevant is his perspective today? Stanek helps us to see that there is indeed a lot to question in his situation-based assumptions and preferences, when we confront them with contemporary culture and the radically different political and urban situation of the present day. For example, Stanek states, we need to revise “his belief in dwelling as the paradigmatic practice of production of space in view of the increasing privatization and gentrification of urban spaces modeled according to domestic interiors; challenging his theorization of difference in the face of the cultural logics of consumption as differentiation.” The list is long.¹⁵

A voice somewhat akin to Henri Lefebvre’s in its tone, that of Zygmunt Bauman, puts these recent situational changes in the prevalent mode of consumption into a relevant perspective in an attempt to characterize contemporary societies where, citing in his turn premonitions expressed by Pierre Bourdieu another twenty years ago, and indeed echoing Lefebvre himself: “coercion has by and large been replaced by stimulation, the once obligatory patterns of conduct by seduction, the policing of behaviour by PR and advertising, and normative regulation by the arousal of new needs and desires.”¹⁶

We must be very grateful for this very solid account and thorough discussion, as well as elaborated critical interpretation of the key concepts of Henri Lefebvre grounded in the empirical world he encountered, the people he met and collaborated with. It opens for a far more complete image of the philosopher, and for renewed implementations of his research approaches toward the growing, and today even more accentuated, relevance of spatial aspects of our modern reality. These approaches are on the verge of including the intriguing and pressing aspects of time consumption in a united scientific and political framework — towards the potential critique of the political economy of time consumption. •

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15 • Stanek, *Henri Lefebvre on Space*, XIV.
16 • Zygmunt Bauman, *Consuming Life* (London: Polity Press, 2007).