

Space and Culture

Book review: Henri Lefebvre on Space – Architecture, Urban Research, and the Production of theory

Monday, March 5, 2012

[Łukacz Stanek. Henri Lefebvre on Space. Architecture, Urban Research, and the Production of Theory. 2011. Minneapolis, London. University of Minnesota Press. 369 pp. ISBN 978-0-8166-6617-1](#)

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[...] to think of space as a whole means to keep it open to everybody. (Stanek: 137)

[Łukacz Stanek](#)'s book on the French urban sociologist [Henri Lefebvre](#) is a detailed, well-researched and balanced account of both Lefebvre's intellectual biography and the development of his conceptual frameworks.

From agrarian to urban space

Stanek stresses how Lefebvre's early intellectual interests in agrarian societies [e.g. his study of a Pyrenean village] were methodologically shaped by a combination of the [Annales school](#) and dialectical materialism, which lead him to an early insight that neither the production of territory and the production of community, nor mental concepts of spatial planning and the actual way of 'living space out', could be separated analytically.

After having written his PhD and becoming professor in Paris, Lefebvre's focus switched from agrarian planning policies to urban spatial planning, partly because in the early 60s, the authorities of the USSR, Algeria and Cuba denied Lefebvre to carry out empirical research on their agrarian policies.

(Urban) Space as concrete abstraction

During this formative period, Lefebvre developed his concept of space as concrete ('lived') abstraction, a concept which should critically surpass and dialectically overcome (aufheben) central state urban planning as well as dismantle notions of space and housing that are perceived by Postfordist or Keynesian capitalism as mere reified objects of consumption.

On a theoretical level, this lead to Lefebvre's critique of both functionalism and structuralism – both, according to Lefebvre, operating as closed, largely unalterable and mentally preconceived systems, either of 'needs' for which there are allotments of preconceived 'satisfactions' (functionalism), or else of preconceived sets of 'signification processes of differentiatinal signs' which can be 'consumed' (structuralism) – as both symptom and tool of a bureaucratic society.

As Stanek stresses, Lefebvre's criticism aims at central planning's ensuing depoliticization, fragmentation and segregation of 'possible communities', in other words, the very denial of every citizen's right to the city as ongoing communal project of co-habitation (Lefebvre writes extensively about the Paris Commune as an attempt at collectivizing the 'equal right' to the city for all citizens).

He thus wanted to dismantle 'Cartesian'-masterplan notions of l'espace conçu (expert knowledges that mentally pre-conceive space for the consumer to live in) in opposing them to notions of space as perceived – l'espace perçu (by the consumers or users), and via open discourse of their mutual incongruencies come to a dialectical understanding of what might be 'fully lived' urban spaces of the future – l'espace(s) vécu(s), without risking systemic closures (Lefebvre's closeness to Derridean and Deleuzian poststructuralism seems evident here).



<http://spyvibe.blogspot.com/2009/08/jacques-tati-playtime.html>

Lived spaces as concrete utopias

The advantages of Stanek's book become quickly clear: He not only embeds Lefebvre's thinking in the larger context of postwar French thought (Lefebvre's ongoing discussions with structuralism, situationism, poststructuralism), but also reproduces, by way of analogy, Lefebvre's larger dialectic of the production of space in the built-up of the book itself, thus covering the triad of Lefebvre's immense productiveness in (open) theory, his public interventions by publicly debating and commenting on the consequences of concrete architectural planning procedures both in the present and in history (e.g. the Nanterre campus as functionalist *misère* playing a major role in declenching the 68' student revolt, the IKEA -style modularized consumptive *petit-bourgeois* differentiation à la Bourdieu of the *habitat pavillonnaire*, the segregationist urban planning policies leading to the peripheries of *grands ensembles* and HLMs; the segregationist policies of a Hausmann in the 1850s indirectly leading to the claims for a right to the city of the Paris Commune) and Lefebvre's participation in 'utopian projects', meaning his co-participation in 'utopian' urban planning design such as Ricardo Bofill's 'city in space' or Nieuwenhuys's New Babylon (and thereby demonstrating his own attempt at a praxis of an 'Aufhebung' of divisions of labor as regards architectural planning) as well as his analyses of historical utopian planning (e.g. his positive reevaluation of Fourier's *phalanstères* as an historical architectural dream enhancing communal solidarity).



<http://blog.sfmoma.org/2010/02/tati-macdonald/>

CC: <http://blog.sfmoma.org/2010/02/tati-macdonald/> [2011-9-13]

The city as *œuvre*: toward an architecture of communal solidarity

All the way throughout the book, Stanek thus stresses Lefebvre's search for an urban architecture which would replace social isolationism and antagonism by opening up to possible spaces of solidarity and association. Stanek shows a Lefebvre's whose take on 'spaces as always unfinished *œuvres* in process', in which the individual (Hegel's concrete universal) can come into discourse with the communal collective and in this way overcoming segregations of work-space and spaces of leisure, remained true to his own humanist marxist version of fighting for an equal right to the city for all its inhabitants.

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CC: ricardobofill.com (City in Space) [2011-13-09]

It is therefore logical that Stanek concludes, in his afterword, with an outline of a late and unpublished manuscript of Lefebvre's with the title 'Toward an Architecture of Jouissance', in which he departs from both individual and social bodies (still reminiscent of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology trying to surpass Cartesian mentalisms) countering their own fragmentation in the division of labor and their identification with 'spectacular images' referring to other images (Baudrillard's concept of a mere simulation of the 'real' in consumption) in order to envisage a broadened concept of architecture as a 'spatial pedagogy' of the body and its multifarious rhythms: an architecture of jouissance as a prerequisite for an universal formation of the senses.

Further reading:

Davis, Mike (2002). Dead cities and other tales. New York: New Press.
 Davis, Mike (2000). Magical urbanism: Latinos reinvent the US city. London: Verso.
 Harvey, David (2003). Paris, capital of modernity. New York: Routledge.
 Lefebvre, Henri (1996). Writings on cities. Oxford: Blackwell.

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EVERYTHING MUST GO

Wednesday, January 18, 2012

... a conference about talking rubbish

Program

Saturday 21st January 2012

11.15-1.00pm ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVES ON THE USED CLOTHING TRADE

Chair: Professor Nicky Gregson, Durham University

Between A and B: Reprocessing Western second-hand clothing for global markets.'

Julie Botticello (Research Associate, SOAS)

'The World of Calamity Clothing in Mozambique.'

Andrew Brooks (Geography, King's College London)

'The making of Unravel.'

Meghna Gupta (Independent filmmaker)

'Oxfam Frip Ethique – A social enterprise solution.'

Sarah Farquhar (Head of Retail Brand, Oxfam)

2.00-4.00 pm NEW MODELS: RECYCLING, UPCYCLING AND CLOSING THE LOOP

Chair: Lucy Siegle, Journalist & Broadcaster

'Fashion and the Community; developing community resources for sustainable fashion and recycling.'

Lizzie Harrison (Founder/Antiform and ReMade in Leeds)

'The potential of the fashion designer to reduce consumer's textiles waste.'

Jade Whitson-Smith (University of Leeds)

'A sneak look behind the curtains of a textile merchant.'

Ross Barry (LMB Business Development Manager)

'Design for Recycling; closing the loop for textiles.'

Kate Goldsworthy (Textile Futures Research Centre, Central St Martin's College of Art and Design)

'Closed Loop or Wear Nothing.'