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Lessons from Nanterre

In a debate with the Polish Marxist philosopher Leszek Kołakowski, which took place in Amsterdam in 1971, Henri Lefebvre reflected about the responsibility of an architect and a philosopher:

Is an architect an intellectual? I think so. He is a liberal profession [sic] *and, in his way, he is an intellectual. And, moreover, he has an intellectual interest, that is to say, he has to know what he is talking about. He also articulates ideas and projects. And he is directly interested and concerned in this transformation, and his relationship with people also involves him. And so he is brought to pose problems which are the same as those I pose. Architecture is a social practice.*[1]

1. Henri Lefebvre, "Evolution or Revolution: Conversation with Leszek Kołakowski," in *Reflexive Water: The Basic Concerns of Mankind*, ed. Fons Elders (London: Souvenir Press, 1974), 249.

Lefebvre's comments bridged the architectural and political debates of the late 1960s and early 1970s in France, addressing both the skepticism of the left-wing intellectuals, who had become increasingly disillusioned with orthodox Marxism recuperated by state socialism, and the uncertainty of the architectural profession about the program and procedures of the Modern Movement and functionalist urbanism. The relationship between critique and project became problematic and questionable, whether it concerned the passage from capitalism to socialism or the design of urban spaces alternative to the current processes of urbanization. In this context, Lefebvre challenged the intellectuals by obliging them to think critique and project together – both architectural and political.

Lefebvre's multiple engagements with architecture culture exemplify his own ongoing attempt to comply with this obligation. His theory of the production of space was rooted in the research he had developed since the 1930s, including his investigations of the spatial conditions of the processes of modernization in France, his contributions to rural and urban sociology, and his studies of the political economy of land rent. Of particular relevance were his three volumes titled *Critique of Everyday Life* (1947, 1961, and 1981), which addressed the spatial determinations of postwar France: the new spaces of consumption; the retreat from politics to the domestic interior; and the functionalist splintering of cities into spaces of work, housing, leisure, and

1985–1988 (Paris: Electa Moniteur, 1989).

6. Gérard Monnier, *L'architecture moderne en France*, vol. 3: *De la croissance à la compétition 1967–1999* (Paris: Editions A. et J. Picard, 2000), 13ff.

7. Henri Lefebvre, "Utopie expérimentale: Pour un nouvel urbanisme," *Revue française de sociologie* 2, no. 3 (July–September 1961): 191–98.

8. Ibid.

attempt to move beyond the technocratic ar
urbanism of the immediate postwar period
for research into urban space. Answering th
1962 Lefebvre cofounded the Institut de Soc
(ISU) in order to take on state commissions
research, which complemented the research
vised since the 1950s under the auspices of th
National de la Recherche Scientifique and th
and Nanterre universities.[4]

The institutional, conceptual, and politi
tions of French urbanism were concurrent
transition in French architecture between th
Corbusier in 1965 and the establishment of "
architecture in the mid-1970s.[5] At the same t
intense theorization of urban space coincide
tative peak in the production of housing and
ulation of innovation in dwelling typologies
1967 with a series of government-funded rese
and ended in 1973 with the oil crisis.[6] Based o
studies of the new town of Mourenx,[7] Lefeb
the critique of functionalist urbanism in the
of the late 1950s, which had mainly focused o
and aesthetic dissatisfaction of the inhabitan
the arguments of such authors as Pierre Fran
Choay, Robert Auzelle, and Paul-Henry Cho
Lauwe, Lefebvre understood functionalist u
of the Fordist reorganization of society, whic
part of the 20th century was already outdate
logically and socially.[8]

The choice of case studies by Lefebvre a
tors reveals a clear intention to engage in cur
tural debates. The group around Lefebvre co
to the redefinition and reevaluation of mode
investigating the everyday practices of the in
Corbusier's Pessac neighborhood and his *Uni*

Henri Lefebvre. Still from Het Internationaal Filosofen Project. Video directed by Louis van Gasteren, 1971. Photo courtesy the author.

in Marseille, and to the debates about possible alternatives. Accordingly, the ISU focused on the Vilagexpo in Saint-Michel-sur-Orge (1966) on the southern periphery of Paris, a celebrated attempt at a dense housing typology that preserves the qualities of an individual house; and La Grande Borne in Grigny by Emile Aillaud (1964–71), which proposed a sequence of differentiated urban spaces based on the prefabrication and industrialization of building techniques.

Nanterre and the Rhythmanalysis of May '68

Lefebvre was most intensely engaged in architecture culture around 1968. Besides his professorship in urban sociology at the University of Nanterre (1965–73), he participated in the Commissions Querrien responsible for the reform of architectural education in France. He also lectured at the École des Beaux-Arts, and later at the Unité pédagogique 7, as well as at the Parisian Institut d'Urbanisme. At that time he was involved in exchanges with the group *Utopie* and was intellectually supporting their eponymous journal.[9] Moreover, in 1970, he cofounded, with Anatole Kopp, the journal *Espaces et sociétés*, which actively participated in debates about architecture and urbanism, and took part in summer

9. Jean-Louis Violeau, *Les architectes et mai 68* (Paris: Editions Recherches, 2005), 209, 234.

Commune (Paris: Gallimard, 1965).
12. Ibid.
13. Lefebvre, *Explosion*, 118.
14. Gérard Chevalier, *Sociologie critique de la politique de la ville: Une action publique sous influence* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2005), 72.
15. Lefebvre, *Explosion*, 104.

three years earlier.[11] Lefebvre analyzes both
unique, exceptional, and reducible neither t
nor their consequences.[12] What is common t
according to Lefebvre, is not only the combi
lence and playfulness, struggle and celebrati
fact that in both 1871 Paris and 1968 Paris, "p
come from the outlying areas into which th
en, and where they had found nothing but a
assembled and proceeded together toward th
the urban centers."[13]

An analysis of the architecture of the N
plays an essential role in Lefebvre's study. T
was laid out in suburban allotments previou
the military and located behind La Défense,
bidonville mainly inhabited by North Africa
1960s, despite the general palliation of the h
France, in Paris there were still 120 shantyto
some 50,000 inhabitants.)[14] When he saw th
opening of the Faculty of Humanities in 196
described it as "misery, shantytowns, excava
express subway line, low-income housing p
ers, industrial enterprises."[15]

The university's functionalist master pl
tectural firm Chauliat was laid out to accom
students. It included three faculties (Huma
Political Science), dormitories providing 1,4
canteens, and libraries around a "green cent
accommodated sport facilities. The faculties
of low-rise buildings with atria punctuated
while the dormitories and libraries formed
standing slabs of different heights.

According to an article in the journal *T*
tecture (1968), the master plan and individu
designed to ensure the "rational functioning

16. "Domaine universitaire de Nanterre," *Techniques et Architecture* (February 1968): 130. My translation.
17. Lefebvre, *Explosion*, 105.
18. *Enquêtes sur les causes des manifestations*, television program, Canal 1, Paris: Office national de radiodiffusion télévision française (ORTF), broadcast on 11.05.1968. My translation.
19. Lefebvre, *Explosion*, 106, 124.
20. Ibid., 104–106.
21. Ibid., 109.
22. Henri Lefebvre, in *Architecture – Mythe – Idéologie*, ed. Léonie Sturge-Moore; report of seminar 3, February 8–9, 1969, 43. My translation.
23. Anatole Kopp, *Ville et révolution: Architecture et urbanisme soviétiques des années vingt* (Paris: Anthropos, 1967); English translation, *Town and Revolution: Soviet Architecture and City Planning, 1917–1935* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1970), 12, 115.
24. Lefebvre, *Explosion*, 104.

and to "create a general harmony within a variety sufficient to prevent monotony."[16] Against these late-modernist criteria for functionalist rationality and abstract aesthetics, Lefebvre pointed out a social and spatial conflict in Nanterre:

Functionalized by initial design, culture was transposed to a ghetto of students and teachers situated in the midst of other ghettos filled with the 'abandoned,' subject to the compulsion of production and driven into an extra-urban existence.[17]

In a TV interview about the student revolt, broadcast on May 11, 1968, Lefebvre, sitting in his office in Nanterre, said that "in order to answer the question why it started here one should look outside the window."[18] If the university buildings ("vast amphitheaters, small 'functional' rooms, drab halls, an administrative wing") became "the focus of political rebellion," it was because these spaces imposed on the students all of the contradictions of French society of the 1960s: between the privileged living in the center and those deprived of the "right to the city"; between the authorities and the youth; between the state and the citizens; between various generations; between the institutions that originated in Fordist modes of production and the evolving social system of which they were an obviously outmoded part.[19]

The architecture of the campus translated these contradictions into separations in space and thus became an apparatus of interiorization in the lived everyday experience.[20] Addressing this condition, Lefebvre referenced the Soviet avant-garde architectural concept of the *social condenser*.[21] In a seminar he co-organized as part of the interdisciplinary project *Les Besoins fonctionnels de l'homme* (1968–70), which involved sociologists, architects, and urbanists, Lefebvre defined the social condenser as an architecture that leads to the "crystallization . . . of social relations."[22] This concept was popularized among French architects and planners in the late 1960s by Anatole Kopp, who also participated in *Les Besoins*. In his seminal book *Ville et révolution* (1967) Kopp explains the social condenser as a form of architecture designed to become "the mold in which that society [is] to be cast" and to turn the "the self-centered individual of capitalist society into a whole man, the informed militant of socialist society."[23] Lefebvre saw Nanterre as a very different type of mold: an apparatus of reproduction of "mediocre intellectuals" and "junior executives."[24]

At the same time, this concentration of contradictions in postwar French society resulted in an "explosion." Kopp's definition of a social condenser as "a building voluntarily out of step with the time in which it was constructed in view

of the city as a possible trajectory of a new
true for the Commune, which Lefebvre saw
olution and a "great attempt of the city to e
measure and a norm of human reality," at
absence of the city – or its presence as utop
the catalysts for its "explosion."[26]

In this situation Nanterre became, para
where the utopian image of the city was rea
difference, interaction, and unfettered spee
nounced that "this fragment of a broken, re
ginal university regains a kind of universali
students *all* tendencies manifest themselves
those which oppose the established society."

The dynamic between the localized exp
campus and the manifestation of larger sca
whole city, the urban territory, or the polar
War order – was not evoked within the orde
metonymy but rather produced in the logic
is, the experience of Nanterre, while being
by the contradictions of the late-Gaullist er
of its multiple causes: the campus – designe
apparatus of segregation of groups accordin
fessional, sexual, generational, and spatial
duced a dynamic that overcame these segre

Lefebvre called this dynamic the "dialec
a concatenation of centrifugal and centripe
seen as the primary dynamic of May '68. In
dynamic is described as a shift of the center
in the first days of May, from the campus t
Sorbonne in order to oscillate rhythmically
Latin Quarter and the factories and housin
city's periphery. In Lefebvre's view, the dial
was a manifestation of urban society as a pr
the Paris events.[28]

Architecture as a Project of the Everyday

Lefebvre's account of the events at Nanterre bridged the critique of an architectural object seen within its political, social, and technological contexts, and the project of a renewed everyday life, which emerges from and counters these conditions. What was discussed in the ISU studies and in *Critique of Everyday Life* as a utopian presentiment, one colonized endlessly by media and urban advertising campaigns, was concretized in the urban experience of 1968.

What were the consequences of Lefebvre's theorizing of critique and project for architecture? The intellectual routes taken by his students and collaborators – his then assistants Hubert Tonka and Jean Baudrillard, Pierre Riboulet of *Espace et Sociétés*, or the members of the *Utopie* group – show that conclusions were drawn *against* architecture. For some, the experience of Nanterre reinforced a straightforward condemnation of architecture as overdetermined by the conditions of its production, irredeemably oppressive, and something to be replaced by a general critique of the political economy of space. Others were inspired by the understanding of the event as a short circuit between critique and project, and postulated the replacement of architecture with the ephemeral and the atmospheric, instantiated as ultimate models for architecture practice.

If Lefebvre avoided both scenarios of "the end of architecture" typical of the post-'68 debates, it is because his account of Nanterre was contextualized by the ISU studies of the everyday practices of habitation. This resulted in a series of theoretical decisions reflected in his writings from the late 1960s and 1970s: the translation of the dialectic of centrality into an integral model for urban space; the development of the rhythmanalysis of everyday life; and the move beyond the concept of the social condenser and toward a project of "an architecture of social interchange."

Lefebvre's concept of an architecture of social interchange was drawn under the influence of his analysis of May '68, in particular the oscillation between the interiorized experience of the campus and the broad urban territory, seemingly stretching from the center of Paris to the global dimension. This led him to a postulate an architecture which would link three essential levels of social practice: the global level, the medium (mixed) level (or the level of urban practice), and the private level, or level of habitation. These levels are both distinct and necessarily interconnected, because human beings "are situated in a series of enveloping levels, each of which implies the others, and the sequence of which

interchange was not foreign to this debate, as, for example, in the City Interchange Project (1963) by Ron Herron and Warren Chalk of Archigram.
34. Henri Lefebvre, *Le temps des méprises* (Paris: Stock, 1975), 247. My translation.

of the city, sprawling and spreading out, may
in a privileged fragment."[31] This fragment –
ensemble or a gathering of various facilities (
tutions, meeting points, recreation) – is inscr
ity of the city without renouncing its indepen

Lefebvre's project of the architecture of
change addressed the 1960s debates in archit
including the controversy about architecture
tered urban sprawl and the tendency toward
urbanization of society."[32] The descriptions o
reverberate with the discussions regarding th
megastructure, envisaged in the 1960s as uni
and urbanistic scales in order to match the s
territory; replacing functionalist separations
between the infrastructural framework and
and embracing mobility, flexibility and the p
the inhabitants.[33]

The specificity of Lefebvre's position in
be grasped by focusing on two approximatio
tecture of social interchange: Constant's Ne
(developed from the late 1940s to the 1960s)
Bofill's Cité dans l'espace (1970–72). Lefebvr
reference to both projects – which challenge
sensual fascination with the "Situationist cit
prevalent disdain for postmodern forms – po
shared ambition to produce "a new unity wh
architecture and urbanism."[34] What distingu
of these projects within the debate about me
his stress on the singularity and irreducibilit
social practice linked by architecture. Consta
projects suggest that what is at stake is a dyn
the differentiated and interconnected levels o
practices, each of which achieves a paradigm
within the urban whole.

It is striking that Lefebvre's descriptions of New Babylon and Cité dans l'espace resemble his theorizing of new social movements, the emergence of which he observed in the course of the 1970s. In his writings subsequent to *The Production of Space*, most importantly in the four volumes of *De l'état* (1976–78), Lefebvre argues that these movements "accentuate the relationships between people (individuals, groups, classes) and space with its levels: neighborhood (and the level of the immediate); the urban (the level of mediation); the region (the nation); and, finally, the global."[35] Such a program includes the systematic questioning of the presumed objectivity and given of territorial scales, revealing them as mediated environments, the outcome of social practices.[36]

35. Henri Lefebvre, *De l'état*; vol. 3: *Le mode de production étatique* (Paris: UGE, 1978), 272–73. My translation.
36. Neil Brenner, "The Urban Question as a Scale Question: Reflections on Henri Lefebvre, Urban Theory and the Politics of Scale," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 24, no. 2 (2000): 361–78.

The everyday thus becomes not only a means of analysis but also the yardstick of Lefebvre's project of space. The incorporation of his vocabulary into French urban policy since the 1970s and its subsequent absorption by postmodern identity politics in cities around the globe demonstrate that Lefebvre's project is by no means immune to the post-'68 processes of normalization and consensus in critical urban theory, which continued to disarm architects and planners in the face of social and political questions. While these recuperations reduced Lefebvre's work to rhetorical slogans and humanistic generalizations, a return to his account of Nanterre makes it clear that the relationship between critique and project can only be produced from within a specific, contingent, and localized social practice that is in excess of its conditions of possibility and thus open to the unforeseen.

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