Spatial Practices:
Architecture, Planning and Citizenship in Mexico City

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Volume 6, Number 3
FES Outstanding Graduate Student Paper Series
May 2002
ISSN 1702-3548 (online)
ISSN 1702-3521 (print)

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Abstract

This study questions the view that privileges planning professionals with the right and responsibility of building the city. Instead, it brings social movements, everyday practices and a cultural politics to the foreground of a study of architecture understood simultaneously as a profession, a built form and a way of life.

The study of spatial practices in Mexico City, in conjunction with a reading of Lefebvre presents the concept of space as a potential site for articulating a social/ecological project through planning and architecture in light of a democratisation of the planning process and a politicisation of urban spaces.

Why?

This paper presents some of the key arguments I developed as the conclusion of my graduate work at the Faculty of Environmental Studies at York University. I now revisit this research in a synthetic exercise, mindful of the innumerable debates, readings and experiences that remain at this outskirts of this text.

When I was crafting the proposal for this paper, I visited Mexico City for a few weeks. The city where I was born and raised. The city I left almost two years prior to engage in a master program in Toronto. Within a few days of my visit I was overtaken by a renewed sense of despair. Insecurity, violence and social polarisation had left most my friends with little hope of securing a healthy and safe environment for their families.

Two more years have passed since. In this period the city has lived the euphoria, the overwhelming hope ensured by the downfall of the 7-decade rule of a single party in the presidential elections. And most recently mixed emotions inhabited by the uncertainty inevitable with change and the frustration when change does not come quickly enough. Nonetheless, throughout these years, when I walk around the city, when I interview people, I became increasingly attentive to strong shifts in the forms of urban development. On the one hand, on behalf of the wealthy, the city's growth has concentrated in cellular developments, encapsulating a handful of residences. These developments are built like fortresses to provide (the illusion of) security within. While they respond to a very real situation, they also serve to reproduce the same conditions against which they react. Though this phenomenon was visible ten years ago, it is only now that it represents such a large proportion of urban growth. The rise of crime and a sense of insecurity has had a greater effect on urban development than most plans and policies ever dream of. Long term planning is surrendered to an immediate (however relative) sense of safety. On the other hand, from the poor, the powerless, the migrants, and the marginalised, the urban response is different. In the last 15 years residents

have increasingly organised their independent of government and political parties. Some of these networks of political action constitute social movements, which have significantly transformed the political structures and the planning process of the city. As a result, we can perceive a democratisation of both the governing institutions of Mexico City, and in the form and extent of public participation. More than ever, citizens take an active role in politicising the city. Nevertheless, their demands are often neglected and their spaces within the city marginalised.

A shift in the political social and economic realms during the last two decades has implied significant changes in both in the institutional process of planning and of the less formal spatial practices which politicise urban meanings. With the reassertion of territoriality in political discourse and the focus on planning as a process, in this paper I propose to look at the reproduction of social inequality through urban spaces as a political issue, suggesting that both formal and informal uses of space have social and ecological implications, and must be engaged politically.

A short story of (earth) shakings and (social) movements

During the 1940-1970 period, urban planning was perceived to be apolitical and managerial-professional (Ward 1991: 161). This dream era of relative stability and apparent peace, was shaken in Mexico City during 1968, when the people who carried the burden of the Mexican miracle – the students and the urban poor – organised as a movement for the first time, mobilised around broad-based issues. Diverse groups organised, cutting across individual differences, to form large scaled coalitions, culminating in an infamous massacre of students and intellectuals by the army.

As a consequence, activists retreated to a strategy of more fragmented and isolated struggles presenting a more elusive (guerrilla style) form of resistance. An era of silence, saw civil resistance and non-governmental organisations disappear entirely from the public scene. Many movements

relocated themselves in small-scaled and disempowered neighbourhood organisations (Alvarez 1997: 133). Social movements in Mexico City emerged as more fragmented and heterogeneous forms of struggle against the hegemonic control of urban space by central government, than the broad-based student coalitions of the 1960s (Díaz-Barriga 1998: 255).

The opening of new political spaces was accelerated by a rapidly growing city producing a heterogeneity and fragmentation manifested in the social, the political and the territorial. This shift resulted in the reshaping of state-society relations, and represented the opening of public spaces to citizen participation. Public spaces became at the same time, the container for the struggles launched by diverse citizens and the very content of these deliberations. Thus began, during the 1970s, a claim over ‘rights to the city’ giving rise to the mobilisation and organisation of the inhabitants of popular neighbourhoods. Correspondingly, during the 1980s, “urban researchers began shifting their focus from structural factors to the production of urban meaning and cultural identities” (Díaz-Barriga 1998: 253).

The emerging appropriation of public space empowered many to struggle for the direct use of a given territory. Yet before 1985, formal housing organisations served to institutionalise opposition in such a way that it was easily controlled by the PRI-government. Granting property ownership in inexpensive land was a way for government to expand the property tax base and appease poverty advocates while neglecting more systemic issues concerning access to resources. This strategy served further to polarise segments of the population geographically.

After the earthquake of 1985 the relevance of these issues reverted. The destruction in the city’s core brought renters to the foreground of land claims alongside landowners and irregular settlers. The shift in focus to the defence of a previously inhabited territory opened the debate of access to public spaces, from the actual occupation of land, to its alternative uses (e.g., zoning). The struggle became one of land use and urban policy.

The change introduced neighbourhood struggles within the margins of legality. In other words, citizens assumed the mechanisms of social regulation (i.e., use of plans, policies, declarations and public registries) as an appropriate tool for the defence of their rights and the formulation of their pleas. In this way, the appropriation of the territory by groups and individuals was not perceived to be limited to the physical control of it, but rather as penetrating its normative framework, the legal-political system (Alvarez 1997: 141).

The increasing participation in public matters was not only significant for individual struggles but because it dismantled the monopoly of the state over public regulation and allowed for the use of public spaces to be recognised and claimed by citizens. While social movements after the earthquake found strength precisely in their distance from government and politicised institutions, the new movements prioritised the democratisation of the city through electoral participation. The inertia of participation called into question the boundaries between state and society, between authority and citizenship, and introduced the private into the public.

Institutionalised Planning

Though urban planning has mattered politically for a long time, it is not until 1976 that the Law of Urban Development in the Federal District was introduced within the framework of the General Law of Human Settlements. And it is not until 1980 that a Master Plan constituted by a General Plan and 16 Secondary Plans was created to regulate the land uses of the urban area. Because these plans were developed without public participation, they were perceived as instruments of the State. However, the institutionalisation of urban and land use planning signified the recognition by a diverse sector of society of the normative character of the plans and their potential as tools and targets for channelling social demands. In this way, social movements soon found they could use the plans to hold government accountable and significantly reduce arbitrariness in decision-making.

Government began to use secondary plans not as a form of social or urban planning but rather as a tool for negotiation and mediation between itself and the more active neighbourhoods. Irregular and informal settlements, however, continued to represent a vast portion of urban growth (50% of urban housing in Mexico City, and 60% of all new housing (Duhau 1997: 29)) effectively occurring beyond and despite the plans. Located at the periphery of official urban planning, these areas remain under-serviced, and threatened with eviction. City officials, realising the enormity of the issue, began to devise individual agreements with irregular settlers. Azuela suggests these agreements have no legal validity but became much more effective than overtly disobeyed policies and plans. What matters is that those who participate recognise the normative character of these agreements, though they legitimise a land use prohibited in the Plans (1997: 170).

With the inertia produced by the increasing number of social movements, a strong opposition party emerged. First in 1998 when a member of the opposition was elected to be the first governor of Mexico City and later in 2000 when the 7-decade rule of the PRI party fell in the presidential elections, the new government structures opened new channels for public participation (Alvarado 1999). It is yet too early to judge the outcome of these projects, yet it is possible to reflect on some alternatives presented to citizens and social movements at a time when planning processes are politicised.

What are the limits of participation? Is participation equivalent or not to democracy? Does the democratisation of participation entail its institutionalisation? The outcome of a participatory process does not necessarily produce a more equitable or just society, nor does it always extend the rights of citizenship in general, nor bear the needs of the underrepresented. The question of democracy in this case, is how to encourage and channel citizen participation, while at the same time, discussing broader issues of social justice, equity, citizenship and rights.

To Cuéllar, both the coalitions of social movements constituted after the earthquake and those formed after 1988, have been unable to extend their

struggles over individual parts of the city to a struggle for citizenship (1997). Struggles are contained within specific neighbourhoods in which the movements arise, rather than extending to other areas with similar socio-economic conditions. The distinction is subtle, but relevant. To Cuéllar it is the distinction between issue-driven exclusive groups (e.g., “not in my back yard syndrome”), and inclusive movements, mobilised around broad-based concerns (e.g., gay pride movement).

Alvarez observes that the different groups that mobilised to participate in this public space must now work to create a broader normative framework that may offer the necessary conditions for the interests of other groups not to be excluded. As public space becomes political, Alvarez suggests the challenge will be to support participation while allowing for plurality and conviviality (1997: 148).

A social concept of space

Central to my reading of Mexico City is the proposition that people are increasingly active in the politicisation of their living environments and in the democratisation of the planning process. This suggests an intricate relation – in the constitution of political spaces – between the way people live on the one hand, and the actual spaces they inhabit on the other. This is reflected from both the study of the production of social relations through the use and representation of different spaces and the empowering experience of social movements claiming a right to urban spaces. Social movements in Mexico City, by politicising the planning process, oblige my analysis of living environments to extend from a study of built environments to include a more complex fabric of social relations and ecological systems.

To this effect, I suggest that a revised concept of space – as a design tool, to crystallise a discussion on social and environmental issues – can help develop a reflection on the events presented from Mexico City and help re-formulate my role as a citizen, an architect and a planner.

The creation of space-time: A view towards Lefebvre

While I acknowledge that the discussion surrounding the concept of space is rich and extensive, in this instance I draw inspiration from two of Lefebvre's avenues of research. One is the "production of space". The other is a "critique of everyday life". In the former, he offers a perspective and a methodology through which to study social relations in the context of an expanding urbanisation. In the latter, he studies the significance of day-to-day activities to the reproduction or disruption of social relations. While I draw from Lefebvre his critique of the abstract space of capitalism, state domination, and power, I also acknowledge his emphasis on the creative alternatives latent in everyday acts and in the lived space of experience – where lies the possibility of an act constitutive of difference.

Spatial Practices

When Lefebvre asks himself if the city can be read, (can architecture disclose the life's of people?) he responds yes and no. No, in that space is not a clean surface (like a white sheet of paper), where a message can be recorded. It is rather a multitude of synchronic and diachronic, overlapping, discontinuous, and over-inscribed codes. Yes, in a way that, space can be understood as a context rather than a text: a context of relations, whereby different moments acquire meaning through experience. We might say that space is 'read' and 'written' in its utterance: i.e., its spatial practice.

Lefebvre finds a chasm between the "mental space" of knowledge produced from the closed realms of philosophy and a "real space" of social relations taking place in daily practices. This gap is the object of a "political economy of space" which sets out to present and represent the political use of knowledge and the ideology that conceals its use, by studying the spheres of the physical, the mental and the social: the perceived, the conceived and the lived; spaces of representation, representations of space and spatial practices.

1. *Representations of space* are conceptualised spaces tied to knowledge, codes and (intellectual) signs. The importance of any representation of space lies in its ability to constitute a power relation, through the process of its production. These constitute a form of knowledge about space that has a dominating influence on the actual spaces where people live.
2. *Spaces of representation* are perceived spaces, linked to non-verbal, complex and clandestine symbols. It is the dominated space in the reproduction of a social order. Also translated as *Representational Space* (Lefebvre 1991), "it is alive: it speaks, […] it embraces the loci of passion of action and of lived situations, and thus immediately implies time" (1991: 42). These are a multitude of experiences, exemplified by the stories told during protest, or the un-recorded collective memories fuelling a procession. These are undefinable moments from where a plurality of spatial practices draw inspiration.

3. *Spatial practice*, might "be defined – to take an extreme but significant case – by the daily life of a tenant in a government-subsidised high-rise housing project" (1991: 38). It is lived space, where the experiences of diverse spaces of representation entwine with the production and subsequent reproduction of representations of space. Here is where this paper turns towards, as a source for architectonic social movements.

Everyday and everydayness [1]

Lefebvre draws inspiration from Marx's concept of alienation aiming to reassert the political in "everyday life" (Shields 1999: 68). Alienation to him, is born from "the banal, trivial and repetitive quality of life under capitalism" (Shields 1999: 66). This is an alienation from the creative significance of the *oeuvre*, which is lost in the daily routines of production. This concept of alienation represents a rupture between the object (i.e., the form) and the significance it gains through the process of its creation; a rupture between the meaningless actions of production, and the creative experience of "moments". "The everyday is composed of a multiplicity of moments, such as games, love, work, rest, struggle, knowledge, poetry and justice" (Kofman and Lebas 1996: 30). Lefebvre finds that orthodox Marxists have failed to recognise what Marx perceived in his last years. Mainly that besides and within the material "object", "'something' always survives or endures – 'something' that is not a 'thing'" (1991: 402). This, to Marx is expressed in part by the tension between exchange value (established by a market economy) and use value (its subjective use and meaning).

Lefebvre (1947, 1997) distinguishes between "everyday life" and the concept of "the everyday". Everyday life has the possibility to contain the uneventfulness of banal activities (i.e., dailyness) and the routines of daily tasks. The everyday, and everydayness, on the other hand, increasingly in Lefebvre's writings, presents the grounds for resistance and renewal.

Nevertheless, each and every element of everyday life holds the potential to be at once alienating and renewing, acting in a dialectic of presence and absence (Shields 1999: 70).

Lefebvre turns towards everyday life as a source of empowerment, as well as the site of control and surveillance. Everyday life in this context is a dialectical relation between the activities that conceal power and the source of novelty. Between the ordinary acts that reproduce social relations and the extraordinary acts, which challenge the first.

The everyday, in short, presents to Lefebvre both the site of rupture between signifiers and reality (i.e., alienation) and the possibility of their reunification.

I offer the emergence of street protests in Mexico City as one such moment of transformation in urban space through everyday acts, contrasted by the development of gated-communities and exclusive urban organisations as a normalising and neutralising process acting thought the reproduction of everyday life. My interest is to draw attention to the spatial practices present in the multitude of seemingly disjointed events of everyday life, which both reproduce a dominating political culture and present the possibility of a broader cultural politics.

Rights to the City

Lefebvre develops an analysis of the city where the mobilisation of people across public spaces constitutes a viable alternative for generating social change. He envisions an urban society, rooted in the working class, capable of transforming capitalistic relations of oppression and exploitation, by staking a claim in the process that produces both city and society.

Lefebvre suggests we should “reach out towards a new humanism, a new praxis, another man, that of urban society” (1996: 150). Hence, when Lefebvre speaks about a “right to the city” he articulates a social project

1 For a analysis of the repercussion of Lefebvre’s concept of the everyday to a discipline in architecture see

intended for the construction of an urban society, where all who inhabit have a right to urban life. Right to the city is a right to a utopia, a right to create *oeuvres*, and a focus on urban society (1996: 146).

To Lefebvre, the project of transforming the urban is not to be undertaken by an individual but rather by an urban society, constituted as a class struggle. "Only groups, social classes and class fractions capable of revolutionary initiative can take over and realise to fruition solutions to urban problems. It is from these social and political forces that the renewed city will become an *oeuvre*. The first thing to do is to defeat current dominant strategies and ideologies" (1996: 154).

To Lefebvre centrality – as does globalisation – is where "the concentration of 'everything' that exists in space subordinates all spatial elements and moments to the power that controls the centre" (1991: 356). Centrality "defined by the gathering together and meeting of whatever coexists in a given space" (1991: 331) "connects the punctual to the global" (1991: 332). These are not separate but rather, dialectical entities. To Lefebvre, the unifying whole is not separate from the localisable scale of everyday life.

The power of present day society resides in its ability and aspiration to make centrality total, as well as in the production of fragmentation. Dispersion and subdivision, dissociation and separation – produced and maintained by the overarching level above – may lead to segregation. In the same way, the possibility of difference and plurality allows for a space of resistance. In this sense, difference is that which is excluded. Difference is in the 'other', which lies in the periphery of the self, (elite) produced at the centre. This is critical, because it implies to Lefebvre that "the production of a new space commensurate with the capacities of the productive forces (technology and knowledge) can never be brought about by any particular social group; it must of necessity result from relationships between groups […] on a world scale" (1991: 380).

McLeod (1997).

I understand Lefebvre's dialectics between the metaphors of 'centrality' and the 'space of difference', in a similar way to what Alvarez, et. al. (1998) describe as the relation between a 'political culture' and a 'cultural politics'. Lefebvre constitutes the centre of social relations around the potential of an urban society, which he locates in the working class, and translates this to the construction of urban centres in the city (i.e., not suburbs). Centrality functions to produce a marginality, which in turn reproduces asymmetrical social relations. Street protests, for example, in this analysis confront the centrality of power by claiming the use of public and social spaces. Their mobilisations are both a claim over urban space and a reconfiguration of social space, resituating *fete* (festivity) in the city, by changing daily life.

In this project, Lefebvre gives more importance to an analysis based on class over any other form of social relation. Though he suggests that "this does not mean that the working class will make urban society all on its own, but that without it nothing is possible" (1996: 154). Here, though Lefebvre makes a call for an urban society to take charge of urban planning – in a way, it is a call for a participatory form of citizenship and a democratic planning process – he remains unclear about how this might happen. Though he makes reference to democracy (1996: 141) he does not discuss democratic theory.

Alvarez, et. al., by contrast do not attempt to find a common ground between social movements (i.e., class). Rather they suggest that it is only through the existence of a wide range of movements that divers issues can be politicised. To them, it is not through a coalitional politics that social change can be achieved, but rather through a continuously diversified cultural politics acting democratically. Hence, I use 'rights' in the plural, following Engin Isin (1998) who expands Lefebvre's concept of "right to the city". While Lefebvre concentrates his analysis on class relations, hence conserving a unifying project, Isin suggests that social movements today act on an array of political struggles. By making the concept of rights plural, Isin is able to politicise a wider scope of social relations (e.g., gender, ethnicity, or sexual orientation). To Isin, the implications to citizenship is a shift in focus from the legal definition of rights

to the various practices through which individuals lay claim to the city and to an identity.

Implicit in this argument, is the proposition that different uses and representations of a particular space constitute a form of knowledge and a discourse about it. And that these representations are not neutral. Such is the case of streets and plazas, of social identities, and sites of collective memories, which are the locus and the object of political struggles. With a street protest, for example, space is not only political as a contested representation but it is politicised as a medium for social mobilisation. The visibility of street movements redefines the political and politicises urban space. Besides claiming streets, street protests claim rights to the city as a political entity, it is a claim to participation in governance, and an active citizenship.

The rituals of street protests, as a case in point, are not unproblematic. Hidden within protest slogans, within humorous banners, as also within the actual sites, resides a wide range of discourses, which serve to normalise, naturalise and neutralise dissent. Control is exerted through the same channels as resistance, and they often intertwine. Power relations are just as present in the oppressor as in the oppressed. Nevertheless, it is also at the level of everyday acts, where a rupture in power relations is possible. Here lies the internal contradiction, the risk and the potential of invading streets to claim "rights to the city".

A political economy of space

Lefebvre's aim is to develop a political economy of space: to reinstate political economy as a way to understand the productive activity of people in their spatial-temporal context (1991: 299). Following Marx, Lefebvre suggests that a political economy of space must extend from a study of social relations implicit in the production of space, to the reproduction of the relations of production of space (1991: 102).

Here space is at once a *product* to be used and consumed and "also a *means of production*; networks of exchange and flows of raw material and

energy fashion space and are determined by it. Space is understood as a social reality (things in space, discourses about space and their links with social practices). Thus, the means of production, produced as such, cannot be separated either from the productive forces, including technology and knowledge, or from the social division of labour which shapes it, or from the state and the superstructures of society" (1991: 85). To speak about the production of social space, we must speak of the reproduction of social relations in/about space. This suggests that, in a context such as Mexico City, it is not sufficient to study the development of particular neighbourhoods or the struggles between different social movements or the conditions of residential segregation that characterise a great part of the urban area. Rather it is crucial to study the particular processes through which these spaces are produced, how they function to conceal this process of production, and finally how these processes can be used or subverted.

True to Marxisim, Lefebvre is particularly interested in the spaces produced by capitalism. To him, capitalism is a space inasmuch as it is a particular fabric of social relations. Capitalism is as an abstract space in the sense that it conceals the violence of its production and its relations of power by reducing the meaning of objects to their exchange value. Consequently to Lefebvre class continues to be an important source of political struggle (1991: 23). Yet, he attempts to broaden the horizon of class defined through exchange value, to the social relations of use value, as a space subversive to capitalism.

In his view, an attack on the hegemony of an elite must not focus on governing institutions nor on the sites where capital accumulates but rather on the social spaces produced to sustain and reproduce capital and hegemony. Correspondingly, the change that Lefebvre hopes for, is not one of governing institutions but rather one of social space.

The study of space, is therefore for Lefebvre a social project. He is critical of both socialism and capitalism. How then does he build a social project? In this, Lefebvre remains unclear. Why?

In part, he was responding to the revolutionary effervescence of his time. In the France of 1968, revolution was perceived to stand just around the corner and capitalism was not perceived as inevitable. The ideals of communism continued to be, in the mind of Lefebvre and other French intellectuals, a possibility. This perhaps also explains why Lefebvre in his analysis of space, never deals extensively with questions of democracy, justice and equality.

Several authors are critical of Lefebvre's methods and conclusions (Shields 1999), nevertheless, most importantly for this paper he was able to politicise the construction of the city, and the construction of knowledge about the city and hence, to dissolve the illusion of neutrality in planning and architecture. He was able to point at space itself as a source of inequality in social relations and as a potential site for social struggle. He was able to point at the covert nature of power, working through representations of space. In his analysis of space, Lefebvre offered an alternative perspective to understand the hegemony of capitalism, not only as an economic system, but also as a social space, reproduced through the extending fabric of urbanisation. Lefebvre introduced a concept of space to sociology and philosophy, and introduced political economy to geographers. And on a parallel project, he brought everyday life to bear on the analysis of the global and the transnational.

Ripples of influence

In this section I want to draw particular attention to some of the arguments raised by Lefebvre, which I find useful to develop a reading of the context I present from Mexico City.

First (a), is Lefebvre's concept of space as a social context of relations, where the dialectical relation of "spaces of representation", and "representations of space", entwine in the experience of "lived space" and the exercise of a spatial practice. Second (b) is the idea that social space replaces the role of nature in systems of production. Nature appears as a resource and as a source of use value which space supplants. This space is a second nature, a socially constructed Nature.

Thirdly (c), Lefebvre's proposition that space is politically instrumental since it serves to facilitate production and control society. And finally (d), that social space and the spatial practices of everyday life conceal the relations of power at the same time that they contain the seeds of its resistance: of a counter-space (Lefebvre 1991: 349).

a) The concept of space as a social context of relations.

This proposition is revealed in the increasing number of movements acting through the politicisation of urban space as a recognition of the link between built environments and different ways of life.

The idea of the social construction of space was developed in the 1980s alongside the notion that the social is also spatially constructed (Massey 1993). In this argument I am attracted to the writings of Hayles (1995) who studies the tension between a socially constructed reality and an environment of social and physical relations that have an influence over my life. She puts forth the concept of "constrained constructivism" to describe the mutual process of "constructing" reality through the dynamic experience of living and having this process "constrained" by a context in a state of constant flux. This double dynamic gives rise to what Massey calls a "radical geography". The argument, flowing out of some of the literature on postmodernity, calls for a situated knowledge (Harvey 1993); and politicises the production of knowledge about space (Massey 1993). The project of radical geographers is to conceive of a contextualised epistemology, rooted in the processes of its production and in its political use.

In this paper I focus on epistemologies as the different currents of thought and ways of living that speak to how "we" understand, represent and relate in the world; the interrelations between a multitude of beliefs, ideas, perceptions, rituals, stories, cultural practices, experiences, social institutions, and an equal amount of places, sites, territories, wild parks, forests, distant lands, citadels, ghettos, homes and cities. Space, at once personal (subjective) and socialised (subjectified), is open and dynamic. This space, dialectically

conceived, is neither a fixed locus nor an abstract construction, but rather, it is both the context of our epistemologies and it is continuously carved epistemologically. Knowledge about space produces space: i.e., a form of relating and interacting with each other, a way of knowing the world.

An epistemology of space calls into question the production of knowledge about space. That is, besides the geography (and history), it asks about the geographers (and historians). Epistemology understood spatially implies a conception of social relations not as located in space, but rather as space itself and entails the possibilities both of a dominant space, and a counter practice, articulated spatially. Social space, so conceived, reproduces, conceals and normalises the knowledge and the ways of knowing of asymmetrical social relations while it can also be a source of novelty and resistance.

Ward suggests that from 1970 onwards the ideological landscape of urban planning in Mexico City was influenced by sociological studies of urban sprawl. These studies focused on self-construction as an alternative to the provision of social housing with the dual effect of explaining the relationship between urban space and ways of life, and actually influencing the way people politicise their dwelling spaces (Ward, 1991). To Ward however, these studies have given a short-sighted analysis of the social consequences of self-construction and informal growth. They have sketched an optimistic image of poverty, which has been used by government officials to develop housing programs reliant on self-construction. These programs prevailed during the 1980s along with the campaign towards the regularisation of land ownership. This approach in the short term, provides large amounts of housing at a minimum cost, but it underestimates the social cost of living in a socio-political environment, where access to resources, services and political spaces, continues to be limited. Self-construction at the same time represents an efficient way for the state to reproduce a devaluated low-wage labour force. It provides for relatively inexpensive housing while converting all leisure time into the production of housing (Ward 1991: 251). To illustrate his point, Ward traces

the development of informal settlements in the periphery of the city, and studies the extent of social mobility within. While some researchers of informal settlements, perceive a degree of positive outcomes which result from the interaction of otherwise isolated individuals (Connolly et.al., 1991; Lomnitz 1998), Ward highlights the reproduction of social inequality, which results from the material conditions of informal settlements and from the symbols/meanings sustained in public discourse. In spite of the accomplishments of self-construction programs and in spite of the positive effects of a supportive community, life within an irregular settlement entails enormous social costs, particularly to women (Ward 1991: 253). To Ward, the informal construction of housing, sustained by a logic of self-construction and the increasing urban sprawl, serves the interests of a capitalist economy, by producing a form of social control and reproducing a low-wage labour market.

The relevance of different social movements to this study is twofold. First is their implicit claim that space – as a network of relations established among people and places – matters to how people live and relate. This idea obliges me to study social relations as an integral part of space or even, as a space in itself. A corollary is that how these spaces are represented also matters to the actual condition of people in the city. An example of this can be found in the increasing number of privatised developments extending along the western perimeter of the city. In these cases, the legal representation of a space, through a Master Plan and related policy, is intricately related to the constitution of a social space.

In this project is where I find Lefebvre useful. To him it is critical to focus on the particular activities of people, that sustain or resist a concept of space (e.g., an exclusive identity reinforced by a gated-community or the disorder produced by a street protest) as an integral part of social relations, since these spatial practices, may serve to reproduce or ameliorate social inequity.

If space is not a homogenous concept, it implies that spatial practices in Mexico City may be acting on radically different concepts of space. And the logical progression of this idea implies that social movements enter into power

relations among each other, through their particular representations of space. The importance of social movements resides both in their ability to transform the constitution and representation of space, as much as the narratives of history which are instrumental in, for example, the claim by indigenous people to the symbolic centre of Mexico City.

By using the terms 'space' or 'social space' in conjunction with the term 'architecture' I want to draw attention first on a form of architecture that is inhabited: linked to *ways of living*. Second, to describe architecture itself as a dynamic process, set in motion by architectonic social movements, i.e., the spatial practices that Lefebvre encounters at the juncture between socialised representations of space and spaces of representation experienced in the day-to-day life of people. Finally, I want to highlight the political aspect of the socio-spatial dialectic as a necessary realm of action for design disciplines.

b) The space of Nature

If I am to link the daily activities of people to the physical and social spaces where they inhabit, the question of nature becomes immediately relevant. What happens to nature if the landscape is also produced through the activities of people? What happens to people when the natural environments where they live are transformed?

When I look at Mexico City, even briefly, a long history of environmental depletion is revealed. Starting with the colonisation of indigenous cultures through the colonisation of the landscape (Melville 1994).

Today, for example, the design of 'ecological reserves' and parks is promoted by developers and government officials as a solution to environmental depletion and the legitimacy of future development.

Land use policy and zoning for example inevitably privilege some ways of using the land over others, and implicitly segregate people through their ways of life. Nature in this case, is presented as a 'wilderness' that must be maintained independent of human presence. This idea fails to recognise a long history of human and environmental interactions and fails to recognise that

many inhabitants of the city directly depend for subsistence on the use of natural resources.

The question is in part weather nature is knowable or a social construct? These possibilities represent two diverging perspectives. On one hand, natural sciences suggest that nature is separate from society, and that it can be known and represented with a model, which may allow predictions to be cast upon diverse manipulations. However, speaking only to ecological circumstances reinforces a nature-society duality and legitimises social practices by ignoring them. Alternate arguments critiquing the scientific view, suggest that an objective position is not possible and therefore, our understandings of nature (and society) are never neutral.

This analysis suggests that the root of environmental concerns in Mexico City is at once ecological and social. If the built environment is integral to a context of social relations, so are the ecological systems that sustain life. Therefore, we must begin to look closely at the way ecology and politics interrelate by focusing on the social concepts that support and sustain our current ways of life (Harvey 1996: 182) and our spatial practices (Ingersoll 1996: 143).

If we take these arguments seriously, and nature is also a social construct we can no longer operate on the idea that there is 'an' idyllic nature which must be saved (or that we are the saviours) or that nature knows best (if we would only leave 'her' alone). Nor can we assume that natural environments can simply be designed or managed to accommodate our current needs. It is in between these two arguments – between a dynamic ecological system and a socially constructed Nature – where a social project can be articulated. In the recognition of both complex networks of ecological systems that have a role in for example, producing the scarce oxygen that people in Mexico City breath, and a politically charged representation of Nature that for example, privileges the development of a golf course over agriculture. The challenge of developing alternative forms of living is presented to social movements in particular and to a democratic citizenship in general (Sandilands 1998: 251). This project, as

some social ecologists have pointed out, must destabilise current discourses of domination in order to democratise social-ecological environments.

c) Space is politically instrumental.

Mexico City suggest that the production of space is political (while not always politicised) in the sense that a wide range of social movements can contest it. Streets are an example of a contested site where one group represents them as a site for public order while the other disrupts order to claim the street as a public forum. Nevertheless, this is not always the case. The depoliticisation of new developments and gated-communities from a planning process, and from their relationship to social and ecological interrelations exemplifies a process which conceals relations of power and conceals the reproduction of disparity. The question therefore is how can people engage in a debate that concerns the spaces in which they live?

How can spatial practices extend their ability to affect the spaces produced to an ability to influence the process of production? Weighing over social movements is the dangerous strategy of coupling an identity with a territory implying the formation of place as an identity separate from other place-identities and correspondingly, the construction of the other, leading towards the weaving of power over the other, and power over the self. While it is often crucial to attach a place to a political project (Gupta and Ferguson), this spatial process of othering risks situating the problematic as one of contact and communication between "naturalised conceptions of spatialised 'cultures'" and not on the process through which this cultural taxonomy is produced. Hence the challenge to spatial practices may be less about "establishing a dialogic relation between geographically distinct societies than exploring the processes of production of difference in a world of culturally, socially, and economically interconnected and interdependent spaces" (Gupta and Ferguson: 14).

What is challenged here is the idea that space is a singular concept and the idea that it is neutral. In this view, many representations of identity and place overlap in a contested site where the "presumption that spaces are autonomous

has enabled the power of topography to conceal successfully the topography of power" (Gupta and Ferguson: 8).

Here, I am not arguing against the construction of identities through the representation of spaces, but rather, inquiring how these convictions play out in the day to day lives of people. My interest is to study the moments when institutionalised mechanisms for the representation of space are disrupted and challenged. The 'moment' when the 'other' crosses its boundary and reveals a world of interconnections. When the stability of power relations sustained on spatially defined differences is threatened. Be it the extraordinary event of an earthquake, or the powerful mobilisation of people, these are actions that challenge the concealed hegemony of some representations of space, produced by a dominating political culture and find empowerment in the formation of different social spaces.

Ultimately, my interest is to acknowledge the political character of a process whereby space-time is socially constructed (i.e., architecture) and thereby to politicise the role of architects and spatial practices. This imminently calls for a discussion on the alternative venues for a democratisation of planning processes and for a more systematic study of the reproduction of inequality through representations of space in Mexico City.

d) Social space at once conceals relations of power and contains seeds for resistance: as a counter-space.

Certainly the polarity I find between new urban developments that neutralise social movements on the one hand, and street protests as a form of spatial practice disrupting hegemonic representations of space on the other hand, is not absolute. Both practices contain the possibility of sustaining relations of exploitation and of resistance. Both examples are inhabited by the tension between a spatial practice that empowers people to engage space politically and practices that exclude people form this process.

Noticeable examples, working along this tension, are the neighbourhood organisations emerging after 1985. While they served a crucial purpose in the

aftermath of the earthquake by defying the political culture, authors such as Ward (1991) and Cuéllar (1997) suggest that today, the challenge of social movements will be to bridge the exclusive struggles of neighbourhoods with the more extensive questions of citizenship, supporting participation while allowing for plurality and conviviality.

The tension resides in the particular spaces through which different people organise their everyday experiences. This interpretative framework is what Lefebvre describes as a representation of space, produced discursively and entwined with a distinct experience of lived space. While some movements work within the interpretative framework offered by city officials others are more radical in their challenge to the actual process whereby spaces and identities are produced. Street protests, such as the gay pride movement, are an example of the second.

The political significance of space lies in the manner in which different representations of space play out in the day-to-day lives of people. The questions will then be about the process and the extent to which spatial practices are able to maintain different representations of space in motion. Continuously revealing and politicising the production of the spaces of their everyday life.

Closing Thoughts

Entangled Encounters[2]

Writing these pages I am intrigued by the seemingly unrelated events framed by my window. The daily practices of people, which are just as influential in shaping the streetscape I now see, as the institutional decisions made by planning professionals. Where I sit, a keyboard meets my fingertips in an improvised dance. A glowing computer screen glares at me while I stare at it. I sit by an eastbound window. Through this window, a parade of seemingly disjointed and unrelated events, stroll by. In this window I find my redemption, my distractions, fascination, bursting laughter, and moments of quiet oblivion. A woman walks as if she were crawling. Concentrating on each step. She holds the world from moving by stepping on it. Inch by inch the city is building itself outside my window.

My purpose was first to look at the city outside my window (and inside this room) as a physical and symbolic space where social relations can be hidden and rendered visible. Secondly, to look at the people walking by, as actively sustaining and resisting the configuration of such spaces.

This paper proposed that in Mexico City the everyday life is increasingly politicised. The ways in which people live are increasingly part of public discussions. What once were private issues (e.g., land ownership) now enter the public realm. And what once were considered as non-political activities (e.g., consumption, leisure or self-construction) are increasingly recognised as an intrinsic and necessary part of a politicised urban planning.

Noteworthy in this process, is a transformation of the political spaces where urban planning occurs. On the one hand, some citizens have become active and vocal in a way that was not possible during the years preceding the 1985 earthquake and the weakening of the PRI. On the other hand, the formal

2 This title is borrowed from a performance created by Ana Francisca de la Mora. Her dance is my inspiration.

institutions of urban planning have incorporated citizen participation as an intrinsic part of the process. This entails a democratisation of the mechanisms for urban planing. As a consequence we can now speak of the emergence of a politicised planning process (Ward, 1991; Díaz-Barriga, 1998). As spatial practices in Mexico City become increasingly politicised, they interlace with the activities of design professions, blurring their separation.

Though spatial practices and everyday acts (of resistance and normalisation) are not immediately political they may become both objects and means of political struggle. On occasions, they are able to destabilise the dominant political culture and create an inclusive political forum, giving voice to the disempowered. Conversely, they can also work, as a claim for exclusive rights, and serve to conceal more complex power relations, which sustain different groups of people in asymmetrical conditions. The same process that allows a community of squatters to have access to services also allows another place to become a gated-community. Hence, an increased citizen participation in planning process should not be celebrated uncritically.

Through a reading of Lefebvre, I explored the concept of space as a potential site for renewing my practice as an architect and my role as a citizen. I proposed that space matters, inasmuch as spatial practices and spatial epistemologies serve to sustain or conceal social relations of domination, oppression and exclusion. And space matters inasmuch as the ecological systems that sustain life are linked to our ways of life. Ultimately, a study of Mexico City, framed by a social concept of space, reveals that the use and representation of space is not neutral. As geographies of domination and geographies of resistance interlace in the everyday use of the city, relations of power are sustained and challenged. Therefore, politicising space itself, as a context of social and environmental relations, and the process of its production, is a necessary part of a democratic project.

Located in a city where half of human settlements are considered illegal (Duhau 1997: 29) and in an attempt to shift the focus of some of the current studies that privilege planning professionals with the right and the responsibility

of building the city, this paper brought social movements, everyday practices and a cultural politics to the foreground of architecture (as a political space). And maintains that a revision of the role of planning professions is possible in the light of a social concept of space. Space, moreover, as a conceptual devise may also offer social movements an alternative study of social hierarchies and a venue to articulate a political struggle. Space as such is revealed not only as a representation (to be politicised or not) but also as the medium itself of architectonic social movements.

Advocates of democracy in Mexico City have succeeded in the transformation of political institutions, but have rarely addressed the spaces that sustain social relations. It will now be necessary for social movements, political organisations and design professions to engage with a concept of space, which extend beyond contained identities (e.g., neighbourhood organisations) to include other layers of social relations.

Yet, it becomes obvious that an increased participation is not a sufficient condition to eradicate social inequality. It is not sufficient that organised residents be able to influence the urban design of their neighbourhoods, nor is it sufficient that any number of design professionals undertake an advocacy role to represent the underrepresented. The question is therefore more extensively a question about democracy. How can social movements, communities or citizens, articulate a struggle for self-determination while ensuring plurality and inclusivity?

In this paper, I explored the multiplication of social movements as an increased call for democratic values. A call to recognise the contested nature of articulating identities and producing spaces. A call to recognise that the political – as the contested realm among different representations of space – cannot be restricted to a planning institution. But rather, extends to the practices of increasingly diverse social relations.

In this context, spatial practices have proved that architecture, like democracy, is a political process that must remain open. A process that requires a vibrant clash of political positions. The illusion of consensus,

unanimity or neutrality in planning is contrary to democracy because democracy itself is a term contested by a plurality of social movements. This open conflict of interests can take many forms: from the outburst of citizen activity during the 1985 earthquake, to the confrontational approach of street protests. The question therefore, is what kind of political outlet can spatial practices attain, for architecture to become a democratic process?

As I write these lines, the new airport is being discussed. I read an article in Reforma discussing the perils to urban spaces of adding a second level to the Periferico expressway. The Jornada newspaper publishes an account of gentrification in La Condesa neighbourhood. The main square of the city is occupied by Coca-Cola for corporate promotion in the guise of new-year celebrations (ironically the new president is a former CEO of Coca-Cola Mexico). Like the visions occurring outside my window, these are not separate, isolated and independent events but rather different faces of the same city.

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