A Fresh Look at Lefebvre’s Spatial Triad and Differential Space: A Central Place in Planning Theory?

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Abstract - In this short but provocative paper, I argue that it is rather unfortunate that planning theorists have, with a few notable exceptions, tended to ignore the potential contributions that Henri Lefebvre’s spatial triad ideas regarding the production of space can make to planning theory. In particular, I argue that Lefebvre’s concept of differential space could provide a powerful focus for planners’ conceptual approaches to the creation and enhancement of public space. Rather than simply complaining about the privatisation, loss or corruption of ‘public’ space, we should appreciate the potentialities inherent in the production of differential space through the contestations that can occur in the creation of a more fair and just society in asserting ‘the right to the city’. What might be called ‘strong’ differential space: the spaces of politicised appropriation and the assertion of rights to the city, insinuates itself to a constant dialectical struggle through elements of the spatial triad. This paper provides a snapshot of ongoing mixed methods research based mainly on archival sources, interviews, visual data and observation. Conclusions draw attention to the importance of spatial histories and differential space for planning practice and theory.

Key-Words - spatial triad, Lefebvre, planning theory, urban planning, differential space

1 Introduction
Urban space according to Lefebvre is not a neutral container, but rather it is a social construct. It is created through social relations that he characterised as a triad of spaces: spatial practice, representations of space, and spaces of representation. Lefebvre is one of the few great 20th century urban philosophers to engage directly with town planning and what we now call urban regeneration albeit that he was rarely complementary. He was critical of the 1950s French new town of Mourenx, for the poor quality of urban public space created which he saw as suppressing democratic social interaction. And he was not impressed with the ‘regeneration’ plans for Les Halles; Paris’ wonderful 19th century produce markets. For Lefebvre, planners are the ‘scientific’ experts who create official representations of space, most notably, visual representations: policy documents, zoning schemes, design briefs, maps, plans, drawings, photographs, artistic impressions. These representations are not neutral but imposed certain meanings onto urban space, imply how it should be used and not be used and by whom. A range of planning theories have emerged since the 1940s (Taylor 1998, Allmendinger 2009) and it is clear that there has been an emphasis on either substantive or procedural theory and on elements of both positive and normative theory. This paper first outlines the main elements of Lefebvre’s spatial triad ideas; it then examines aspects of planning theory. It goes on to review how Lefebvre’s ideas have been applied in planning research before speculating about the importance of differential space. The final sections of the paper outline some of the author's recent empirical research.

2 Lefebvre's Spatial Triad
The spatial triad does have an intuitive simplicity and my approach sees its elements as follows (based on Leary 2009 and 2013):

- spatial practice has three major elements:
  1) the physical, material city and its routine maintenance; 2) major urban redevelopment in the context of existing neo-capitalist and
state power structures; 3) routines of daily life that conform with official representations of space. It is space directly perceptible through the senses, although mediated by 2 and 3 above - perceived space.

- representations of space: rational, intellectualised, official conceptions of urban areas for analytical, administrative and property development purposes. They are produced by technocrats: architects, engineers, urbanists and planners but also artists with a scientific bent. They are the dominant representations and may be in the form of the written word, for example in city-wide zoning plans and strategy documents, or quasi-scientific visual representations of various kinds such as maps, master plans and design guides - conceived space.

- spaces of representation: have two major elements: 1) urban everyday space as directly lived by inhabitants and users in ways informed not so much by representations of space as by associated cultural memories, images and symbols imbued with cultural meaning; 2) emotional, artistic interpretations of city space by poets, writers and painters and others who create artistic representations of urban space. This kind of space overlays physical space and values places in ways that run counter to the dominant representations of space - imaginative and lived space.

See figure 1. The dotted lines represent the porous nature of the three elements allowing their interaction with each other and with the wider society/economy. At the intersection of the three spatial elements, urban public space, quasi-public space (which has characteristics of publicness and privateness) and hence differential space may be produced. Lefebvre was explicit in linking spatial practice and town planning:

As for spatial practice, it is observed, described and analysed on a wide range of levels: in architecture, in city planning or ‘urbanism’ (a term borrowed from official pronouncements), in the actual design of routes and localities (‘town and country planning’) in the organisation of everyday life, and, naturally, in urban reality. (Lefebvre 1991: 414)

Although Lefebvre refers to urban reality his ideas can be applied also to rural space.

In addition to the triad, two other Lefebvrian spatial concepts are important for the ways in which he understood urban space and theorised about cities, they are:

- abstract space; the urban spaces of state regulated neo-capitalism characterised by their commodified exchange value and their tendency to homogenisation (Lefebvre 1991: 49-53)

- differential space; privileges inclusiveness and use value rather than the exchange value of abstract space. It is often transitory space which can arise from the inherent vulnerabilities of abstract space.

3 Planning Theory as Understanding

If theory is simply understanding in a particular discipline and field of professional practice, then planners have adopted a number of notable theoretical positions regarding the substantive and procedural nature of their subject over the decades. For hundreds of years the formal planning of towns and cities, where it occurred, was dominated by physical understandings of place and architectural understandings of practice. In the early twentieth century such theoretical position coalesced in the writings of (Keeble 1952; Sharp 1940; Abercrombie 1933; Le Corbusier 1923) albeit that these theorists had their own particular take on cities and planning. The physical planning approach also coalesced in two famous ‘city beautiful’ plans for North American cities: Chicago (Burnham and Bennett 1909), Vancouver (Harland Bartholomew and Associates 1928). Similarly, in the UK over a hundred (Larkham and Lilley 2003) post-World War Two reconstruction plans were made, including high profile ones for: Manchester (Manchester Corporation 1945), London (Forshaw Abercrombie 1943) and Glasgow (Glasgow Corporation 1945). These theorists and practitioners understood planning as ‘architecture writ large’; Daniel Burnham proclaiming famously ‘make no little
plans’. They focused on the city as a physical ‘product’ constructed according to a precise blueprint that would lead to a desired physical end state.

In the 1960s and 70s such ideas were challenged by those who understood planning, (rather crudely here for the sake of brevity) as: social and community relations (Jacobs 1961), complex systems (McLoughlin 1969; Chadwick 1971) and those who theorised planning as universal procedures or processes (Faludi 1973). From the 1990s considerable intellectual academic effort (inspired by the participation and communication ideas of Sherry Arnstein and Jurgen Habermas) went into formulating understandings of planning around notions of who should be involved in the decision making process and how: consequently, the so called communicative or collaborative planning approach emerged (Innes 1995; Healey 2006; Margerum 2011; Inch 2015).

4 Lefebvre’s Ideas in Planning Research
Lefebvre’s production of space ideas remain contentious but highly relevant for the investigation of city transformation in general and how the planning of urban space can contribute to social injustice in particular (Soja 2010; Harvey 2012). The utility of Lefebvre’s ideas for urban planning practice and research has been observed recently in mainstream planning literatures (see e.g. Fincher and Iveson 2008; Carp 2009; Metzger 2011; Buser 2012). After the publication in 1991 of *The Production of Space* in English, there was a flurry important empirical urban planning research focused on: London (Allen and Pryke 1994), Glasgow (Fyfe 1996?? and Coventry (Hubbard et al 2003). However, it should be said that the planning theory and urban planning worlds more generally have been somewhat perplexingly reluctant to give Lefebvre the theoretical attention his ground breaking insights deserve. This is evidenced by his absence from the 2011 edition of Fainstein and Campbell’s planning theory reader. It is evident that Lefebvre’s often repetitive and at times convoluted presentation of his spatial triad concept in his book *The Production of Space*, has been interpreted in slightly different ways over the years.

5 The Importance of Differential Space
Researchers who engage with Lefebvre’s work particularly those who pursue empirical research, tend to work with the concept of the spatial triad which has become well-known over the decades. However, Lefebvre is ambivalent about differential space, associating it with a utopian post-capitalist world, “on the horizon” produced by social revolution that will result in a planet-wide space of “transformed everyday life open to myriad possibilities” (Lefebvre 1991: 422-23) but he also detects differential space more prosaically in the immediacy of Brazil’s favelas and in 1960s Paris. The teleological nature of Lefebvre’s historical dialectic in which an inevitable transition unfolds, from the absolute space of nature to capitalist abstract space, finally reaching utopian differential space, has been observed several times. Differential space is possible partly because under the conditions of neo-capitalism land and property is abandoned periodically by capital interests and the state. This withdrawal from space occurs continually in urban areas even in the centre of cities. Abandoned urban land is seen in a variety of positive light including the opportunities it engenders for ‘natural’ space wildlife habitats. Although the contention by some that abandonment and vacancy are simply stages on the road, perhaps a long road, to redevelopment and regeneration is more dubious. In the UK and other countries capital and state abandonment of space is associated with the cyclic, sharp economic crises of capital and with more long term structural changes in the economy in the fields of for example, manufacturing industry and transport infrastructure. From his Marxist perspective Lefebvre highlights the potential for ordinary users of space to seize new rights to urban space and produce differential space from abandoned abstract space:

An existing space may outlive its original purpose and the *raison d'etre* which determines its forms, functions, and structures; it may thus in a sense become vacant, and susceptible of being diverted, reappropriated and put to a purpose quite different from its initial use. (Lefebvre 1991: 167, emphasis in original)

In addition to what might be called ‘utopian socialist’ differential space, Lefebvre speaks of another kind arising from what might be called the
‘here-and-now’ contestations and bodily “re-appropriation” of city space. An example in 1969 was the take over by Parisian students and others of the wholesale produce markets of Paris, Les Halles Centrales, which were “transformed into a gathering-place and a scene of permanent festival” (Ibid), that is a ludic space of play rather than work. Lefebvre presents a contradictory categorisation of ludic space suggesting at one point that it is a vast counter-space that escapes the control of the established order (Ibid: 383) only to affirm also that the space of the leisure industry, through commodification is a victory of neo-capitalism. However, leisure space bridges the gap between spaces of work and spaces of enjoyment and fun (Ibid: 385). It is therefore “the very epitome of contradictory space” hosting exuberant new potentials. Lefebvre is clear about what differential space might be and how it might arise:

From a less pessimistic standpoint, it can be shown that abstract space harbours specific contradictions. Such spatial contradictions derive in part from the old contradictions thrown up by historical time … Thus, despite – or rather because of – its negativity, abstract space carries within itself the seeds of a new kind of space. I shall call that new space ‘differential space’, because as much as abstract space tends towards homogeneity … a new space cannot be born (produced) unless it accentuates difference. (Lefebvre 1991: 52)

Differential space seems not to be bestowed on city dwellers through the largesse of landowners or the state; it has to be appropriated through active assertion of rights to urban space. Lefebvre makes this clear through the relationships he enunciates between differential space and the right the city. His thoughts on the right, or rather, rights to the city were written up presciently in 1968 just before the Paris uprisings in May of that year. By implication the right to the city includes individuals’ access to public space but it additionally it encompasses collective access, needs for work, security, certainty, adventure, work, similarity, difference, isolation and encounter. More recently, Andres (2013) has??

6 Empirical Research
Previous research has identified the differential space potentials of urban planning and regeneration initiatives through the creation and enhancement of urban public space in Manchester from the 1990s (Leary 2013; Leary 2009). And similar findings are noted in comparative research focused on Manchester, Vancouver and Lowell MA (Leary-Owhin 2016, forthcoming). It is clear from archival data and interviews that the Manchester City Council planners and the planners at the Central Manchester Development Corporation (1988-96) sought to transform the Castlefield area from an area of largely run down and increasingly derelict industrial space. The transformation they envisaged was based on the creation of post-industrial urban space consisting of private sector residential apartments, offices and studio space, bars and restaurants and attractive canal side environments. To a large extent this is precisely what they achieved but I argue in the process they also created the potential for the production of differential space.

Iain Borden is one of the few British researchers to deploy Lefebvre’s differential space concept in empirical research. He sought to deconstruct skateboarding’s history and differential space arguing that the temporary appropriation of space even for a matter of hours is a useful tactic but is not full blown, which implies ‘ownership’. Co-optation as Lefebvre calls it is therefore more likely to be tolerated by powerful social groups (see Borden et al 2001). Differential spaces of temporary appropriation are documented in comparative research by Groth and Corijn focused on abandoned city space in Berlin (railway workshop), Brussels (railway station) and Helsinki (warehouse). Theirs is a sophisticated insightful understanding of here-and-now differential space:

… it is a space created and dominated by its users from the basis of its given conditions.
That is, they created urban public spaces that are conducive to the staging of inclusive leisure events (figure 2). They are also conducive to the appropriation of space for purposes of political expression, political protest (figure 3). This I argue is the highest form of democratic public space and something to be treasured.

7 Conclusion
What Lefebvre encouraged through the dissemination of ideas about urban space, was an understanding of the public space as not just an empty physical container but as a holistic product and social process where planners play a crucial role in producing representations that have a direct bearing on spatial practice (the built environment) and routine ways of life. His contribution to planning theory therefore is potentially profound. In seeking to redevelop urban public space and in abandoning urban space; public and private institutions it seems produce inadvertently the potential for differential space. In tardy or rapid reactions to this potential, collective politicised action seizes opportunities to appropriate urban space for its use value, whether ludic or politically vibrant. Whether on a permanent basis running into years or on a temporary basis of months, days or hours, such appropriations are important for revealing the immanent vulnerabilities of abstract space. A theoretically robust critical appreciation of the production of urban space of use for planning requires a careful engagement with the histories of the elements of Lefebvre’s spatial triad. I argue that such understandings will elevate diverse, inclusive urban public space theoretically, politically and practically to the status of one of the prime desired outcomes of urban policy and planning practice.

References
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