



Published by the UFS

<http://journals.ufs.ac.za/index.php/trp>

© Creative Commons With Attribution (CC-BY)

How to cite: Kuhn, J. 2022. Theorising urban space. *Town and Regional Planning*, no. 80, pp. 3-5.

Theorising urban space

Commentary by Jens Kuhn, 24 March 2022

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18820/2415-0495/trpxxx>

A reply to ... A critical Lefebvrian perspective on planning in relation to informal settlements in South Africa by Marie Huchzermeyer, published in *Town and Regional Planning*, 79, pp. 44-54.

Henri Lefebvre's prime contribution to theorising about society was to bring on board the concept of "space", or perhaps more correctly, geography. Well into the 1940s Marxian analysis of capitalism remained wedded exclusively to time, that being the large-scale currents of change in history. The effect of urban and regional form, and its role in the reproduction of capitalism, received no mention because it complicated and fragmented Marxist analysis immeasurably. Unlike space, time can be treated as the same and regular, no matter where you are. Spatial structure differs significantly from one location to the next. Lefebvre's was insistent, however, that no critique of capitalism is viable without incorporating the decisive role played by spatial form. Capitalism periodically reconfigures regions, imposing a new form. This is essential for its survival. But the new form has a strong reciprocal impact on how the next generation of capitalism itself looks. It gets adjusted for another round for profit-taking. Incorporation of space as a variable in Marxist analytics would thus have to account for both what kind of space gets produced and how it then constrains the further evolution of capitalism. Nowadays, this theoretical insight lies idle once again, mainly because Marxism, and its central motive of defeating capitalism, is quite out of favour.

Neo-Marxism has let go of that motive to concentrate instead more directly on human emancipation. This is to be achieved through suitable reforms rather than a displacement of capitalism. A focus on reform has meant that critical social theorists have gradually become indistinguishable from the establishment-Left within most domestic politics. Moreover, whether working from inside or outside the systems of power, a pre-occupation with micro adjustments to legislative frameworks, in order to achieve rather general goals such as social justice, gender equality, welfare provisions and so on, have resulted in a 'forgetting' of space once again. Obviously, in the course of policy debates, reference to space is frequently made in the form of 'disadvantaged townships', 'informal areas', or even specific locations. Yet these references are in the 'passive' mode: they get used as empirical examples as to why existing policy remains inadequate. They argue that such urban places are what they are because they have been neglected by existing instruments of urban policy. In the spirit of an inclusionary city thus, they should be upgraded and supported unconditionally. Such spaces are thus never regarded as

'active', namely as agents in their own making, as stamping their will on the political economy of the moment.

One can view them as not having been 'left out' at all but rather as simply 'different' to the dominant land policy-machine, that being capitalism's planning frameworks. In other words, unlike the establishment-Left, such places remain emphatically 'outside' the system. As Lefebvre suggests, they may, in fact, desire to remain outside, and as such are concrete and physical expressions of non-capitalism, of alternative social arrangements essential for some people's survival. In that sense, they come into view as a third mode of city-production, alongside private real-estate development and state-driven delivery.

Huchzermeyer does us a great service in picking up this neglected thread of social theory. In Lefebvrian terms, one would have expected Slovo Park's leaders to push back fully against the standardising force of state-produced space. But they did not. Instead, we note a selective resistance. In as far as land-layout and location go, they did resist, but in respect of securing external capital investment and utility servicing, they did not. The community had been fully focused on appropriating something material from the system: services, rights-in-land, funding, and so on. These are also the entitlements promised by the socio-economic rights movement! But does such selectivity preserve Lefebvre's hope of retaining an alternative to capitalism? Or, in Neo-Marxist terms, does such selectivity retain spontaneity, self-organisation and self-management, and an opposition to features of modern town planning? Put more abstractly: Does such selective resistance draw communities into capitalism's ambit, thereby extinguishing *hope*, and their very means of survival? In

Mr Jens Kuhn, Town Planner and former Manager: Housing Land and Forward Planning, Cape Town City Council, PO Box 1410, Milnerton, 7441. Phone: 072 810 4650, email: <jenskuhn@kingsley.co.za>

my interpretation, it does not. Yet it does contain lessons both for social theorising and for planning practice.

To explicate the lesson for planning practice, a quick detour into economics is needed. By examining the survival strategies employed by the extremely poor communities in India's Chittagong slum more closely, the western trained economist Muhammad Yunus uncovered the potential power of 'social collateral' among those whom formal banks had rejected. These were people left without the opportunity to benefit from the gains offered by the formal economic system on account of having no material collateral – not even a donkey or a sewing machine. What they did have is social solidarity. That is, they had the will and agency to vouch for each other and to repay tiny loans on each other's behalf should individuals fail to meet their obligations. That demonstrates community solidarity well beyond political rhetoric. It is a sign of collective commitment and, one could say, a much better definition of 'community'. The condition was, however, that loans had to be available from lenders to whomever the savings group put forward. This simple deal tied a social process to a banking procedure, both of which had operated in complete isolation previously. Orthodox economic theory teaches that loans must be backed up by material collateral of some kind, while savings groups knew that all they ever had was each other. In establishing the Grameen Bank thus, Yunus stepped out of the formal logic of finance capital, giving birth to a new kind of banking.¹

A sceptic might fairly ask at this stage: Is this not just capitalism's method for extending its homogenising influence? Not quite, I would argue. In the same way that the Joe Slovo community drew selectively on the formal city-production process, the Grameen communities drew finance from the market, but retained the right to determine who gets a loan.

Viewed in this way, one notices a weakness in our urban theory.

Is the observation made by Muhammad Yunus in *Economics* awaiting us in *Planning via Huchzermeyer's 'inquisitive transductive planner'*? To a considerable extent, her article already points us in that direction. In spatial planning terms, one might thus rephrase Yunus' challenge thus:

How can communities² in informal areas lock into the wealth and productivity of formal urban environments, and do so by drawing on, and offering, their agency/resources³ but without loosing their spatial practices?

Armed with this question, the inquisitive planner may simply stumble upon an institutional arrangement (like Yunus' innovative Bank) needed to handle "deals" between differing modes of space production. The economic analogy is, of course, meant simply to open up a line of thought in planning. Since money is uniform, unlike space, there are hardly any complications of uniqueness in economics. Nonetheless, inventing appropriate institutions to cross the formal/informal seam in urban environments is something local planners ought to pursue, and future incarnations of SPLUMA, and Activists, must attend to.

Turning to theorising: An important point to note is that the Grameen Bank did not seek to replace capitalism. It simply sought to bring to millions of poor some of the fruits of a powerful financial system. And it did so without shattering their networks of trust or mutual support. No doubt, this development lies at the base of India's current economic growth. Secondly, the Grameen Bank treated the poor as responsible human beings with whom one can transact, not as objective referents. Since any transaction is

a give-and-take, it naturally comes with the loss of some autonomy in respect of informality. But which aspect of informality exactly: site selection, layout determination, self-redevelopment? It may be either or all depending on the specific case. Conversely, residents of an informal area may thus, by definition, be unable to appeal to the formal sector for an adjudication in, say, an internal land-use dispute, because, in the formal world of land use, disputes are typically settled *via* the enforcement of a prescribed policy rule. Moreover, self-management means simply that.

At present, critical social theory has no room for such concessions. If anything, it dreams of pushing back the homogenising influence of the modern neoliberal state and comforts itself that such sentiments amount to support for the poor. Defending informality is then used as one way of countering neoliberal's spread. With such an approach, however, the poor are implicitly treated as pawns in a different struggle: one in which they are engaged by neither the system nor the theoreticians who counter the system. To repeat, informal areas hereby become points of reference in the human rights discourse and thus remain, apparently, without their own agency. This is one weakness of any meta-narrative, or of theorising at the super-local scale.

Furthermore, at the level of standard politics, the demand for individual human rights and liberties is bound to prevail over calls for community self-determination, because the referent is less precise, namely a generic segment of the population – the informal sector! Referring to a category of people is politically much safer than pointing to a specific location for upgrading. And thus politics side-lines the question of space as best it can. In this instance again, space made passive. Planning practice has, by dint of circumstance, partially avoided such a dilemma. It is hardly possible to be involved in actual planning without being specific about the piece of geography and population at play. Treating space in passive terms is only available to philosophers of planning.

1 Toulmin, S. 2001. *Return to reason*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, pages 63-65.

2 In this instance, 'communities' are defined as collectives that are willing and able to commit and mutually support each other over time. It does not refer to populations of people who happen to be living in a geographic place, as defined by outsiders.

3 Not resources they are 'entitled to' (but do not yet have), according to the human rights lobby.

Huchzermeyer's proposal that planners should be more 'inquisitive' about the mechanics of spontaneous settlement production (and I would add their operations) and how they facilitate alternative forms of human networking, human survival, and so on, is not misplaced. Such an enquiry into 'spatial practice' takes us to the point where space, *via* its residents, gets viewed as an active player in city-building. Such a curiosity is not limited to informal areas though. Frequently, formal sector planners are themselves unaware of how their daily application of rules, standards, and land-use rights produce certain environments and not others. Typically, their diagnosis as to why a plan or layout cannot be fully realised is because it has not been adequately legislated or codified. The plan's distortion is rarely regarded as being due to a different dynamic springing, and pushing back from the specific location's people. Being alert to 'spatial practice', even in this instance, may yield surprising and new insights.

Huchzermeyer's particular brand of research into planning practice is welcomed and should be emulated as a matter of urgency.