

# RE-ENVISIONING THE CITY: LEFEBVRE, HOPE VI, AND THE NEOLIBERALIZATION OF URBAN SPACE

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*Abstract:* This study draws upon the urban theory of Henri Lefebvre to examine HOPE VI, a public housing demolition and redevelopment program administered by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Hailed as a new approach to urban policy, the HOPE VI program embodies many of the key tenets of neoliberal urbanization, including an emphasis on entrepreneurial forms of urban regeneration and a focus on individual responsibility. To provide a lens for understanding this neoliberalization of space, we first detail Lefebvre's theorization of abstract space and transparency, highlighting in particular its nondialectical and depoliticized character. We then turn to examine the HOPE VI model and its implementation in Charlotte, North Carolina. Lefebvre's analysis, we argue, provides a useful entry point for interpreting the re-envisioning of urban space that underlies HOPE VI-style redevelopment, and therefore can potentially inform contemporary struggles against neoliberal urban policy. [Key words: Lefebvre, HOPE VI, transparency, neoliberalism.]

In the early spring of 1995, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Secretary Henry Cisneros was invited to testify before Congress. He was not facing an entirely friendly audience. Republican lawmakers had swept into power during the mid-term elections of 1994, and now formed the majority in both the House of Representatives and the Senate. HUD was facing a massive budget cut, and a bill had even been introduced to eliminate the Department altogether.

It was in this context that Cisneros presented to Congress the (Democratic) Clinton Administration's plan for a complete "HUD reinvention." He told skeptical lawmakers that HUD was going to "radically transform public housing in this country" by drawing on the "power of market discipline and individual choice" (Cisneros, 1995c, p. 71). These "revolutionary changes in public housing," Cisneros testified, "will empower residents and infuse market discipline into Washington's relationship with public housing authorities and will give residents real choices that bring dignity to their lives" (*ibid.*, p. 67).

A few months later, President Clinton released his first National Urban Policy Report (HUD, 1995). In transmitting the report to Congress, the President identified four

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organizing principles: “First, it links families to work.... Second, it leverages private investment in our urban communities.... Third, it is locally driven.... Fourth, it relies on traditional values—hard work, family, responsibility” (Clinton, 1995, p. 1). Collectively, these shifts in urban policy—with their emphases on work, responsibility, private investment, and market discipline—can be said to represent the consolidation of a particular framing of urban space and its residents, one that has come to be known as neoliberalism. In this article, we will interrogate this new vision of urban space, and examine what we consider to be some key dimensions of its underlying epistemology.

To do so, we draw upon the urban theory of Henri Lefebvre. As geographers are aware, Lefebvre had much to say about the nature of urban space under contemporary capitalism, and about the ways in which space is envisioned as an object of knowledge by urban experts and policymakers. He also showed that space was bound up with political projects and contestations. In Lefebvre’s words, “space is at once result and cause, product and producer; it is also a *stake*, the locus of projects and actions deployed as part of specific strategies, and hence the object of wagers on the future—wagers which are articulated, if never completely” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 142).

In what follows, we view neoliberalism as a particular kind of “wager,” one with implications for urban geographers as we attempt to understand contemporary spatial change and urban politics. In order to develop a lens for this exploration, we first offer an exposition of some of Lefebvre’s insights regarding the nature of urban space. We focus in particular on Lefebvre’s analysis of abstract space, which he says is underpinned by a particular urban epistemology. This epistemology has a number of notable characteristics: it is *nondialectical*, it is backed by a visual-objective illusion of *transparency*, and it is *reductive* and politically disempowering. Following this discussion, we turn to examine one key dimension of neoliberal urban policy, the HOPE VI Program, a public housing demolition and redevelopment initiative established by HUD in the mid-1990s. HOPE VI has since become one of the centerpieces of the HUD reinvention and also exemplifies such core principles of neoliberal urbanization as entrepreneurialism and personal responsibility (Hackworth, 2007).

Our overall argument is that Lefebvre’s insights are particularly instructive for examining contemporary urban policy, because they can help to make connections between a nondialectical epistemology and the production of social space. As we hope to show, the consequences of such an epistemology are political, or more accurately, apolitical, because the static notion of space that underlies it can have the effect of numbing individuals to the political potential of their spaces and actions. A critique of this orientation offers the potential to re-envision social space, a project that we suggest can contribute to a broader critique of neoliberal urbanization.

#### LEFEBVRE AND THE NEOLIBERAL TURN

The works and ideas of Henri Lefebvre have been widely discussed by scholars interested in theories of space, politics, and everyday life. One line of recent investigation concerns Lefebvre’s philosophical importance, including three book-length treatments (Shields, 1999; Elden, 2004b; Merrifield, 2006), and several attempts to examine Lefebvre’s links to fellow philosophers such as Lacan (Blum and Nast, 1996; Gregory, 1997), Heidegger (Elden, 2004a), and Bergson (Fraser, 2008). Others have applied

Lefebvre's theories of rhythmanalysis and everyday life to explore ideas related to the body and mobility (Simonsen, 2005; Edensor and Holloway, 2008).

A second line of research treats Lefebvre more as an urban theorist, and in this vein his writings, particularly *The Production of Space*, have been useful for urban geographers, enhancing notions of an urban space both multidimensional and in constant flux. Beginning with the early work of Harvey (1973) and Soja (1989), urban geographers have built on the work of Lefebvre to expand discussions of the linked roles of representation and materiality in creating and re-creating the social-spatial mix of urban places. Soja's well-known elaboration focused on Lefebvre's spatial triptych—the three spatial moments of spatial practice, representations of space, and representational spaces—forms the framework for his book, *Thirdspace* (Soja, 1996).

Recent investigations have continued along similar lines, drawing on Lefebvre to examine urban struggles over spatial practices and representations in domains such as political protest (Uitermark, 2004), sex work (Hubbard and Sanders, 2003), public housing policy (Smith, 2000), and neighborhood politics (Whitehead, 2003). This research helps to highlight the relations and disjunctions between the way that social space is lived, on one hand, and is variously imagined and represented, on the other. A related line of investigation has focused attention on the production of space, especially the tensions that can arise between the lived spaces of everyday life and the abstract space produced by capital and the state (McCann, 1999; Davidson, 2007).

Building on such work, we focus here on the spatial representations, practices, and politics associated with contemporary neoliberalism. The term *neoliberalism* has a complex lineage and usage, but is generally taken to describe a political and economic model of governance, as well as a particular vision of human nature, that places value on market rationality and individual choice at the expense of collective decision-making and public-sector solutions (Peck and Tickell, 2002; Tickell and Peck, 2003). In the urban setting, this broad ideological shift has led to a variety of changes in the conditions under which, and the strategies through which, cities operate (Hackworth, 2007; Leitner et al., 2007). Among these, we would highlight the following: (1) a shift toward more entrepreneurial forms of urban governance, focused around strategies to attract capital investment, promote growth, and leverage the private sector in the form of public-private partnerships; (2) a move to reduce the role of the local state in the provision of services and amenities, in favor of purportedly more efficient privatized and market-based alternatives; and (3) the articulation of new forms of urban citizenship, emphasizing notions of individual choice, family self-reliance, and personal responsibility. What is perhaps most striking about this set of neoliberal shifts is that they are generally presented as value free. That is, neoliberalism is supported by the *naturalization* of the market as a sphere of rational and moral decision-making, and the *depoliticization* of significant policy interventions that rely upon market-based solutions (Harvey, 2005; Peet, 2007). One result is that neoliberalism's inherent *individualism* is normalized in the formulation of urban policy.

Here, we believe, is where Lefebvre's urban theory may be useful, because it calls attention to the ways in which our spatial epistemologies can work to obscure the social relations and political negotiations that produce urban space. Despite the lofty rhetoric of freedom and self-realization that accompanies neoliberal discourse, nonetheless it is still the case that many inner-city residents remain mired in landscapes where their circumstances are conditioned by poverty, disinvestment, and social disenfranchisement. If we

follow Lefebvre, we may conclude that one factor in the continued reproduction of such spaces is a spatial epistemology that restricts the ability of individuals to realize the true productive and collective power of their social space. Therefore, we would argue that Lefebvre's work holds great potential for helping geographers think through, and perhaps re-enliven, contemporary struggles against neoliberalism. We will return to this notion later, but before doing so will examine in some detail Lefebvre's understanding of urban spatial epistemology.

### NON-DIALECTICAL SPACE

In the opening chapter to *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre makes the following statement: "(Social) space is a (social) product" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 27). Many readers interpret this to mean that space is social, but we believe that Lefebvre intends to say something more than that with this statement. By including the parentheses, Lefebvre implicitly encourages the reader to also consider the sentence in this way: "Space is a product." To us, this version of the statement is important because it reminds the reader that one of Lefebvre's key goals in *The Production of Space* was to argue not only that space was social (he took that for granted, as should we), but that space was a dialectical *product* much like the commodity.

For a useful description of the special features of the commodity, one can turn to Andrew Merrifield, who describes the dialectical nature of the commodity as a two-fold abstraction:

Marx recognized that, although commodities as material "things" are produced through a labour process that involves specific social relations, the thing character (the money-form) tends to mask the underlying social processes once these commodities enter daily life via the market. Marx (1967, pp. 71–83) terms this obfuscation the "fetishism of commodities"; ... Marx argues that commodities, like phenomena, are processes which appear in the form of things. (Merrifield, 1993, p. 520)

The dialectical commodity is a concrete "thing" in the sense that it is something that can be bought and sold, and can only exist when it corresponds to some physical expression. But it is abstract because it cannot exist without the simultaneous existence of a whole system of other social processes, such as exchange and labor, so in that sense it is a process. In the same way, Lefebvre asserts that space only exists when it is localized and made concrete through some physical expression. Yet in a capitalist system, local physical space is only tied down and made concrete when it is part of the abstract system of an exchange economy. Space within a capitalist system can be bought and sold—it can be divided up into uniform, homogeneous parcels, which are then exchanged, but like the commodity it only "exists" when it is local. Lefebvre argues, "Space thus understood is both abstract and concrete in character: abstract inasmuch as it has no existence save by virtue of the exchange-ability of its component parts, and concrete inasmuch as it is socially real and as such is localized" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 342). Thus space participates in the same concrete-abstract tension as the commodity itself. Space is a rich, dialectical relation with both thing and process features.

Having established the dialectical nature of space, Lefebvre is then led to ponder another feature that he calls homogeneous space (1991, p. 287). For Lefebvre, homogeneous space is a particularly elusive quality that emerges from abstract space. According to Lefebvre, capitalist relations are characterized by a series of abstractions, one of which is labor—a measurable, purchasable quantity that presents the appearance of being separate from an actual human being. Conceived as a product, labor conceals the social relations behind it.

Similarly, the concept of exchange, conceived as an abstraction, conceals the social relations (money, labor, private property, and markets) that sustain it as an abstraction. When one forgets all the social arrangements that are required in order for exchange to exist as a concept, then exchange can seem perfectly abstract. It can appear to have a neutral form (exchange in the abstract) and a concrete content (the items exchanged in any particular circumstance) (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 100). In reality, however, exchange only exists as an *act*, and when it does exist as an act it is always tied to *particular* commodities. When considered this way, all those social relations that were cast aside in either the abstract or the concrete instances come rushing back in—but this rarely happens. However, by sustaining the ideological position that exchange can be thought of *both* in terms of a particular instance as well as an abstract, neutral form, capitalist relations sustain the illusion of a neutral exchange system—a system that pre-exists any particular instance of exchange or labor. But there is no neutral system or form that pre-exists the act of exchange. Rather, the idea that a neutral form exists is the *result* of the abstraction of the concept of exchange, rather than its precursor (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 100). As a concrete abstraction, neither the form nor the content exist in isolation, but both appear to.

For Lefebvre, this very same kind of approach governs the production of abstract space. Abstract space gives the appearance of homogeneity and of emptiness, but this appearance is the result of its construction through a system of ideology, rather than the source of that ideology. “Like that of exchange, the form of social space has an affinity with logical forms: it calls for a content and cannot be conceived of as having no content; but thanks to abstraction, it is in fact conceived of, precisely, as independent of any specific content” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 101). Like exchange, which exists only as an act (yet through the dialectic of form and content appears to pre-exist the act in a neutral form), social space also exists only in material practice, yet through the dialectic of the concrete abstraction it gives the appearance of pre-existing that material practice in an abstract form. The persistence of the idea of separation between abstract space and concrete space therefore results in a commonly accepted notion that a homogeneous, neutral space pre-exists whatever gets placed in it. But homogeneity is the apparent *effect* of the separation of the abstract from the concrete, not its precursor. The appearance that a neutral space pre-exists the actuality of spatial practice is a mirage that results from the ideology of abstraction. It is a fetish—homogeneous space is a process that appears as a thing.

Thus, Lefebvre can make this seemingly counter-intuitive statement:

Abstract space is not homogeneous; it simply has homogeneity as its goal, its “lens.” And, indeed, it renders homogeneous.... Thus to look upon abstract space as homogeneous is to embrace a representation that takes the effect for the cause, and the goal for the reason why that goal is pursued. (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 287)

Lefebvre is arguing that even though homogeneous space appears to be neutral and empty, it is not empty; it is filled with the dialectical tensions and social processes that create it as an effect. But if homogeneity is an illusion, then why is this illusion so readily accepted as fact?

### VISION AND TRANSPARENCY

For Lefebvre, the illusion is accepted because it is supported by the visual epistemology of transparency. In the introductory chapter of the *Production of Space*, he outlines what is meant by the concept of transparency:

The illusion of transparency goes hand in hand with a view of space as innocent, as free of traps or secret places. Anything hidden or dissimulated—and hence dangerous—is antagonistic to transparency, under whose reign everything can be taken in by a single glance from that mental eye which illuminates whatever it contemplates. Comprehension is thus supposed, without meeting any insurmountable obstacles, to conduct what is perceived, i.e. its object, from the shadows into the light. (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 28)

From this quotation it appears that, for Lefebvre, transparency has several dimensions. First, it is an “illusion,” although it is not immediately clear what sort of an illusion it is.

Second, transparency is an agent of confusion; it has something to do with secret traps and hidden places, even if that only means it is antagonistic to them. And third, based on his references to sight and the mental eye, it appears that for Lefebvre transparency is a highly vision-centered concept.

In *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre spoke at length about vision and its role in social-spatial life. For him, the sense of sight was a reductive one, at least as it has been employed in a Western setting. “To the eye ... space appears solely in its reduced forms,” he argues (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 313). “That which is merely seen is reduced to an image—an icy coldness” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 286). Lefebvre was not only critical of vision, however: he was also highly critical of certain spaces designed to enhance or encourage a visual approach, what he called readable spaces. Readable spaces are those spaces constructed with a heavy emphasis on open visibility, such as monumental buildings or open plazas. Lefebvre’s distrust of these sorts of spaces stems from the fact that, when individuals are confronted with them, he felt that they become passive “readers,” relying too heavily on their disengaged eyes. They accept too readily that the objects they see are fixed, and that their clear vision supplies them with pure, factual information about those objects. He said, “the eye ... tends to relegate objects to the distance, to render them passive” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 286). The Modernist, vision-based epistemology, then, carries with it distinctive assumptions concerning the nature of “reality,” a reality that is taken to be fundamentally visible. Furthermore, in the visible world vision is assumed to be clear and distinct, objects are fixed and unchanging, and the resulting “picture” is a stable holder of contents (Jay, 1993; Jones, 1995). As Pickles (2004, p. 81) observed, “people are very reluctant to question their belief in the stability and reality of their visual world. How could it be otherwise? Isn’t the world clearly apparent to us?” Lefebvre’s

notion of transparency is in effect part of a complex critique not only of visibility, but of the entire visual-objectivist ontology.

Transparency, then, is a representation of clarity that is conjured up through the visual practices of socially produced space. For Lefebvre, because space is a product like other commodities, once it is produced it appears to exist as a thing independent of any social relationships. The social processes that produce it are hidden once the production is accomplished. In truth, social space is a nontransparent process that appears transparent because it is concealed through the social production process. In particular, the opaque and nontransparent quality of social space is conjured away (is hidden) through homogeneity—which is a representation that emerges from the tension between concrete and abstract space. These same social processes also conspire, through visual representation, to make abstract space appear empty and therefore nondialectical. Ironically, homogeneous social space is a social process formulated in such a way that it creates the appearance that space is independent of any social processes. This appearance is then supported and maintained through the tropes of vision and transparency.

#### TRANSPARENCY AND URBAN POLITICS

For Lefebvre, the appearance of stability and clarity that surrounds transparent space is pure mirage. In fact, it is worse than a mirage; it is propaganda, because it not only fools the viewer, it also persuades the viewer that social life is process-free. For Lefebvre, this message is deeply disempowering. If individuals cannot realize that social life presents them with opportunities for change, then they will never know how to look for those opportunities and actually make those changes. In *Lefebvre, Love, and Struggle*, Rob Shields argues that the overriding theoretical concern for Lefebvre was alienation (Shields, 1999). Throughout his life, Lefebvre struggled to understand how, under the conditions of industrial society, individuals came to be alienated from themselves. They spent their days at monotonous jobs, and then returned home to pursue monotonous forms of recreation. Instead of realizing their humanity through creativity, art, beauty, relationships, or love, individuals expressed themselves primarily through consumption. Thus the constraints of industrial capitalism came to dominate their lives both through their labor and through their personal lives, and Lefebvre felt this reduced people from holistic individuals to flattened, one-dimensional drones. He was saddened by this situation and he spent his life trying to understand why people had their humanity stripped from them, and why they did not try to recapture it.

In *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre begins with the assumption that social space shares in the unity of social life, but the alienation that governs industrial capitalism governs social space as well, and makes it appear flat and one-dimensional. Within this abstract space, Lefebvre says, everything *appears* open and clear, and it seems as if everything can be said, but, in fact, “there is very little to be said—and even less to be ‘lived,’ for lived experience is crushed” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 51). For Lefebvre, the reductive terms of the spatial discourse that characterized Modernity’s social space—vision and transparency—limit the conversation of space to the rational certainties of a world of objects. In this limited form, space contains no terms rich enough to convey the full relations of human lives and lived experience, so these relations remained un-conveyed, or “crushed.” Because humanity is untranslatable in the rational, visual language of abstract

space, it is as if it simply does not exist. Human needs, such as the family, the body, reproduction, and relationships, are pulled apart, and people are turned into objects, unable to recognize their own unity, diversity, or uniqueness.

In addition to these human consequences, for Lefebvre, transparent abstract space also brings with it profound political consequences. Abstract space performs a social act that separates the process of space from the “thing” of space, and then conceals this act; in doing so, it reduces the rich, process-filled language of social space to the flattened terms of things. For Lefebvre, such a process is a “*reductive and partial practice* ... the politics of space sees space only as a homogeneous and empty medium, in which we house objects, people, machines, industrial facilities, flows, and networks” (Lefebvre, 2003, p. 48).

Abstract space, then, works to obscure the social processes between individuals—the economic processes, the political processes, the labor processes, the processes of social inequality. In fostering this unhitching of the individual from the fully dialectical processes of social space, abstract space is instrumental in closing off true social and political discourse, because it limits the terms of such a discourse. This limitation, for Lefebvre, is tantamount to violence because it rips the possibility of process away from spatial individuals, leaving them to try to build a political dialogue from nothing but isolated objects; such a dialogue will always, of necessity, be stilted, noncritical, and flat. For Lefebvre, the full range of social options can never be conveyed through the terms of such a reductive space, because it constrains and isolates individuals while purporting to join and liberate them in a free social space. Only by reconnecting what abstract space breaks apart can individuals restore the richness of social discourse, and find the potential for an emancipatory spatial politics. Thus, for Lefebvre, the spatial epistemology that is supported through transparency is profoundly apolitical, because it acts to blind individuals to the true opportunities available to them for change. Transparency, then, helps to convince us that things are “exactly as they look” (Stewart, 1995, p. 614), that no change is possible, and in this way it binds us to an alienating and restrictive view of urban space.

#### ENVISIONING SPACE IN URBAN POLICY

Within urban geography, Lefebvre’s arguments about socially produced space have led to significant changes in the way that urban space is understood, studied, and acted upon. Such a dynamic notion of urban space, however, has not always carried over into the more applied arenas of urban study, such as urban policy. Within urban policy, theorizations of urban space have generally taken a back seat to more immediate issues, such as debates about poverty, housing, and the proper role for government assistance in urban settings (Mohl, 1993; Hays, 1995; Euchner and McGovern, 2003). This kind of governmental action, however, both depends on, and influences, the broader societal understandings of what urban space is, and how it is connected to, and constitutive of, inner-city social communities. Lefebvre might call this a “representation of space”; through its deployment, urban policymakers become key players in dictating the spatial thinking that first interprets inner-city places, and then prescribes solutions for the accompanying issues and problems. If these key spatial thinkers rely on a limiting, transparent spatial epistemology, their recommendations and remedies may also be limited by the constraints of such an epistemology. To illustrate this, we focus our attention on certain

features of U.S. policy toward public housing. Although the provision of public housing has never been the singular aim of U.S. urban policy, it has been an important one, and it illustrates some of the key features of contemporary neoliberal spatial thinking. Public housing therefore provides a useful context for examining the role of transparency.

At the time Lefebvre wrote *The Production of Space*, the main thrust of federal urban policy, under the guise of Urban Renewal, had been inner-city demolition (Mohl, 1993). Beginning in the 1950s, troubled inner-city areas were presumed to be best served by a program that cleared out older houses and commercial structures, and replaced them with new plazas, public buildings, and commercial districts. Under Urban Renewal, urban space was primarily an economic landscape, and cities were presumed to be best served by policies that bulldozed “blighted” houses and businesses, and replaced them with newer, more valuable or efficient structures—structures that would also return greater property tax receipts to the municipality. The social value of neighborhoods, families, and communities, and their longstanding sociospatial connections to these places, did not enter into the economic calculus of the redevelopment agencies that developed and carried out urban renewal demolitions.

Many of the residents displaced by this process ended up in large-scale public housing communities, characterized by a modernist design ethic. Drawing on the influential theories of architects like Le Corbusier and Gropius, urban designers had advocated inner-city, high-rise “projects” that were deemed to exemplify the rational and efficient use of both urban space and financial resources (Smith, 2006). For Lefebvre, this kind of esthetic represented the prototypical example of abstract space. Modernist architecture, he argued, was “an authoritarian and brutal spatial practice” that produced the “homogeneous and monotonous architecture of the state” (Lefebvre, 1991, pp. 126, 308).

Lefebvre was certainly not alone in his criticism. U.S. urban policymakers began to express doubts in the 1970s, and by the late 1980s there was a growing consensus that the traditional approach to public housing was a failure. Public housing projects were beset with a host of seemingly intractable problems, as described by former HUD Secretary Andrew Cuomo:

When we’ve made mistakes in public housing, we made them big. You have many projects that in my opinion now exist throughout the country which were flawed from inception. They were flawed by design, and they were condemned almost at the point of construction. They were too dense, they were too isolated, they were too concentrated, they were without support, they were without integration, they were without jobs, they were without opportunity. Literally those great buildings with the caged hallways in concrete bunkers. They were a mistake. In many cases the best thing we can do is literally blow them up and start over. (Cuomo, 1997, p. 43)

Commentators at the time expressed particular unease with the perceived lack of stability in, and control over, the spaces and activities of public housing developments. HUD policy documents focused attention on the “array of economic and social problems that destabilize families and neighborhoods” (HUD, 1996b, p. 5), and HUD Secretary Henry Cisneros asserted that “many neighborhoods that were clinging to the edge of stability a decade ago have since slid into chaos” (Cisneros, 1995c, p. 23).

From this diagnosis, congressional leaders and HUD administrators set about developing an alternative model of public housing, one that would replace the modernist spaces of large-scale housing developments. This new model, according to President Clinton, “reflect[ed] an emerging consensus in the decades-long debate over urban policy” (Clinton, 1995, p. 1). In Lefebvrian terms, the goal was nothing less than a new representation of space, capable of bringing about an “end to public housing as we know it” (Zhang and Weismann, 2006). The new vision, “grounded in a clear-eyed understanding of the urban processes that had destabilized distressed public housing” (HUD, 1999, p. 5), took form during the mid-1990s. By this time, urban policy was heavily influenced by the prevailing ideas and strategies of neoliberalism, and this shaped the new spatial strategy of public housing to a significant degree.

The new model of public housing was eventually codified in HUD’s HOPE VI program (Housing Opportunities for People Everywhere), initially implemented in 1992 as a demonstration project, and later expanded. The program provided funds to rehabilitate (or where necessary, demolish and rebuild) the roughly 86,000 public housing units across the country that were designated as the most “severely distressed” (Popkin et al., 2004). To date, HUD has awarded nearly 250 revitalization grants totaling more than \$6 billion. During its first decade, annual HOPE VI appropriations averaged around \$500 million, although since 2004 this amount has been decreased to roughly \$100 million annually.

The HOPE VI-funded redevelopments differed in a number of significant respects from those they replaced. First, HOPE VI projects rejected “the conventional blank boxes of public housing architecture” (HUD, 1999, p. 7) and instead applied the principles of New Urbanist approaches to architecture and design. These principles seek to recreate a sense of community through pedestrian-friendly neighborhoods and design codes aimed at fostering settings for interaction and neighborliness. HUD has also promoted the concept of “defensible space,” which replaces large common areas with smaller spatial configurations, in which “building entrances and outside spaces are used and controlled by only one household (i.e., they are ‘private’)” (Cisneros, 1995a, p. 6). Proponents of this concept argue that defensible space “gives people a new respect for the work and territory of others by giving them a territory of their own to prize and to wish to see respected” (Newman, 1996, p. 2).

As these statements suggest, however, the ideals of HOPE VI redevelopment went well beyond the transformation of physical space. “Even in its relatively modest beginnings,” HUD noted, “[HOPE VI] recognized the importance of transforming the lives of public housing residents as well as their physical environment” (HUD, 1999, p. 4). In line with both Republican congressional rhetoric and neoliberal sensibilities, “transforming lives” primarily meant trying to enforce greater self-discipline and personal responsibility among public housing tenants. HUD policymakers lamented the “negative social dynamic of public housing” (USDHUD, 1996b, p. 3), and pointed to “today’s developments where no one works, where nearly every family is headed by a female single parent” (Cisneros, 1996, p. 3). In other words, it was necessary to transform the spatial practices of public housing tenants as much as the spatial form of the housing itself. This represented an important shift, not only in urban policy but also in the epistemology of urban space that served as its unacknowledged support. We might describe this as a shift from the management of particular kinds of spaces to the governing of particular kinds of

individuals; a move from homogeneous abstract space to the nondialectical, individuated urban subject.

This approach marked a decisive turn in a longstanding policy debate about the relative merits of focusing on what Louis Winnick once described as “place prosperity vs. people prosperity” (Bolton, 1992). As HUD Secretary Cisneros put it,

Congress established HUD 30 years ago to focus national efforts on building, preserving, and improving places. Much debate has occurred since then ... as to whether housing assistance should be directed to people or to places. We say ... that housing assistance should go to people. (Cisneros, 1995b, p. 149)

Not just any people, however. In the wake of federal welfare reform, Congress passed the Quality Housing and Work Responsibility Act of 1998, which sought to “impose tough expectations that hold public housing residents responsible for their actions” (HUD, 1996b, p. 3). Among other things, the Act allowed public housing authorities to impose strict requirements on public housing tenants, and made it easier to evict them for noncompliance, drug use, or crime (the “One Strike and You’re Out” policy). “Public housing,” HUD concluded, “should be made available only to responsible individuals” (Cisneros, 1996, p. 13).

Much of the blame for the current state of affairs was placed on the fact that traditional public housing developments had concentrated and spatially isolated low-income and minority populations in poor neighborhoods. This, the thinking went, led to a repeat cycle of poverty because poor tenants lacked sufficient positive role models to motivate them to work their way out of poverty (Greenbaum et al., 2008). “Misguided policies,” the reformers insisted, “have robbed public housing communities of the working families whose example is so crucial” (HUD, 1996b, p. 5).

The watchword for redressing this state of affairs became “deconcentration,” which was to be achieved by replacing public housing projects with portable Section 8 vouchers (Goetz, 2003; Greenbaum et al., 2008). This new regime of vouchers and individual choice was proclaimed by some to herald a new “geography of opportunity” for residents of public housing (Rosenbaum, 1995). In a similar vein, HOPE VI projects were explicitly designed to be mixed-income developments, with market-rate units mixed in and among the assisted units. This, it was believed, would reduce the stigma attached to public housing and also end the “isolation of public housing families from the world of work and the habit of responsibility” (HUD, 1999, p. 5). The mixed-income model was facilitated by the elimination of the traditional one-for-one replacement requirement that normally accompanied public housing demolition.

In many cities, these new mixed-use developments, often employing a popular town-home architectural style, have become centerpieces of larger efforts aimed at urban regeneration and gentrification, which often include significant private-sector involvement. As the Urban Land Institute notes, “HOPE VI has pioneered new forms of financing that mix layers of public and private funds and new, innovative partnerships between the private sector and public agencies” (Urban Land Institute, 2002, p. 1). Thus the HOPE VI Program has become viewed by its proponents not only as a new form of public housing, but also as a vehicle for inner-city revitalization (Popkin et al., 2004).

## THE CHARLOTTE CASE STUDY

The city of Charlotte provides a useful example of some of the trends we have outlined. Since 1994, the Charlotte Housing Authority (CHA) has received five HOPE VI grants totaling \$122 million. These grants have been used to demolish five distressed housing communities, and replace them with mixed-income housing developments and private housing vouchers (Woodyard, 2007). Charlotte's approach bears the twin hallmarks of neoliberal urban policy: a concerted attempt to secure the participation of the private sector, and a significant focus on individual conduct and responsibility.

First, Charlotte's model exemplifies the entrepreneurial bent of recent neoliberal urban policy. As the CHA President has put it, "to the extent that cities are a collection of commercial economies that thrive or suffer as a result of market forces and government intervention, HOPE VI can be seen as an attempt to grow and stabilize America's economy" (Woodyard, 2007, p. 116). The CHA was able to attract significant private investment, particularly from Bank of America, which has been heavily involved in the gentrification of downtown Charlotte since the 1970s (Smith and Graves, 2005). The Bank was instrumental in developing Charlotte's first major HOPE VI project, the demolition of Earle Village and its replacement by the mixed-income neighborhood of First Ward Place. In 1994, First Ward Place was recognized with an Award of Excellence from the Urban Land Institute, which praised "the project's ... ability to attract private capital and create value throughout Charlotte's First Ward, the Garden District, and beyond" (Urban Land Institute, 2004). "Earle Village was an extremely distressed public housing project," wrote Bank of America senior vice president Nancy Crown in her application, "and its redevelopment into an integrated, mixed-use community has been far reaching and catalytic, resulting in the rebirth of an entire quadrant of Charlotte's center city ... this is public/private partnership at its best" (Smith, 2004, p. 1D).

As we have seen, however, the neoliberal vision of urban redevelopment extends beyond the mere transformation of space to encompass a re-imagining of urban citizenship. Here too, Charlotte is an exemplary case. Early on, the head of the CHA, Harrison Shannon, Jr., stressed that public housing should not be a "safe harbor" for those who "lack a work ethic" (quoted in Husock, 2000, p. 58), and so the CHA imposed strict eligibility requirements for those seeking a unit in the redeveloped projects. Potential tenants were expected to enroll in a local family self-sufficiency program known as the Gateway Program (Rohe and Kleit, 1997). Gateway is one of a series of programs (including Operation Bootstrap and the Family Self-Sufficiency Program) supported by the federal government since the mid-1980s, in an attempt to transition families out of public housing (Kleit and Rohe, 2005). To be eligible for Charlotte's Gateway, residents were required to have, among other things, a GED or high school diploma, full-time employment (for a minimum of one year), and a low debt to income ratio. Residents completing the program also had to commit to leaving public housing within five years. As Bank of America Senior Vice-President Brian Tracey put it, "our goal, and the community's goal, for First Ward Place was to create a strong neighborhood of skilled, employable and economically independent residents" (Tracey, 2003, p. 122).

The responsibility for becoming "employable" however, was placed squarely on the tenants. The strict requirements for participation in self-sufficiency programs have been described by HUD as a "'stick' to balance against the 'carrot' of housing assistance"

(HUD, 1996a). The screening process in Charlotte's Gateway Program were stricter than most, and were hailed by one conservative commentator as "a blueprint for transforming the nature of public housing or even, over the long term, phasing it out" (Husock, 2000, p. 52).

Of the 1,266 families residing in the demolished projects, only 22—less than 2%—have participated in the Gateway Program. According to the *Charlotte Observer* "the development team says it regrets [that] so few ... families chose to meet the requirements for returning" (Leonnig, 1999, p. 1A). A HUD Urban Policy Brief puts it in somewhat different terms: "the experience of Gateway points out one of the most difficult problems facing urban PHAs that screen applicants this way: it can be difficult to locate people who are both interested in and qualified for the program" (HUD, 1996a, n.p.). For many former tenants, in other words, Charlotte's HOPE VI has been little more than a demolition program. Nearly half of the former residents have been simply shuffled into alternative public housing communities. Another quarter of the former tenants have been scattered across the city using Section 8 housing vouchers which, the CHA notes proudly, "has aided in deconcentrating low income residents from a concentrated area" (Woodyard, 2007, p. 118).

Meanwhile, First Ward has become one of the trendier downtown Charlotte neighborhoods. The market price for a typical two-bedroom condominium was above \$200,000 prior to the economic downturn that began in 2008, and one downtown realtor notes that "the future of First Ward appears certain to have a strong flavor of artistic and cultural venues" (Center City Realty, n.d.). Current plans call for a new office building, retail development, more than 2000 new residential units, and a new city park ("more of a festival gathering place, without playgrounds or basketball courts" [Spanberg, 2008]). Small wonder, then, that Charlotte's HOPE VI program was singled out for early praise by Secretary Cisneros: "the Earle Village transformation will convert a blighted public housing project into an asset to its community," he wrote, "even as it expands residents' opportunities for mobility and choice. We can have Earle Villages all over the United States in a few years" (Cisneros, 1995b, p. 149).

#### THE URBAN EPISTEMOLOGY OF HOPE VI

Charlotte's HOPE VI redevelopment exemplifies two of the most prominent recent trends in neoliberal urban governance: the entrepreneurial push for public-private partnerships, urban gentrification, and market rationality; and the cultivation of individual choice, self-sufficiency, and responsible citizenship. The first of these strategies operates on space; the second targets the individual. Both, we would argue, rely upon a nondialectical and reductive urban epistemology.

In the first instance, HOPE VI can be viewed as a spatial strategy that attempts to inscribe clarity and coherence into what was previously a complex and multidimensional urban environment. As one HUD document put it, "the demolitions signal the birth of a new approach to public housing—a fundamental shift to smaller, more human-scale communities that offer a stable starting point from which poor families can begin to move back into the economic and social mainstream" (HUD, 1996b, p. 9). This "stable starting point" is to be effected in part by new design codes and gentrified, mixed-income inner-city developments. As Bennett and Reed (1999, p. 192) argue, HOPE VI designs proceed

on “the presumption that the physical environment is determinative of social relations. In reality, the New Urbanism represents the beautiful box into which ... [a housing authority] seeks to pack a contested neighborhood” (Bennett and Reed, 1999, p. 192).

For Lefebvre, this “box” of abstract space was precisely a means of creating the appearance of order, HUD’s stable starting point for the development of new social relations:

Architects and city-planners [have] offered—as an *ideology in action*—an empty space, a space that is primordial, a container ready to receive fragmentary contents, a *neutral* medium into which disjointed things, people, and habitats might be introduced. In other words: incoherence under the banner of coherence, a cohesion grounded in scission and disjointedness, fluctuation and the ephemeral masquerading as stability, conflictual relationships embedded within an appearance of logic and operating effectively in combination. (Lefebvre, 1991, pp. 308–309)

The spatial strategy of HOPE VI can in this manner be viewed as yet another attempt to create homogeneous urban space.

As Lefebvre would be at pains to point out, however, this appearance of stability is an effect of transparency, and of a nondialectical spatial epistemology that flattens the rich complexity of social life. The result is a new version of Lefebvre’s illusion of transparency, one in which the production of a now neoliberalized abstract space is presumed to provide the context for new middle-class values and more disciplined and responsible spatial practices. Those urban residents who fail to measure up to HOPE VI’s new festival spaces are “deconcentrated” to new neighborhoods, where individuated subjects now uncontaminated by their prior social relations will take on the rational and responsible values of their suburban neighbors. “Comprehension is thus supposed,” as Lefebvre had it, “without meeting any insurmountable obstacles” (1991, p. 28).

Under neoliberalism, in other words, the envisioning of urban space is coincident with a reductive and nondialectical framing of the urban subject. Through the discourses of responsibility, housing choice, deconcentration, and the like, the HOPE VI model abstracts the neoliberal subject from the broader social and economic processes that influence the lives of urban residents—social inequality, racial discrimination, an increasingly casualized labor market, and a punitive criminal justice system. That urban policymakers often fail to appreciate the deep social and spatial connections between such processes is described by Lefebvre as a kind of blindness. “Blindness,” he writes, “consists in the fact that we cannot see the shape of the urban, the vectors and tensions inherent in this field, its logic and dialectic movement, its immanent demands. We see only things, operations, objects” (Lefebvre, 2003, p. 40).

As we have suggested, this kind of nondialectical vision is deeply disempowering, because it divorces social life from the messy, everyday realm of spatial practice and political negotiation—in short, from what Lefebvre called the “users” of social space. In contrast to “the abstract space of the experts,” suggested Lefebvre, “the user’s space is *lived* ... [it is] a space of ‘subjects’ rather than of calculations” (1991, p. 362). Lefebvre was concerned that the users of space are all too often marginalized, voiceless. “The silence of the ‘users’ is indeed a problem,” he wrote, “and it is the *entire* problem” (1991, p. 364). It would certainly appear to be a problem in many HOPE VI redevelopment

projects, including those in Charlotte, in which the displaced users of public housing are offered little opportunity to return.

A HUD secretary once characterized the typical HOPE VI community as “a place to nurture and grow the seeds of citizenship” (Cuomo, 1997, p. 278). What was left unsaid is that HOPE VI is fostering a limiting and homogeneous vision of place, and promoting only a very narrow conception of individualized, neoliberal citizenship. For Lefebvre, of course, the production of space and the performance of citizenship were about much more than holding down a job or having good credit. They entailed what he called a *right to the city*, the right of all city dwellers to participate in a collective, democratic process of producing and defining urban space (Purcell, 2002). For Lefebvre, it was this collective spatial practice that he hoped would lead to a new, more democratic urban fabric, one that worked against the abstracting processes of transparency and homogeneity. In our current era of neoliberal urbanization, such a project is more urgently needed than ever.

### CONCLUSION

The neoliberalization of urban policy since the mid-1990s has had a significant influence on the trajectories of urban development and spatial change. The HOPE VI Program represents only a single dimension of this larger shift, but it is one that we feel is worthy of our attention. In examining the spatial implications of HOPE VI, we have tried to make the case that the urban theory of Henri Lefebvre can offer a valuable lens for assessing some of the important dimensions of contemporary urban policy. In particular, Lefebvre’s deconstruction of spatial epistemology highlights the Modern tendency to envision space as homogeneous and nondialectical, devoid of social process or politics. Through the visual-objectivist illusion of transparency, urban policymakers fall prey to a compelling spatial vision, in which ordered and stable space appears to present the possibility of a fresh start, with an absence of social problems.

Following Lefebvre, then, we can view neoliberalism, and its manifestation in HOPE VI, as a particular kind of spatial strategy, one that is part and parcel of Modernity, but which also changes form over time. As Lefebvre put it:

... each new form of state, each new form of political power, introduces its own particular way of partitioning space, its own particular administrative classification of discourses about space and about things and people in space. Each such form commands space, as it were, to serve its purposes; and the fact that space should thus become classificatory makes it possible for a certain type of non-critical thought simply to register the resultant “reality” and accept it at face value. (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 281)

Neoliberalism, we suggest, is just such a form of political power, and it is therefore important to challenge its naturalized, “face-value” epistemology of social practice and urban space.

For advocates of tenants rights and affordable housing, this means fighting for a greater voice for public housing residents in HOPE VI revitalization projects, an elimination of strict eligibility requirements, and a renewed commitment to expand the stock of affordable housing. Provisions of this nature are in fact included in the HOPE VI

Improvement and Reauthorization Act of 2007, which was passed by the U.S. House of Representatives in January 2008 (the bill was never taken up by the Senate).

More conceptually, a critique of a nondialectical epistemology can become a means to direct our attention away from the perceived certainties of urban space, and instead focus on the practices that sustain them. It is a conceptual tool that directs us to look at the absences of spaces, and ask not what are they showing but what are they concealing? Transparent spaces often purport to tell a singular, undistorted story of what space is—stable, clear, filled with undisputed objects. But urban space is a much more complicated picture, with objects and stories open to multiple interpretations and even distortions. By remembering the power of transparency—to reduce, to disconnect, to flatten—we may be more prone to question those objects, those certainties, those singular narratives of cleanliness and clarity. In so doing, we may also be opening space for a renewal of spatial practice and politics, and for a more democratic vision of urban transformation.

#### POSTSCRIPT

Given the potential for a protracted economic crisis, it may be that the neoliberal model will be revised, or even abandoned, over the next few years. We have already witnessed a dramatic re-insertion of government influence in the financial system, and a partial nationalization of a significant portion of the banking sector. What is less clear is the extent to which the current economic turmoil (as of mid-2009) might lead to a new vision of urban space and citizenship. It certainly should.

The reinvention of public housing and urban development around private markets, personal choice, and individual worthiness is a symptom of the narrow reframing of the social that in many ways lies at the heart of the present crisis. The nondialectical and reductive epistemology exemplified by HOPE VI severed the threads of the social through which we cultivated bonds of common interest and solidarity. Rather than view housing as a social good or entitlement, the neoliberal vision redefined it as a reward for responsible citizenship while working to erode any sense of collective responsibility for the widening gaps in income and opportunity. The results were predictable and by now well known: amid a crisis of affordable housing, families facing increasing marginalization and insecurity were pushed by aggressive lenders into risky and unsustainable mortgages. Now, of course, those individual decisions are a collective concern. The real challenge of the present moment is not simply to engineer the most fiscally sound bailout; it is to find the collective will to mend the frayed fabric of our social and spatial relations.

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