

Appropriation in Metro Manila

The relationship between squatting and appropriation

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1 Introduction

Social norms shape our society and how we think, mostly without us reflecting about it. When it comes to space and urbanity, one of the most influential thinkers in the 20th century was the French philosopher Henri Lefebvre. In his book *Production of Space* he dissects the way we think about space in order to see how space is truly created and how it can be changed.

What interests me is what kind of forces that creates a city like Metro Manila, with its tremendously unequal distribution of its wealth. Though the building typology is extremely diverse, ranging from shacks to skyscrapers, can they be created by the same forces? Or is the squatted slums that fill every empty plot in the city something different, a space actually appropriated by people themselves?

Introducing Lefebvre

Henri Lefebvre's theory about space is mainly developed in his book *La production de l'espace* from 1973. He was hardly the first to theorize about space, but perhaps our times most influential intellectual to do it. As David Harvey points

out in his book *Spaces of Global Capitalism*, the term “space” is maybe one of the terms that, alongside “nature” and “culture”, could qualify as one of our languages most complicated words (Harvey 2006:119), which sometimes even makes the intellectual debate confusing. Lefebvre’s contribution is that he recognizes that you can in fact divide space into three parts with dialectical relationships. He calls them physical space, mental space and social space. The physical space is the things around us that we can experience with our senses, where we integrate with materials and objects, the space we can see and touch. This is not the same as how we represent and picture that space, for example via words, diagrams, maps and images, which is rather what Lefebvre called mental space. The social space on the other hand is the space for human interaction, the actual experienced space in which we have to take into account all the feelings, fantasies, emotions etc. that we have all the time, every day. These spaces are not to be separated; in fact they do not have any clear borders between themselves. Lefebvre was of the opinion that if you tried to separate them you are, perhaps unknowingly, serving different ideologies (Merrifield 2006:104). Lefebvre’s analyse shows that space is actively produced and has an organic nature; it is more like a process than something fixed. Harvey underlines when he tries to clarify the term space, that this also makes it inseparable from time (Harvey 2006:126-127).

The terms domination and appropriation are used to describe power relations in different spaces. When a space is dominated, the production of it is controlled by the production forces and governmental institutions that support those. It can for example be dominated through the way our cities are built and in the way our lives are fragmented in time into specific times for work, leisure and sleep. When people on the other hand are taking the production in their own hands, spaces are appropriated. But appropriation is not the same thing as ownership, rather the opposite. The right to ownership is rather a part of the domination as it effectively

excludes people, while appropriated spaces by definition are spaces that allow other to participate and indulge (Lefebvre 1991:165-167).

Lefebvre also use the term “abstract space” to describe the space the ruling class and capitalism is producing to dominate the social space of people’s daily lives. Abstract space is trying to control the people and keep them in line in order not to revolt. The reason people is not rising is, as Merrifield puts it, because it is “a conspiracy of sorts, but it isn’t *just* a conspiracy” (Merrifield 2006:112). It takes the form of a “non-aggression pact”, a consensus between people on how to act in different spaces. It is abstract because its power, rules and prohibitions are exercised through how spaces are being used and by whom. Every action is taking place in space, and since space is created before the action, the one controlling the production of space has a huge advantage controlling what takes action. We are, mostly unknowingly, by ourselves reproducing the abstract space, in the way we behave in our daily lives (Lefebvre 1991:57). But Lefebvre also points out that the very concrete use of state monopolized violence is always in the background of the abstract space, although one of abstract space contradictions “is that between the appearance of security and the constant threat [...] of violence” (Lefebvre 1991:57), Lefebvre writes.

Lefebvre’s theories about space are meant to be tools to analyse the potentials for a different society (Lefebvre 1991:11-16). If we understand how space is produced, then we also can change how it is produced, and in order to change our mode of production, i.e. the capitalist system, you must change space itself and vice versa (Lefebvre 1991:46). But, as Harvey points out, Lefebvre never really explains how the change is going to happen and he is against spatial utopias because of their closed authoritarianism (Harvey 2000:183).

One thing Lefebvre do stress is that it is impossible to go back to any historic, traditional model for a city, even though he wants many of its features back. Neither did he think that the model that was chosen, i.e. “the escape forward, towards

the colossal and amorphous agglomeration” (Lefebvre 1982:136-137), was something to strive for.

2 The urbanization of the developing countries

After the World War II the urban population in the so called developing countries exploded. There are numerous reasons for why it happened just then but one of the most important was the ongoing decolonization process. Colonial authorities had rather successfully prevented the urbanization of the colonies by different regulations, often based on a racist agenda (Davis 2006:51-53).

The new regimes that were established adopted the idea of master planning developed in the West in the inter war period which in the 50s and 60s were implemented in full force. The successful planning of the war effort in many countries gave the governments a mandate for state control over the planning (Mazower 1999:232). The idea of a detailed master plan is arguably a product of modernist thinking; practical and rational as it seems with its features such as traffic separation, zoning and mono-functionality. In the middle of the 60s the critic had become louder and the downsides of the system was evident. As Jenkins, Smith and Wang points out in “Planning and housing in the rapidly urbanizing world”, the system failed to adapt to rapid changes and spontaneous settlements. It was also usually poorly implemented, had problems of underestimating growth at the same time as it was unrealistic in terms of public funds and so on (Jenkins et al. 2007:132-133). New ways of planning was attempted, such as *structure planning* and *action planning* but these approaches had very little impact over the planning in the third world.

In terms of housing the post war period focused on ideas of modern large scale developments, being a part of the industrialization of the developing countries. As the rapid industrialization in most parts failed to materialize, the modern large

scale housing schemes proved to be way too expensive for the government as well for the initial target groups. On top of that that they did not provide the culturally wanted type of spaces (Jenkins et al. 2007:155), which actually was the case in the core countries in the West too. This development was of course not a natural law by any mean. China, Hong Kong and Singapore have in large indeed been successful in their efforts in providing large scale state funded social housing. (Davis 2006:61).

As the master plans of the third world cities failed to be realized for better and worse, the actual situation on the ground created a planning approach called *guided land development*. The concept was that since the infrastructure that was built formed the use of the areas, the planners could organize the area in the normative way they wanted by working more closely to the engineers that actually planned and built the infrastructure. This also created smaller fundable projects whose effects could be evaluated by potential donors. But it lacked the strategic overall approach which made it prone to often lead to fragmentation of the city structure (Jenkins et al. 2007:141).

The housing policies in many of the developing countries changed with the views of the World Bank in the early 70s. Influenced by the anarchist architect John Turners work the World Bank developed a plan for self-help housing and quickly became one of the big actors in housing policy making. As a reaction to the wave of squatting that transformed the cities in the 60s and 70s, Turner argued that the housing users themselves were best suited to decide what they needed in terms of adequate housing. Building the houses themselves piece by piece was also a better use of the resources available. Not to mention the architectural gains in a varied townscape, and housing focused on use-values, not the exchange value on the market (Jenkins et al. 2007:161). Although these ideas seemed hard to argue with at first, Turner and the World Bank program soon had many critics. Evaluations of different projects showed that the money invested seldom was returned as

interest rates as supposed to and the houses themselves were at a remarkably high rate sold to higher income groups as the private market did not even supply housing for these groups. Some critics also opposed the commodification of the housing that was a fundamental part of the programs, transferring new segments of the cities to be part of capitalist economy, with speculation and gentrification as a result. The policy shift also led to an (intended) reduction of investments made by the governments, which in reality meant an increase of the burden of the poor (Jenkins et al. 2007:163-165).

In the 80s neo-liberal ideas had a huge impact on the housing policies. Instead of having different housing projects, the government was supposed to concentrate in providing the best possible framework for the private market to function by itself, encouraging 'entrepreneurship' among the individuals via various programs. Now the root to the problem, i.e. the lack of economic growth, was to be targeted and funds were moved from housing to overall development policies. But the already poorly financed and under dimensioned government agencies could not cope with the simultaneous cuts in funding and demands for sophisticated market surveillance and the needed administrative coordination. Thus the result was not an improved situation of housing for the poor (Jenkins et al. 2007:171-172).

The *urban management* approach in planning was ideologically closely related to the neo-liberal structural adjustment programs (SAP) enforced in most of the developing countries by international economic institutions as IMF and the World Bank. Also here the idea was to make the system more effective by downsizing the government part in the planning process and instead invite private actors who partly funds the project and in return gets the profits made out of it. One obvious outcome was that some of these projects inevitably lead to private monopolies, for example highways, water supply, railroads and electricity, which in turn eradicates the incentives for efficiency predicted by the neo-liberal ideology (Jenkins et al. 2007:144).

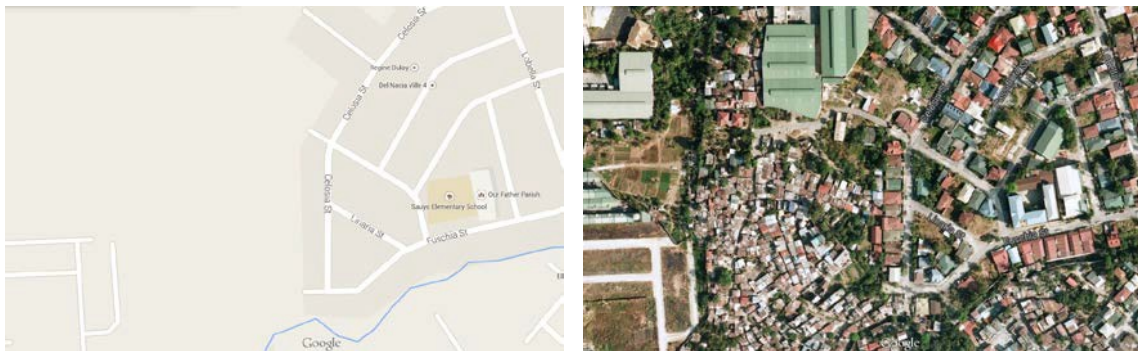
Master planning as an approach was never really challenged in the developing countries, largely because the effects of it were limited due to weak local governments that failed to implement them. The elite also continued to promote the approach essentially because of technocratic traditions and that the real estate interests wanted to profit from the added value of land being formally urbanized through the planning (Jenkins et al. 2007:151). Formal settlements and areas are continually being master planned while informal settlements are shaped by a more ad hoc, low cost planning approach. This leads, according to Jenkins, to “a segregation and fragmentation in the provision of infrastructure and services” (Jenkins et al. 2007:152), which widens the already significantly large income gaps.

3 Squatting and appropriation

Since Lefebvre in 1968 wrote his famous book *Le Droit à la ville* (The Right to the city), calling for a change in urban thinking and politics, we are still, despite an enormous growth in world GDP and a tremendous accumulation of wealth, having trouble fulfilling the needs for the whole urban population. Huge areas in the developing countries have been occupied by squatters when mechanization and political agendas makes it impossible to sustain a life with decent material standard on the countryside (Davis 2006:14-15). These squatted areas were, and sometimes still are, generally lacking basic service such as water, sewage and electricity, as well as institutions for education and health. The squatters had to provide these things for themselves and for that they had to organize.

But is it possible to argue that these kinds of areas are a part of a new urbanism Lefebvre was talking about, an urban movement able to transform the cities into spaces shaped by human needs and desires and not capital forces? We can use Lefebvre’s definition of space to analyze the situation.

The squatters have, by definition, occupied the physical space of their area. They have changed the space by providing access roads and put up structures and organized themselves in order to provide common necessities as water and electricity. They are producing a social space for living, a space where they feel home, where they are able to find livelihood, and where they can live there everyday life. It can be argued that they come very close to actually appropriate the space, but what makes it just *almost* appropriated is of course, according to Lefebvre, the lost battle of the mental space. To be able to appropriate the space, you have to take control of all three types of them since they have a dialectical relationship and cannot be separated. The space of the squat continues to be dominated by the capital through the way it is perceived by outsiders and the inhabitants alike, and the squatters live in constant fear of being evicted. The area is still perceived as somebody else's property, on regular maps it does not even exist. At most the outlines are drawn, like if somebody did not dare to draw it.



In the Philippines the squatters usually organize themselves in *home owner associations*, just like in a formal settlement. This organization is the one planning and organizing the upgrading projects the community funds by themselves, like water drainage and electricity. They are also the ones negotiating with the official owner and the local government about formal upgrading projects. The term 'home owners association' reveals the fact that the squatters themselves are also a part in

the reproduction of social norms and abstract space. The basic fundamental of a home owners association is that the members are home *owners*. The neo-liberal agenda of private home ownership is definitely present even here. And as Lefebvre put it, ownership is the opposite of appropriation as it is excluding by nature, while appropriation is inviting and indulges people in the production of space (Lefebvre 1991:165-167).

The slum upgrading projects initiated by the World Bank in the 70s usually have the commendable aim of securing tenure for the dwellers by dividing the area into formal lots and handing them out or selling them to the home owners. While this seems to be a strategy for easily helping the informal settlers, I would say it also may ruin the process of appropriation. When the area gets formalized, it also becomes a part of the capitalist economy, and exposed to speculation. If the area is favorable situated, prizes tend to rise quickly and a gentrification process is inevitable. Hence the physical space would no longer be produced according to the needs and desires of the people living there, but of planners and speculators trying to maximize profits. The social space of a community where people look after each other, help each other and have common goals of achieving a better quality of life is in risk of being scattered by egoism and the strive for the maximization of property values.

Since the 70s, the world-wide spread of the neo-liberal agenda has led to an increase in the share of our needs that are subject for commodification. Indeed one of the ideas behind the formal slum upgrading is the commodification of housing per se. The distribution of new lots puts the inhabitants right out on the real estate market where the exchange value usually by far outweighs the use-value to the new owner.

One area where they tried to avoid this is in Pasay City in Metro Manila. It is organized by St. Hannibal Empowerment Center (SHEC), a NGO connected to the Catholic Church, whose aim is to improve the situation of the poor and thus to provide decent housing. The outline is rather traditional, the resident takes a loan and buys the unit, but the catch is that you are not allowed to sell it as you please. The buying and selling is controlled via the local community organization, which is headed by clerical representatives from the SHEC. The cost for the



land and the buildings were furthermore heavily subsidized by the church centrally with roughly half the cost. The inhabitants form a strong community founded in the common religiosity of the members and the history of their former housing situation along the flood prone waterways of Metro Manila. The community organizes the different activities that are necessary for it to work such as money collecting and guarding the area, but also social activities for its members.

What can be learned from SHEC in Manila is that although it can be viewed as a form of actual appropriation, it cannot be a way forward for a new urban organization. NGOs are with few exceptions making a very small difference on the larger, structural scale. The NGOs in general and the SHEC in particular are conservative organizations with small interest in changing society's structures or norms (Davis 2006:77-79). At best they change the life of a few individuals in selected areas, at worse they postpone structural change and social development when they "divert and sublimate political rage, and make sure it does not build to a head", Davis writes, himself quoting Arundhati Roy (Davis 2006:79).

4 The Role of Architects

The role of the architect in an appropriation process is limited. Conventionally architects work for domination forces, making the plans and buildings normative and pleasingly effective, ultimately shaping the society physically so that no other everyday life can be imagined. Cities are planned to attract new capital and protect the capital's needs. Being it industrial sites to exploit, new shopping areas to sell their products or attractive housing for the directions and managers, the requests are always promoted and given priority. Social classes are needless to say profitably separated, the highest income areas being the most segregated. Roads and transportation networks are planned to get the workforce as efficient as possible to the workplace, and public space is steadily privatised which comfortably hinders protests and demonstrations to take place where they can be noted.

As an architect it is hard to find a traditional professional role that is stimulating social change, you are more probable of working to holding it back. Of course you push for a more norm breaking architecture can in every project, which could be usable as experiments and showcases for others. But this work can only be complimentary to the overall more important political struggle to change society. The risk of projects being done as a form of merely "social washing" (compare "green washing" in the environmental context) is imminent if the two are confused. That is because you cannot address society's asymmetrical power relation problem without radically changing society away from capitalism. But there are numerous of organizations and parties around the world that are trying to do that every day, and a lot of architects are deeply involved in their work. New special rights must be taken by the people living in the cities to shape their spaces as they please and according to their needs and desires, and the squatters in the developing countries can at least show us how it can partially be done.

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