

ABSTRACT SPACE, SOCIAL SPACE, AND THE REDEVELOPMENT OF PUBLIC HOUSING

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter examines conflicts and struggles between public housing residents and housing authority officials over the redevelopment of public housing in New Orleans. In recent years, the federal government has pressured local housing authorities to adopt policies to promote tenant self-management, mixed-use and mixed-income communities, market-based leasing, scattered site low-income housing, and decentralize management by adopting site-by-site needs analysis and site-based budgets. More important, the federal government has called for the demolition of existing public housing units and converting larger projects into small-scale communities as a vehicle for promoting “self-sufficiency” among tenants (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 1996). Indeed, the centerpiece of all federal housing policy since the 1970s has been retrenchment, privatization, and devolution of authority, responsibility, and funds from the federal government to state governments and, then, to local municipalities (see Gotham & Wright, 2000 for an overview). As Quercia and Galster (1997) have recently argued, public housing authorities are now being forced to change their management practices, the types of tenants they house, the kinds of developments they operate, and to attract private capital

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for the development and operation of public-private public housing venues. Public housing authorities and residents now face a situation of government-imposed redevelopment, demolition, and displacement – a situation exacerbated by uneven urban development, lack of affordable housing, and the general anti-poor sentiment shared by the nation.

In this chapter, we argue that the redevelopment of public housing, in New Orleans and elsewhere, is an attempt by federal and local officials to recommodify space, to enhance its exchange-value through privatization while reducing its use-value for low-income people. We use Henri Lefebvre's (1991) conceptual tools of "abstract space" and "social space" to understand the conflicts between public housing residents and housing authority officials over the redesign of public housing, broad policy shifts involving public housing space, and the role of the state in using space for social control. "Abstract space," according to Lefebvre, is the space of instrumental rationality, fragmentation, homogenization, and, most important, commodification. It is the use of space by capitalists and state actors who are interested in the abstract qualities of space, including size, width, area, location, and profit. In contrast, "social space" is the space of everyday lived experience, an environment as a place to live and to call home. For Lefebvre, the uses proposed by government and business for abstract space, such as planning a new highway or redeveloping older areas of the city, may conflict with existing social space, the way residents think about and use space. This conflict between abstract and social space is a basic one in modern society, according to Lefebvre, and involves spatial practices (spatial patterns of everyday life), representations of space (conceptual models used to direct social practice and land-use planning), and spaces of representation (the lived social relation of users to the built environment) (1991, pp. 33, 38-9).¹ The inseparability of spatial and social relations, interconnectedness of power and space in the city, and the association of space with social stratification and inequality are the central themes of this chapter.

We begin by discussing our theoretical orientation. The recent "spatial turn" in urban sociology has directed attention to the ways in which spatial arrangements operate as constitutive dimensions of social phenomena (Foucault, 1977; Harvey, 1993; 1989; Bourdieu, 1990; Giddens, 1990). Examining topics as diverse as racialized spaces (Gotham, 1998; Haymes, 1995), the social organization of gang activity (Venkatesh, 1997), the spatial attributes of corporate interlocking directorates (Kono, Palmer, Friedland & Zafonte, 1998), the emergence of social movements (Shefner, 2000; Zhao, 1998; Wright, 1997), space and community identity (Gotham, 1999; Swearington & Orellana-Rojas, 2000; Kasinitz, 2000), the militarization of urban space (Davis, 1992), and the political economy of art and entertainment (Scott, 2000), scholars have

delineated why space is important and how the consideration of socio-spatial relations and land-use conflicts can illuminate our understanding of social change. As a component of social organization, spatial patterns and conflicts permeate social relations at the personal, collective, regional, and global levels (Lefebvre, 1979, p. 290; Gottdiener, 1994, pp. 126–127). Although urban scholars disagree about how space influences social relations, they agree by viewing space as a means of production (i.e. land and real estate), an object of consumption, and a geographical site of social action.

In the third section of the paper we discuss our data sources and method, and then introduce our empirical case. Next, in our findings section, we identify the themes, symbols, and motifs used by public housing residents to interpret the causes of the disinvestment and deterioration of their community. We also examine the rhetoric employed by public agencies such as the Housing Authority of New Orleans (HANO) and HUD to legitimate their “definitions of the situation” and discredit alternative views of this redevelopment process. In conclusion, we discuss the policy implications of our analysis. Rather than viewing the problem of urban disinvestment and poverty as only “structural” problems, we encourage scholars to consider them also as “land-use” issues directly connected to urban redevelopment, displacement, and cultural meanings of what the city “should look like” by those who have the power to shape its development.

Many empirical studies illustrate the powerful influence of government agencies and capitalist firms in shaping and transforming urban space (Feagin, & Parker, 1990; Jonas & Wilson, 1999; Logan & Molotch, 1987), the impact of “globalization” (Wilson, D, 1997; Van Kempen & Marcuse, 1997; Smith & Feagin, 1987), and macro-level economic “restructuring,” especially the shift from mass industrial production to high technology and information processing (Sassen, 1990, 2000; Castells 1996, 1997, 1998). Yet little sociological research has investigated how cultural meanings and the interpretive and symbolic aspects of socio-spatial struggles are central to the social construction of urban space. The work of Sharon Zukin and colleagues (1998) on the symbolic economy and visual consumption, Robert Beauregard (1993) on the discourse of urban decline, and Mark Gottdiener (1997) on theming, represent exceptions to this tendency. Yet, overall, questions concerning how spatial arrangements influence social relations and reinforce social inequalities has been a secondary topic in sociological research. In this chapter, we connect power with its spatial context to highlight socio-spatial inequality, concentrated disadvantage, and conflicts over the use of space. Our goal is to supplement structural analysis and open new avenues to exploring the mechanisms that reinforce and perpetuate urban poverty and uneven development.

URBAN SPACE, POWER, AND CONFLICT

The paradigmatic (or 'significant') opposition between exchange and use, between global networks and the determinant locations of production and consumption, is transformed here into a dialectical contradiction, and in the process becomes spatial. 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 all its component parts, and concrete inasmuch as it is socially real and as such localized. This is a space, therefore, that is homogeneous yet at the same time broken into fragments (Henri Lefebvre 1991, pp. 341–342).

This paper builds upon several areas of sociological research and theory. Ecological studies have long been interested in the forces behind the spatial ordering of urban communities, land-use conflicts, and social movement networking (Park, Burgess, & McKenzie, 1925; Warner, 1963; Lofland, 1973; Suttles, 1968, 1972). Moreover, Marxian scholars have devoted considerable attention to specifying the role of different user groups, land developers and real estate interests, and other economic and political elites in continually refashioning land-uses to assure the reproduction of profit and capitalist social relations (Harvey, 1985; Castells 1978; Molotch, 1979). Despite their competing assumptions and modes of analysis, both perspectives have treated spatial relations as expressions of social relations and have downplayed the spatial character of social action and structure. Whereas for urban ecologists urban space is an outcome of a noncontentious process of human adaptation and functional integration, for Marxian scholars it is a consequence of the logic of capital accumulation. In both accounts, urban space becomes a "residual phenomenon" (Logan & Molotch, 1987, p. 100), a container of social action, or a product of social conflict rather than a constitutive component of human agency and identity.

In response to the limitations of urban ecology and Marxian theory, a growing number of contemporary theorists view urban space as a medium of social relations and a material product (e.g. the "built environment") that can affect social relations (Lefebvre, 1991; Gottdiener, 1994, 1993; Gotham, 1998; Milligan, 1998; Friedland & Boden, 1994; Liggett & Perry, 1995; Wright, 1997; 2000; Zukin, 1991). In this critical sociological literature on cities and urban life, social relations exist to the extent that they possess a spatial component: they project themselves into space, becoming inscribed there, and in the process producing that space itself (Gottdiener, 1994; Swearingen & Orellan-Rojas, 2000; Wright, 2000; Gotham, 2000, 1999, 1998). According to Gottdiener (1985, p. 123), "Space cannot be reduced merely to a location or to the social relations of property ownership – it represents a multiplicity of sociomaterial concerns. Space is a physical location, a piece of real estate, and simultaneously

an existential freedom and a mental expression. Space is both the geographical site of action and the social possibility for engaging in action.”

One important outcome of the emphasis upon space has been to challenge the notion of space as merely a container of social action, or a derivative of the logic of capital accumulation. Indeed, the assumption that space is a “reflection” of exogenous social processes is a form of spatial fetishism. In his recent trilogy on the rise of the global network society, Manuel Castells argues that space is “not a reflection of society, it is its expression. In other words: space is not a photocopy of society, it is society” (1996, p. 410). Castells defines space as having a form, function, and social meaning that shapes, and is shaped by, individuals and groups engaged in historically determined social relationships (1978, p. 152). According to Lefebvre, the production of different spaces shapes individual behavior, social action, and group formation. Moreover, the consequent layers of space – individual, local, metropolitan, national, global, and so on – interpenetrate and superimpose on one another, connecting global and local socio-economic processes with the production of fragmented and yet homogeneous spaces. As a “brutal condensation of social relationships,” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 227), space reflects power relations while also being a “site” for contesting relations of domination and subordination.

The emphasis within urban scholarship on delineating the links between space and social structure has led analysts to rethink basic social categories such as time, class, ethnicity and race, and gender through the prism of space (DeSena 2000; Spain, 1993; Urry, 1996; Miranne & Young, 2000; Friedland & Boden, 1994; Castoriadis, 1987; Hanson & Pratt, 1995; Simonsen & Vaiou, 1996; Wekerle, 1980; Stimpson, Dixler, Nelson, & Yatrakis, 1981; Hayden, 1986; Wilson, E., 1992). Urban geographer Doreen Massey (1984) argues in her book, *Spatial Divisions of Labor*, that changing social relations of production or social structure alone does not determine the spatial distribution of labor activities. For Massey, social structures and forms of conflict – including class-based divisions of labor and capital-labor struggles – take on a number of different spatial forms and there is no particular historical ordering in the emergence of new “regimes of accumulation” or “modes of political regulation.” The fact that “space matters,” according to Massey, requires us to consider that “processes take place over space, the facts of distances, closeness, of geographic variation between areas, of individual character and meaning of specific places and repair – all these are essential in the operation of social processes themselves” (1984, p. 14). As a set of productive forces, space plays an active part in the constitution of social reality, a point highlighted, in various ways, by Henri Lefebvre (1991, 1979, p. 290), Manuel Castells (1996, pp. 410–428, 1998, pp. 130–145), David Harvey (1989, p. 204), Edward Soja (1989), and sociologists such as Mark

Gottdiener (1994, pp. 110–156) and Talmadge Wright (2000; 1997). As John Urry (1996, pp. 378–379) puts it, “space makes a clear difference to the degree to which . . . the causal powers of social entities (such as class, the state, capitalist relations, patriarchy) are realized.”

The theoretical work of Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault, and Anthony Giddens represent attempts to refashion social theory to take into account the reflexive relationship between space and social action. Specifically, Bourdieu (1988, pp. 774–777, 1993, p. 45) develops two concepts: “habitus” – the “ensemble of dispositions” that orient action and perception; and “field,” the structured space where social struggles emerge (Bourdieu, 1989; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, pp. 16–19) to highlight and explain the spatial and temporal attributes of agency and structure (for an overview see Camic & Gross, 1998). For Bourdieu, space helps to generate the “habitus” of everyday life for local residents and the factor that can produce place-specific forms of identity, consciousness, and knowledge (Bourdieu, 1989). Similarly, Foucault uses the concept “heterotopias” to refer to those oppositional spaces that form with relations of domination and subordination and serve as the birthing place for political mobilization and revolution. Just as “space is fundamental in any form of communal life; space is fundamental in any exercise of power” (1984, p. 253). Space, Foucault (1977, p. 70) suggests, can no longer be treated as the “the dead, the fixed, the undialectical, the immobile” (quoted in Liggett & Perry, 1995, p. 3).

Giddens (1973, pp. 108–10) draws attention to the importance of spatial segregation as a “proximate factor of class structuration . . . an aspect of consumption rather than production which acts to reinforce separations” (quoted in Logan & Molotch, 1987, p. 19). According to his “structuration” approach, agency and structure are expressed through micro relations, routinized activities, and the “repetitive nature of day-to-day life” (Giddens, 1984, p. xxiv). Structuration means that “structure,” as Giddens puts it, “is always both constraining and enabling” (1984, pp. 25, 163) and embedded in and reproduced through specific rules, procedures, and social relationships in time and space. In Giddens’ terms, agency and structure are a duality that manifest themselves in historical, processual, and dynamic ways. Underscoring the importance of space in Giddens’ work, Saunders (1989, p. 218) asserts that “any sociological analysis of *why* and *how* things happen will need to take account of *where* (and when) they happen” (emphasis in original).

In the rest of the paper, we apply Lefebvre’s insights on the conflict between social space and abstract space to understand the redevelopment of public housing. Specifically, we examine the efforts of residents to resist displacement and demolition of their social space, and housing authority strategies to recommodify public housing, transform it into a privatized space, and make it

subject to exchange-value pressures. Our goal is to specify why space is important and how the consideration of socio-spatial relations can illuminate our understanding of the recent policy shifts involving public housing. First, we investigate how housing authority officials and other local elites use various rhetorical devices, imagery, and motifs to define public housing as an undesirable area of overcrowding and social pathology and convince the public and housing residents of the necessity of redevelopment. The dominant discourse of urban redevelopment views public housing as a symbol of urban “decline” (Beauregard, 1993), a “failure” of federal policy, and a rampant ghetto of crime, drugs, and violence. This vision is a key to understanding the cultural and racial politics that supports the redevelopment effort and, at the same time, discourages alternative views, a point we explore further in the paper. Following Lefebvre’s insights, we ground our analysis of the processes of place construction in material practices but recognize that these processes cannot be separated from representational and symbolic activities. Exploring the relationship between materiality and the symbolic interpretations people assign to space is crucial to understanding the inseparability of power and space in the city.

DATA AND METHOD

Our research is part of a multi-year team ethnography composed of graduate students and sociology faculty working on a number of different research projects within the C. J. Peete (CJP) public housing development in New Orleans (see chapter by Sams-Abiodun & Devine for an overview). The three authors of this ethnographic study use long-term field observations of daily life in the housing development, including field notes from numerous public meetings, and informal and semi-structured interviews with housing authority officials and residents from September 1, 1998 through August 31, 2000. The third author took on the role of primary data gatherer and field researcher while the first and second authors monitored and directed the activities of the field researcher. Sociology faculty and graduate student field researchers shared data collection strategies, data, and analyses while working on different agendas, questions, and issues within public housing.

We divided our ethnographic research and data collection into two major phases. During the first phase, from August 1998 through May 1999, our overall research strategy was to “hang out” with residents, spending time with them in varied settings (at their place of residence, at the community center, in surrounding neighborhood stores). The basic task was to acquire an appreciation for the nature of life in public housing and the ways in which residents managed

project life both experientially and cognitively. The field researcher followed the residents she encountered through their daily routines and listened not only to what they told her but also to what they told one another. She asked questions and probed from time to time and recorded her observations and conversational dialogues in a detailed field narrative.

In the second phase, starting in May 1999, the field researcher began to supplement her field observations with semi-structured interviews. These respondents included ten African-American females ranging in age from thirty-two to seventy-eight who have lived in CJP for ten years or more. She gathered some of these interviews through a snowball sample while others were with residents who worked or volunteered within the CJP office. In August 1999, the field researcher expanded her interview sample to include six housing authority officials, including the on-site redevelopment coordinator, the assistant director of modernization, the director of management, the home ownership specialist, the development manager, and program coordinator.

Finally, in December 1999, the field researcher conducted interviews with six persons working for the Tulane-Xavier Campus Affiliates Program (CAP) at CJP. Established in 1996, CAP is a collaboration between Tulane and Xavier universities, HANO, and HUD that seeks to address the problems of poverty in public housing, and improve the living conditions and economic social well-being of residents in CJP. HUD helped establish CAP as part of the agreement under which Tulane University became the executive monitor over HANO (Shefner & Cobb, 2000). The field researcher interviewed CAP's office manager, the social work supervisor, three full-time social workers, and the "relocation liaison." The purpose of these interviews was to uncover information about the status of the redevelopment, CAP's role in this process, and finally, identify the concerns CAP staff had regarding the effects of the redevelopment on residents. We use pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality of all interviewees quoted in the paper.

In recent years, urban scholars have attempted to integrate structural analyses of poverty with ethnographic accounts of the everyday life of the poor using multiple data sources and by triangulating methods. This integrative framework has emerged as a result of criticisms of "structural" explanations that ignore the voices of the poor themselves (Jarrett, 1994), and ethnographic reports that often suppress the mention of structural features in understanding the conditions of poverty and inequality. Attempts to integrate ethnographic analyses with structural explanations are evident in the work by David Wagner (1993), Talmadge Wright (1997) and David Snow and Leon Anderson (1993) on homelessness, Jon Shefner (1999) on Mexican community organizations, Philippe Bourgois (1996) on crack dealers and David Wilson (1993) on inner

city disinvestment. In this paper, we integrate our ethnographic analysis with larger structural concerns of macroeconomic change, transformations in federal housing programs, and recent trends in urban redevelopment. Structural accounts argue the poor are unable to overcome poverty, resist disinvestment, and mobilize to fight displacement because of intractable “barriers” they face (Wilson, 1987, 1996; Massey & Denton, 1993). These barriers include institutional discrimination; social marginalization and lack of access to quality education, health care, and employment opportunities; political exclusion from the policy-making and policy-formulation process; denial of political representation through electoral channels, and so on. We contend that this structural account has neglected a key issue – the interconnectedness of power and space – in attempts to explain the causes and consequences of urban poverty and disinvestment. In its explicit appreciation of space, our integrative framework supplements structural explanations by investigating how spatial arrangements reinforce social inequalities.

ABSTRACT SPACE AND “EXCLUSIVE” REDEVELOPMENT

In connections with the city and its extensions (outskirts, suburbs), one occasionally hears talk of a ‘pathology of space,’ of ‘ailing neighborhoods,’ and so on. This kind of phraseology makes it easy for people who use it – architects, urbanists, or planners – to suggest the idea that they are, in effect, ‘doctors of space’. This is to promote the spread of some particularly mystifying notions, and especially the idea that the modern city is a product not of the capitalist or neo-capitalist system but rather some putative ‘sickness’ of society. Such formulations serve to divert attention from the criticism of space and to replace critical analysis by schemata that are at once not very rational and very reactionary (Henri Lefebvre. 1991, p. 99).

In recent years, housing authorities around the country have begun to demolish units, convert existing units to mixed income occupancy, and privatize substantial portions of their public housing stock under the Urban Revitalization Demonstration Program, or HOPE VI. Currently, CJP is undergoing a massive \$90.7 million “revitalization program” aimed at razing 881 units, constructing ninety-four senior housing units, and renovating 526 rental units and 150 for-sale properties in the adjacent community outside the CJP development. HOPE VI program goals for distressed public housing in New Orleans include: (1) changing the shape of public housing, through selective demolition, dedensifying sites, and creating safe and secure housing developments; (2) lessening the isolation of residents, creating mixed-income communities, and integrating public housing sites into surrounding neighborhoods; (3) establishing positive incentives for residents’ self-sufficiency. The rhetoric employed here

casts revitalization as “innovative” and “trend-setting” and its supposed effect is to transform a deteriorating and poorly managed public housing project into a vibrant living space that reflects the diversity and cultural vitality of New Orleans (Housing Authority of New Orleans, 1998, 2000). The multimillion dollar redevelopment effort attempts to remedy the problems of public housing space in a holistic fashion, to change the very structure – physical, social, and economic – of public housing.

On the national level, a recent series of reports from HUD maintains that HOPE VI public housing revitalization is reducing isolation by providing opportunities for employment and education and engaging residents in the life and prospects of the community (Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), 2000, 1999, 1996). The evidence from New Orleans suggests, however, that the revitalization process is generating substantial conflict between CJP residents and HANO over when demolition and redevelopment will be completed, who will be forced to move, how HANO will reimburse residents for the cost of relocation, and where residents will live once demolition and conversion to mixed income takes place. As we see it, rather than remedying the social inequalities and problems the poor face, the redevelopment of public housing reinforces such inequalities by being “exclusive” rather than “inclusive” in its design and intent. In the case of C. J. Peete, HANO has designed urban redevelopment to “exclude” the poor, from both the redevelopment process itself and from living in the renovated complex once it is complete.

Indeed, the very policy defined by the HOPE VI program in CJP is exclusive. HANO documents count 1403 resident units in the housing development, 881 of which the agency has scheduled for demolition and 517 for conversion to rental units. In addition, HANO will build 128 “for-sale” units, and a private developer will construct 94 units. Following the policy of creating a mixed-income community, only 40% of the 517 rental units will be available for “extremely” low income households, and an additional 35% of these units will be reserved for low-income households. This division of housing resources does not match the needs of the immediate community, where the majority of residents live below the poverty line, and more than 40% are unemployed (see chapter from Devine & Sams-Abiodun). According to HANO’s own figures, they will reduce the number of units available for the existing residents within the housing development from 1088 to 482 (Brumley 2000). The policy, in effect, legitimizes exclusion.

As of November 2000, the housing authority had demolished several buildings within CJP, rehabilitated others, and allowed others to stand vacant and fall into disrepair. In many of our conversations and interviews, residents repeatedly condemn the housing authority for being insensitive to their concerns, accuse officials of disseminating inaccurate and conflicting information, and charge that

the housing authority is refusing to work with them to find affordable housing. As a number of residents told us:

Sadie (age 53): I don't think HANO is being straight up with everybody. You know, one time they'll tell you one thing then when you look again they're telling you something different. And at each meeting something different comes up. The first contractors did some set of details and the second contractor come in with something altogether different and turn it around now so, you really don't know where you stand. All you know is that you got to get out.

Tangie (age 44): All the top guys, they're not being honest because they are telling the people 'hey, why don't you go to another development and if you decide you don't like it you can come back here in C. J. Peete.' You can't. How in the world can these people come back in C. J. Peete when you have so many units now and it's going to be downsized to four hundred and something?

Gillian (age 32): Well my opinion is that they're moving all these people and they don't have nowhere to put them – first of all . . . They don't give them all the information that they really need to tell them about, you know you have to pay the water, lights in some houses, plus your phone bill. The other thing I think they're lying about when they say they're going to bring them back. They're not going to bring those people back. None of them, not even the older people.

As these excerpts suggest, residents believe that the housing authority is being dishonest and that the objective of the redevelopment effort is to displace them. Conflicting information about how much low-income housing will be available after the revitalization is completed exacerbates this fear of displacement. In other conversations, some residents doubt that revitalization will actually occur because of the time lag between information given and action taken by HANO and the private revitalization firm. For some, the fact that the housing authority undertook some demolition in 1997 and then left the land vacant fuels resident skepticism. Neither have CJP families been forced to move in anticipation of further construction. The private developer's intentions to demolish all the buildings on one side the development has yet to be fulfilled due to many delays in signing the contract with the housing authority. HANO's expressed commitment to offer 90-day notification of relocation contrasts with housing authority employee interviews, who suggest HANO will not forcibly remove residents. The many extensions granted to residents similarly creates ambiguity over the redevelopment schedule and further reinforces resident uncertainty and doubt over the future of the project (Brumley, 2000).

Moreover, HANO's policy of giving residents relocation money well in advance of their move has also caused much discontent and frustration, due to the realistic fear that the money will be spent before the move. Housing Authority representatives have alerted residents that they will receive only one check and if they spend it before their move they will not receive anymore

money when it is time to move. This policy has come under attack by residents who charge that HANO is erecting barriers to successful relocation and is unsympathetic to their housing needs. According to the third author's field notes of a conversation she had with one resident:

I then asked her what she thought about the revitalization in general. She said that she was particularly concerned about the elderly. "They don't want to leave because they feel safe and secure here. How can you tell a 64 year old woman that she has to relocate." She then went on to say that it doesn't make sense how the housing authority is handling the redevelopment. She says that HANO has already started handing out Section 8 vouchers. She raises her voice and argues that HANO or UNIDEV (the private firm in charge of redevelopment) need to give classes on Section 8. "You don't give vouchers to clients without explaining and without training. It won't work."

I then replied that I thought at the town meeting in December 1998 that HANO announced they were going to have workshops and that in order to get your certificate you must complete the training. She shook her head and said they had already started giving them out. "What are they planning on doing? Building a homeless shelter? You know not everyone is gonna get a job. It just makes no sense" (field notes 1/25/99).

Most Housing Authority officials around the nation assume that public housing residents are dissatisfied (or that they should be) with their living arrangements, and that most would be interested in leaving public housing, or would enthusiastically support redevelopment (Vale, 1997). Yet no one has confirmed this view using systematic surveys or in-depth ethnographic research. More often than not, press accounts and conservative poverty researchers have conveyed empirically unsubstantiated views that totalize public housing residents by emphasizing the most extreme and pathological dimensions of life in public housing environments – e.g. violence, drugs, joblessness, hopelessness, and despair. From the perspective of the housing authority, the relocation of residents and redevelopment of public housing is a solution to the problems of poverty and deterioration. Thus, the challenge is to recommodify public housing, to create an economic mix of residents, and redesign projects so that renovated area attracts new residents. The cost of this policy, however, is the exclusion of large numbers of needy people. Demolishing units (without a one-to-one replacement) and reconfiguring public housing for mixed-income occupancy eschews responsibility for housing the traditional clientele of public housing, those who cannot afford private market housing.

According to housing authority officials, if there is a problem in the relocation policy and process, that problem is with the residents themselves. For example, one HANO official we interviewed maintains that the "residents need a new 'mind-set' in order to get through this process easily" (Interview with Mark Burton). Another HANO official defended the redevelopment process as a way to achieve "a mix of different folks both socially and economically" in order

to repair the “incredible dysfunctional community” currently in place. That official further stigmatized public housing, calling the developments “a microcosm of every social and economic problem at an exacerbated high [level].” When pressed about the redevelopment process, this same official stressed he would advocate no changes, saying “more or less, it works. It is strictly business redeveloping a site – it is not about people, it is about business.”

According to Lefebvre (1976, p. 28), the domination of abstract space does not result from some autonomous logic of capital but emanates from socio-spatial strategies employed by powerful groups and actors – socio-spatial strategies that shape public views, images, and understandings of particular groups of people and spaces. One strategy used by powerful land-use actors and organized interests to commodify space is to assign certain negative imagery, metaphors, and symbols to that space thereby stigmatizing inhabitants, their culture, social relations, and so on. In New Orleans, city leaders view public housing as undesirable areas of overcrowding and social pathology, as “obstacles to regeneration,” according to Cook and Lauria (1995). The effect of this stigmatization enhances the abstract qualities of space, fragments social relations and action, and, in the process, represents an attempt to homogenize social relations under the aegis of commodification. The denigration of public housing fits well with Lefebvre’s analysis. Here the socio-spatial strategy is to reduce the use-value of housing for low-income residents and, at the same time, legitimize the demolition of dwellings and the displacement of residents through the redevelopment effort. Thus, the redevelopment of public housing is the mechanism to expedite the commodification of public housing.

SOCIAL SPACE AND RESIDENT VIEWS OF REDEVELOPMENT

Let us now turn our attention to the space of those who are referred by means of such clumsy and pejorative labels as ‘users’ and ‘inhabitants.’ No well-defined terms with clear connotations have been found to designate these groups. Their marginalization by spatial practices thus extends even to language. The word ‘user’ (*usager*), for example, has something vague – and vaguely suspect – about it. ‘User of what?’ one tends to wonder. Clothes and cars are used (and wear out), just as houses are. But what is use value when set alongside exchange and its corollaries? As for ‘inhabitants,’ the word designates everyone – and no one. The fact is that the most basic demands of ‘users’ (suggesting ‘underprivileged’) and ‘inhabitants’ (suggesting ‘marginal’) find *expression* only with great difficulty, whereas the *signs* of their situation are constantly increasing and often stare us in the face.

Henri Lefebvre. 1991, p. 362 (emphasis in original).

In the *Production of Space*, Lefebvre points out that the use of space by “inhabitants” or “users” is shaped by the social relations of capitalism and state action

that fragment and homogenize social space (p. 129). The juggernaut of commodification transforms the use value of social space into the exchange value of abstract space, while the modern bureaucratic state imposes hierarchy and instrumental control over space. Concurrently, spatial interchangeability and compartmentalization destroy the ability of people to forge meaningful social contacts and relationships (pp. 49–50, 287, 341–342). In a commodified world, abstractions come to dominate reality such that “everyday life” becomes degraded, privatized, and divided among competing private interests (pp. 308–320). The imposition of technical planning schemes and redevelopment plans, for example, restricts the multidimensional character of everyday life and fragments life activities. At the same time, such plans impose homogeneity by integrating transportation and communication technologies with schools, work, housing, and differentiated land-uses. The instrumental value of space eclipses its intrinsic value: People no longer value space for its own sake but come to view space for the advantages it may bring, especially as a means to the single end of financial gain. As far as possible, the abstract space of commodification, quantification, calculability, and control seeks to crush the social space of lived experience (pp. 59–60). The incompatibility of use and exchange value causes space itself to become an object of social conflict (pp. 52, 356).

Although many residents express fondness for their past and present in CJP, many public housing residents with whom we talked with dislike public housing and feel disdain for its social fabric. Many readily complain of the poor living conditions they are forced to live with (e.g. leaky ceilings, drafty apartments, poor public services, etc.), in addition to the ominous threat of crime, violence, and drug trafficking. From these observations, it seems likely that many would prefer to leave public housing, even in the face of extensive redevelopment and modernization of units. Yet many residents we talked with fear leaving the -relative security of public housing and being forced to face new financial burdens (i.e. utility bills) and potential homelessness. These observations corroborate findings from other studies of public housing around the country (Feldman, Stall & Wright, 1998; Feldman & Stall, 1994; Vale, 1997). For the CJP residents we talked with, public housing is what Lawrence Vale (1997) calls an “empathological place,” where “profound ambivalence is the ruling emotional response” (p. 159) where fear of remaining is counterbalanced by the fear of departure. As the following residents told us,

[HANO] don't give them [the residents] all the information that they really need to tell them about, you know you have to pay the water, lights in some houses plus your phone bill. A lot of people not used to this, used to doing them things. I know a lot of people personally that have given back their Section 8 vouchers because they could not afford them.

Farrah (age 38): There's only so many vacancies in public housing. For those who do have to relocate, that means they would have to go outside of public housing – then you deal with bills that they're not accustomed to dealing with. Or having added adequate funds to pay those bills. And that's my concern for the redevelopment and relocation for the community.

Margerie (age 47): I know I've heard a lot of people say that when they go in the (HANO) office they don't have any place for them to go and look at. You know. So really what can you do if they don't have any place. I've been there several times.

As the above excerpts show, residents feel that alternative housing outside public housing is too expensive and therefore unavailable. Here the desire to remain in public housing accompanies feelings of entrapment and lack of real choice, given the dearth of affordable housing in the private market. Not surprisingly, a number of residents we interviewed disagree with the Housing Authority's optimistic view that redevelopment and relocation will benefit them, surrounding neighborhoods, and the city. Some residents do indeed welcome redevelopment as an opportunity to escape distressed living conditions. Others express a firm desire to stay in CJP, despite their negative evaluations of life in public housing. Moving out of public housing, as residents recognize, will disrupt connections to schools, church, friends, work, shops, and other organizations and resources. As Rhoda and Vivian put it,

Rhoda (age 78): at this age I am not thinking about [moving] . . . No indeed, no part. Because I'm living comfortable there's no sense in me moving now. Been here fifty some odd years or longer, as long as they've been up. There's no sense in me moving.

Vivian (age 33): This is where I grew up at. I would like to stay in this development . . . Really and truly I like this project, I really do, cause I grew up around here from a baby. I grew up around this area. And, you know, it would be strange for me to move in another development.

Rhoda, Vivian, and other residents with whom we interacted with express a desire to stay in CJP because redevelopment plans as they stand today will destroy their immediate homes, the spaces they congregate and regularly and frequently interact with others, and their community ties and friendship networks – connections so many poor people rely on for resource and survival (Stack, 1974). These residents view public housing as a community and oppose the housing authority efforts to redefine and recommodify the social space they call home. These voices may not represent the CJP population as a whole, and they may represent more of a “pocket of resistance” or important sub-group rather than a norm. Nevertheless, the antipathy toward HANO, the deep sentimental attachment to public housing, and the firm resistance to the redevelopment effort clearly express the basic conflict between abstract space and social space. The redevelopment represents an attack on their place of residence, an assault on their “home,” and a disruption of the “habitus” of social activities and everyday life.

A number of employees from the Campus Affiliates Program (CAP) have observed that many residents have a common stake in the future of public housing not only because it is the only form of housing that they can afford but because of the long-term community ties many have forged over the years. The stakes involved in the relationship to place are high, reflecting material and psychological connections to space, people, and organizations. The CAP employees express similar notions as the residents about the significance of place. As these employees told the third author:

I see a lot of community ties and affiliations and the way that the community copes with lower paying jobs and lack of childcare and things like that. This is a tragedy, and I know that is a strong word, but that is reality, families being separated. I see a loss of relationships (CAP interview 12/15/99).

There are a lot of systems set up here to help them make it that they won't have outside the community. Like most they are placed somewhere else, and I don't think that they will have the same support, even a grandmother's help (CAP interview 12/16/99).

This is all they know. This is where many people spend most of their days and it is hard for people to separate themselves from this place (CAP interview 12/9/99).

As the above excerpts show, residents' understandings and interpretations of public housing are undergoing a major transformation as they find themselves forced to ask what kind of secure and meaningful place they can make in the face of impending demolition and displacement. The tenuousness of their ties to public housing does not keep residents from drawing on a distinctly spatial discourse, which they use as a political tool to contest the efforts of the housing authority to transform public housing space. As we see it, the construction of a meaningful place can and does have political meaning, even under circumstances where the daily practices of people in that place show little commonality. For Lefebvre (1976, p. 31) "space is not a scientific object removed from ideology or politics; it has always been political and strategic." From the point of view of the housing authority, the problems of public housing are "technical" and "administrative" problems amenable to policy recommendations and redevelopment "strategies" emanating from their particular constructions of urban reality. Urban geographers Helen Liggett and David C. Perry (1995, p. 18) argue that various elites, including urban planners, policy analysts, and state actors "are more adept at representing or discussing reality in precisely those terms that conceptually structure their intervention of which they are agents . . ." Thus, how various groups define and "represent" space are "goal-oriented activities that aim at furthering particular interests" (p. 16), including elite interests in recommodifying space.

Yet even as housing authority officials seek to convert public housing into an abstract space of commodity exchange, residents assign their own meanings

to refute the premises imposed by abstract space. Philip Kasinitz (2000, pp. 254–255) argues that “the social construction of urban spaces is highly contingent on the local construction of meanings, often in response to idiosyncratic local circumstances. The ways in which people, including poor people, think about their spaces plays an important, though by no means exclusive, role in how those spaces are shaped.” The meaning or symbolic significance a particular place takes on is in part the outcome of a struggle among different groups that compete to control that space – e.g. capitalist and state “utilizers” versus community “users.” It is these socio-spatial conflicts that structure the “city trenches” (Katznelson, 1981) in which government officials and planners debate the policy issues and people defend their sentimental attachments to place. In short, the fierce contest over images and counter-images of places is an arena in which the cultural politics of places and the political economy of their development frequently interlock in indistinguishable ways.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we have used Henri Lefebvre’s theoretical insights on abstract space and social space as an empirical basis for understanding the redevelopment of public housing in New Orleans. Lefebvre’s task is to bring together objective and subjective understandings of space by tracing them both back to the process in which individuals and groups produce space. He questions the validity of any understanding of space that does not locate spatial conflicts and struggles within the political economy of capitalism and the production of space. The strength of Lefebvre’s work, therefore, is that it refuses to see materiality and representation as separate spheres and it denies the particular privileging of one realm – e.g. class, race, gender, and so on – over another. For Lefebvre, the crushing of lived social spaces by the imposition of abstract space results in the ghettoization of all sectors of society, from the ghettos of the elite, of the bourgeoisie, of the intellectuals, of immigrants, and the poor. These fragmented and segregated spatial forms lead to the creation of new socio-spatial conflicts that transcend class divisions. For example, the emergence in the 1960s and later of powerful and diverse social movements based on civil rights, gay rights, women’s issues, housing and poverty, NIMBY conflicts, nuclear weapons, and the environment derived from the “explosion of spaces,” from the proliferation of new spatial boundaries in response to the chaotic expansion of abstract spaces. As social inequality expands and land-uses constantly change, new mobilizations of the very poor, the homeless, the unemployed, home owners fearing a decline in property values and crime, and other community organizations appear at the

borders of the newly created social and physical spaces. Today, retrenchment in federal housing policy combined with the commodification of public housing is leading to the creation of new spatial forms and therefore new conflicts and antagonisms, including struggles for fair housing, tenants' rights, and homeless mobilizations, among others.

Rather than viewing urban space as a container of social action, this analysis suggests that space has a strategic and political character that is an active component in producing, reinforcing, and contesting social inequalities in society. In his award winning book, *Out of Place*, Talmadge Wright (1997) suggests that one of the key areas of struggle over urban space in contemporary urban America is "the allocation of land-use according to 'higher and better' uses" (p.10). "What these uses are is established by constructing a hierarchy of worthy spaces, people and things related to the labeled moral and physical comportment of a given population." For example, the myths of self-reliance and self-sufficiency, combined with possessive individualism, work to maintain distinctions between the "deserving" and "undeserving" populations, establishing objective and subjective distinctions and hierarchies of worth. These meanings specify how deviant populations, especially the urban poor, should be treated, where they should live, and what should be done to keep them in their "place." In turn, stigmatizing public housing residents with pejorative labels – e.g. lazy welfare queens, drug abusers, violent criminals, and so on – works to legitimize individualistic interpretations of social inequality, divert attention away from the structural causes of urban poverty and inner city deterioration, and justify the commodification of public housing. HOPE VI efforts to ensure that public housing developments are mixed-income does little to solve the critical housing problems of the poor. What the program does is exacerbate the problems of housing and poverty by displacing residents, making fewer units available, and forcing local housing authorities to compete with the private sector for tenants.

Understanding how space is a component of social organization and political struggle also has implications for understanding public policy and urban redevelopment. To date there has been little empirical work that examines the dialectical interplay between public policy, changes in the built environment, and the socially "constructed" aspects of urban space – e.g. the ways different actors and user groups produce, negotiate, and assign different meanings, imagery, and discourages to spaces in the city. Yet Robert Beauregard (1995, p. 77) suggests that to "contemplate public policy for our cities or to consider acting collectively requires not merely an analysis of the conditions available for success but also a reflective understanding of the language with which we represent these conditions." This is a call "to direct our attention to the

simultaneity of discourse and history, the importance of negotiated imaginations, and the power of material conditions.” Rather than viewing the social problems of poverty and lack of affordable housing as social welfare issues, this ethnographic study suggests we should view them as land-use issues connected to urban imagery, typifications, and cultural and symbolic representations of the city. Various motifs and themes, including rhetoric such as “growth,” “development,” “revitalization,” and the like, are not objective, fixed, and stable categories but constitute authoritative and yet contested representations of space that shape peoples’ perceptions of different living spaces and the people that live in them. In turn, these meanings of space shape peoples’ understandings of the causes of urban problems that bias and select against some urban planning and policy choices rather than others. The assignment of meaning to places in the city, by urban planners, policy makers, poor people, and others, is not arbitrary but established through social practices that connect with the material conditions of uneven development, political-economic power, and public policy.

NOTE

1. Lefebvre’s work is the seminal source of critical American and European scholarship on the city and urban life. David Harvey, Manuel Castells, Mark Gottdiener, Joe Feagin, and Talmadge Wright have elaborated on Lefebvre’s political economy of space. Many other urban geographers and postmodern scholars have incorporated Lefebvre’s ideas into their perspectives and analyses, including Fredric Jameson, Michael Dear, Neil Smith and Edward Soja, among others (for reviews see Gottdiener, 1993; Stewart, 1995; Dear, 1997; Benko & Strohmeier, 1997; Liggett & Perry, 1995).

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