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Editorial

Henri Lefebvre, Planning’s Friend or Implacable Critic?

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Abstract

This is the first issue of an academic journal, of which I am aware, to focus on Henri Lefebvre and urban planning. Urban spatial planning evolved as a concept to integrate the complex social, economic, environmental, political and land use conundrums of late 20th century society. Similarly, the spatial ideas of Henri Lefebvre encompass these issues but stress the importance of everyday life, production, culture and history. This thematic issue of *Urban Planning* is predicated principally on three of Lefebvre’s major works: *The Production of Space* (Lefebvre, 1974/1991), *Critique of Everyday Life* (Lefebvre, 1947/1991) and *The Urban Revolution* (Lefebvre, 1970/2003). Lefebvre’s ideas regarding the investigation of cities and urban society have been taken up most vigorously in the fields of geography, urban studies and latterly architecture. Despite this, it is clear that Lefebvre’s five central concepts—the production of space, abstract space, everyday life, the right to the city and planetary urbanisation—provide powerful tools for the examination of urban planning, cities and urban society in the Global North and South. Anglophone urban planning first embraced Lefebvre’s ideas in the 1980s. Surprisingly then, it is only in the last ten years or so that urban planning academia and research has witnessed a blossoming of interest in Lefebvre’s ideas.

Keywords

everyday life; Henri Lefebvre; modern planning; production of space; spatial triad; urban planning; urban space

Issue

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1. Introduction

Henri Lefebvre is one of the most cited thinkers in the broad field of urban studies. His ideas have influenced academics in a wide swathe of disciplines. There have been significant impacts on various urban struggles and city politicians regarding Lefebvre’s conceptualisation of the right to the city (Colau, 2016; Garbin & Millington, 2018). He is one of the few great 20th century European philosophers to engage directly with urban planning both in theory and in practice. The unique reasons for this are explained below. At times his censures of French modernist planning were fierce but well argued. The central question I pose here therefore, is the one in this editorial. This issue of *Urban Planning* seeks to contribute to and extend the debate regarding the application of Lefebvre’s ideas to the current challenges and opportunities of urban planning. It follows the recent explo-

sion of Lefebvrian scholarship in the broad field of ‘the urban’ (e.g., Brenner, 2014; Chiodelli, 2013; D’Ascoli, 2018; Stanek, Schmid, & Moravánszky, 2014).

The call for papers for this issue encouraged proposals that could cover a broad range of issues e.g.: governance, urban design, urban regeneration, environmental management, community participation, housing, policy making and evaluation, local/strategic planning, infrastructure, international planning, neoliberal urbanism, smart cities, land hunger, urbanisation, gentrification, urban poverty/inequality, the right to the city, new towns/cities, planning history, city management and the law. Articles were welcomed that displayed a critical engagement with Lefebvre’s ideas and arguments and presented: new empirical research, critical reviews of current issues and theoretical developments. The result is a varied and stimulating thematic issue. The articles therefore, allow the authors to move the debate on in pro-

ductive and provocative ways. Before introducing the papers though, I present a brief summary of Lefebvre's interaction with planning (see Leary-Owhin & McCarthy, In Press) for a fuller account.

2. The Meeting Between Lefebvre and Urban Planning

Lefebvre was born in 1901 and grew up in the French Pyrenean town of Navarrenx in the traditional province of Béarn. He passed away in 1991. His scholarship ranged far and wide, but he was happy to be called a Marxist sociologist and philosopher. His unique and often misunderstood heterodox dialectical Marxism had complex elements of Hegelian Humanism and, drawing on Engels, he stressed the importance of the 'urban' much more than Marx. He appreciated the slow evolution, intimacy and community spirit of the historic town of Navarrenx, which was small enough to have a caring familiarity and comfort but large enough to be 'urban' and therefore different from the surrounding rural areas. Lefebvre's first foray into empirical research occurred during the 1940s and was in the field of the rural sociology of the Pyrenees. He used a combined archival, interview and ethnographic research methodology.

Then in the 1950s, the French government in partnership with the multinational Total petroleum company, started the planning and construction of a new town, to be called Mourenx, in the Béarn countryside close to his home town. Lefebvre was shocked and disappointed by various aspects of the French modernist new town programme and its implementation. He criticised the: top town 'expert' planning far away in Paris, unsettling speed of development, urbanisation impact on the Béarn countryside and rural everyday life, utilitarian monotony of the designs that seemed to inhibit community life and, perhaps most of all, the sheer boredom induced by the new town, with all the social dangers that it can engender. During this new town phase he wrote an often neglected paper, 'Notes on the New Town', (in Lefebvre, 1995; but see also Wilson, 2011), that sought to understand what he experienced directly but then filtered through his Marxism, experience and academic intellect. His criticisms regarding planning usually related to state planning, especially in France. And his vehement dislike of Mourenx was expressed more as a balanced assessment than implacable critique, sometimes praising the planning system and the new town he encountered (for a comprehensive consideration see Leary-Owhin, In Press). Following this archival and ethnographic research experience, Lefebvre embarked, in the late 1960s, on the publication of a series of books about the 'urban' that would culminate in 1974 in his most famous book, *The Production of Space*.

3. Planning Theory and Practice: Lefebvre's Potential Contributions

In recent research (Leary, 2013; Leary-Owhin, 2018) I argue that it is rather unfortunate that planning practi-

tioners and theorists have, with a few notable exceptions, tended to ignore the potential contributions that Henri Lefebvre's ideas can make to planning theory and practice. Indeed, the leading planning theory book does not mention Lefebvre until its fourth edition (Campbell & Fainstein, 2015) and then only in passing. This is despite one of the first Anglophone articles on Lefebvre and planning being published over two decades ago (Allen & Pryke, 1994) and a steady trickle of publications since then (e.g., Buser, 2012; Carp, 2008; Holgersen, 2015; Honneck, 2017; Leary, 2009). Perhaps this is partly because Lefebvre is regarded by many as a tough read (Schmid, 2014). However, along with the well-known spatial triad, I argue that Lefebvre's concept of differential space could provide a powerful focus for planners' conceptual approaches to urban planning, especially the creation and enhancement of public space (Leary-Owhin, 2016). What might be called 'strong' differential space: the spaces of politicised appropriation and the assertion of rights to the city, insinuate themselves into a constant dialectical struggle through elements of the spatial triad. Rather than simply complaining about the privatisation, loss or corruption of 'public' space, we should appreciate the potentialities inherent in the production of differential space through the contestations that can occur in the creation of a fairer and just society in asserting 'the rights to the city'.

4. Structure of the Issue

This issue consists of eight newly commissioned articles. All of them deal carefully and intelligently with a range of Lefebvre's theories showing how his ideas can be applied, tested or challenged in the context of contemporary urban planning issues. Geographically, the articles range across the globe from North America to Japan via Europe and South Africa. Two largely theoretical articles bookend the issue: first, Zieleniec (2018) explores the politics of space and Lefebvre's right to the city in ways that seek to provoke new thinking in planning and design; Yamamoto (2018) in the last article draws out the implications of Lefebvrian 'desire' for democratic theory and practice. Subsequent to Zieleniec (2018), Cutts and Minn (2018) zoom in on the neo-capitalist housing market and the contradictions inherent in the production of mortgage foreclosure casualties in Maricopa County, Phoenix, Arizona.

Nkooe (2018) delivers the third article, employing a novel combination of production of space and rhythm-analysis concepts in a study of public space in Mangaung, South Africa. A trio of Scandinavian papers follow: Wallin et al. (2018) employ ideas of social space to interrogate planners' stories resulting from research interviews in Tampere, Finland; in complementary fashion, Larsen and Brandt (2018) analyse, in the context of Copenhagen, how 'dominant regimes' and 'local inhabitants' pursue and realise differing perceptions of urban change. In the sixth chapter, Koch (2018) works with

the concept of abstract space, confronting the means by which citizens become consumers in ways that torment sustainability. Across Europe in Barcelona, Jiménez Pacheco (2018) draws on ‘the science of social space’ as a theoretical guide to research relating to ‘global real estate violence’. Some of the articles cover familiar ground, others strike out in new directions. Neither the authors nor I pretend the issue contains the definitive word on these questions. Rather, it is meant to push the urban planning world to interrogate Lefebvre’s potentials and see him more as a critical friend rather than implacable foe.

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Conflict of Interests

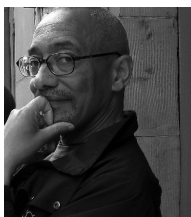
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About the Author



Michael Leary-Owhin, PhD, MRTPI, FRSA, has an international reputation in the fields of urban planning and regeneration. He has carried out funded research and published widely. He has practiced in the public and private sectors, recently giving expert witness evidence at a major urban regeneration public inquiry in the UK. He is the author of numerous peer-reviewed journal articles, the co-editor of *The Routledge Companion to Urban Regeneration* and the author of the research monograph *Exploring the Production of Urban Space*. He regularly chairs sessions and presents papers at major international conferences. Currently, he is co-editing *The Routledge Handbook of Henri Lefebvre, the City and Urban Society* (forthcoming 2019).