Taking Space

Don Mitchell

From Gezi Park and Taksim Square to the occupation of schools by Chilean high-school students; from Occupy (everywhere) to Free Hetherington and the other UK university building take-overs; from the squats of Berlin, Zurich or New York's Lower East Side to Berkeley's People's Park, Copenhagen's Christiana and Hong Kong's Star Ferry Terminal; from homeless people's tent cities to community gardens the world over, there's a reason why it's so exciting when people take over spaces – disused buildings, abandoned lots and public sites – and either temporarily or permanently make them their own. The reason is that such occupation disrupts the logic of capital as *it* seeks to produce cities in its own image, a process, we are told over and over again, for which there is no alternative. The taking of public spaces shows that there are alternatives; it disrupts, sometimes quite radically, the capitalist production of space.

Urban activists and urban theorists have long known that it is vitally important to understand how city-space is produced. In capitalist cities, the landscape is produced as a commodity (or more accurately, a complex set of commodities). Just about anything can be built, even 'affordable housing' or playgrounds for children, just so long as it returns, or aids in the return of, profit. Therefore, tracing how capital circulates through the built environment – the urban landscape – is necessary in order to grasp, for example, not just what gentrification is (a strategy for capital accumulation, or what UK city governments like to call 'regeneration'), but why it unfolds where it does (a question of capital circulation). Likewise, there is simply no way to understand why and how disinvestment in the urban landscape (the precondition for gentrification) occurs without understanding the circulation and accumulation of capital. In other words, the logic of regeneration only becomes clear when we think about what capital (and its owners, managers, and beneficiaries) are up to. What they are up to, of course, is making money. There is no other reason to produce space. Parks are valuable only if they help increase the value of surrounding property. The whole logic of tax-increment financing of urban infrastructure, which is becoming increasingly popular in Britain and has long been a mainstay in the US, provides ample evidence for this assertion.

Such is the *logic* of capitalist space-production. It is in no way a description of the *actuality* of capitalist space-production. Overproduction of the built environment, as we all know, is common: flats and offices do not find tenants; housing goes unsold (despite or even because of ever-more elaborate credit schemes); new airports struggle to attract carriers; industrial parks and their extensive parking lots stand half empty; and socially useless projects abound (eg high-priced condos in the midst of growing homelessness). Add to that the fact that the built environment is a capital trap – capital is bound up in the very concrete, steel, bricks, wood and glass that comprise the city for extraordinarily long periods of time, and thus is always at risk of becoming socially useless – and it is easy to see why cities are constantly on the verge of crisis, if not deeply mired in it. Besides, the landscape deteriorates, it wears out, it comes to the end of its useful life – which means that it has to be destroyed and built anew or renovated in some way. In such cases, we are told (rather bizarrely) capital itself is the solution to capital's own problems (whatever the evidence of the boarded-up houses, shuttered factories and abandoned wastelands all around us).

In this logic, and whatever its real effects on the ground, the exchange of space – its tradability – dominates its use. We buy houses less to live in than for the value stored in them, which we hope is ever increasing and which can then be exchanged on the market. Cities build parks because they add to the value of surrounding property more than because a bit of green space and a playground would be nice for area residents and visitors. The fact that recreation is now a function of commercial development (malls, shopping districts, museums dominated by their stores) seems simply commonplace. Whole cityscapes are planned on the logic of 'highest and best use' – which is to say, the use that will return the greatest amount of capital – rather than on the logic of need.

The French urbanist Henri Lefebvre, who coined the idea of the 'right to the city' in 1967, a few years later sought to understand this tendency towards the exchange-value of space dominating use-value (or as he put it, the 'absorption' of the use of space by the exchange of space). To do so he developed the concept of 'abstract space', the spatial equivalent of what Marx called 'abstract labour'. The concept of

abstract labour is a means by which we can understand how qualitatively very different kinds of labour can be made commensurable, which is to say that abstract labour is what very different kinds of commodities have in common. For example, the labour that goes into making an iPhone is as different as can be imagined from the labour that goes into a Marks & Spencer ready-to-eat lasagne. The former requires the mining of metals and rare-earth minerals and transporting them across the world; forging the metals into appropriate components; turning oil into plastic and (in a separate process) moulding it into particular shapes; designing chips; manufacturing those chips (using some of those rare-earth minerals plus a lot of silicon); writing software; assembling the phones; shipping them to distributors and shops around the world; and (one hopes) cleaning up the mess all these processes inevitably make – to say nothing of the work of managing the whole process. Much of this labour is automated, but to say that is just to say that some of the human labour that goes into making the iPhone (or any commodity) is past labour, or what Marx called 'dead labour': the labour that went into making the machines, a portion of which is transferred from the machine into the commodity. All these different kinds of labour get worked into the phone, establishing its value. The lasagne, by contrast, encapsulates a bit of the labour of cattle raisers and slaughterers, wheat and tomato growers, egg-farmers (with free-range chickens, in this case), cheese makers (no matter how industrial), food chemists, chemical manufacturers (for the lasagne itself, but also for its packaging), cooks (who might just be watching machines), assemblers (ditto), packagers, truckers, shelf-stockers and yet more managers (to name only a few). The kinds of labour and processes involved in making a ready-to-eat lasagne could not be more different from those of making an iPhone, and yet we have no trouble in equating them, no trouble in saying X number of lasagnes are equal to one iPhone. Price does that for us (price is in fact only ever an approximation of value, but it is, nonetheless, a measure of relative worth). A quick look online suggests that Marks & Spencer beef lasagnes sell for £7 for 1.5kg. The price of an iPhone is a lot harder to figure out (because of all the deals and service packages) but seems to hover around £99 for a good-sized 5s. As an approximation (but a very rough one), the iPhone embodies a value equivalent to that embodied in about fourteen 1.5kg lasagnes.

But what is equivalent here? The use of a lasagne could not be more different from the use of an iPhone, and as we saw, the labour in each is qualitatively very different. What is commensurable, in fact, is labour *in the abstract*, labour as a quantity, not a quality. Abstract labour is labour abstracted out of its particularity and made commensurable, made exchangeable: X amount of lasagne-making is worth Y amount of iPhone-making.[1] The point of making iPhones or ready-to-eat lasagnes is to sell them; to exchange them. Abstract labour makes exchange possible. Abstract labour therefore also makes the domination of use by exchange possible.

Similarly, 'abstract space' is a way to begin to apprehend spaces' commensurability. But 'space' – or land, landscape, the built environment – while a commodity (like lasagne) is a quite different kind of commodity. Firstly, as land, it is a 'gift of nature', possessing a set of qualities (sloping or flat, fertile or infertile, well-drained or not, suitable for building on or not, etc.) that are not a direct result of labour (though each of these can certainly be improved by labour). Secondly, as space, it is both physically unmovable and monopolisable – ownership conveys rights to keep others out. Thirdly, as built environment, its use for one function – a factory or a house or a street – precludes its use for any number of other (but not all) functions. Finally, as a 'complex commodity', it traps value for long periods of time – not the several days or weeks of a lasagne or the couple of years of an iPhone, but the decades or even centuries of a factory, house, street or park. If the abstract labour – the value – encapsulated in a regular commodity is realised when it is sold to a consumer, then the value encapsulated in land and the built environment is realised only slowly (think mortgages and amortisation schedules here). Regular commodities really circulate – from the factory into the hands of a consumer and then back to the factory in the form of money – they literally change place and move. But space only circulates 'ideally', in the form of deeds conveying ownership – and in the form of credit, which is, however complex the credit instrument

may be, a claim on future value; space literally stays in place. In this sense, *potential* future values – *future* exchange – dominate use. Through processes of capital circulation in the built environment – actually in the improving of soil or in the construction of buildings, as well as ideally in the form of deeds and credit – space is made abstract; that is, space made commensurable with other different spaces, comes to dominate the use of space.

The primary reason to develop a landscape is to sell it, to exchange it (or, as with parks and streets, to support the selling of it). Exchangeability requires use, of course. The space has to be useful to someone; someone has to want to use it. But that comes second, as it were. Exchangeability – abstractability – comes first. This is what Lefebvre meant when he said that abstract space absorbs use. Marx had a slightly different way of putting it. Talking about commodities in general, but especially those commodities that serve as the means of production (including factory buildings, not just machinery), he argued that 'dead labour' tends to dominate living labour; the past labour encapsulated in present conditions shapes what can and cannot be done in the here and now.

Such is the *logic* of the capitalist production of space. The *tendency* towards the production of abstract space – exchangeable space – is a capitalist necessity. And yet (and this was perhaps Lefebvre's whole point) that tendency could never fully be achieved. Rather, class struggle (which he interpreted widely) continually interrupted the tendency towards the production of abstract space (just as it interrupted and transformed not only how labour was done but how life was socially reproduced – Marx's 'historical and moral' element). Class struggle, and for that matter everyday life (since we have no choice but to live *in* space), continually strives to create what Lefebvre termed 'differential space' – space *made* different and in which *use* becomes paramount. Sometimes this process of differentiating space is incredibly mundane, as when we live in and make housing our own, when we turn it into a *home* (usually in the context of a community of neighbours and friends); when, that is, living in our space comes to mean more than exchanging it.

Sometimes the process of differentiating space is quite spectacular. Lefebvre developed his ideas about class struggle and the social production of space (in and against capitalism) in the wake of the 1968 Paris uprising, but closer to our time we can think about the uprising in Istanbul's Taksim Square. A small band of activists sought to stop the bulldozers from ripping up Gezi Park, a last bit of green space standing in the way of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's particular brand of developmentalism (which enrolled a form of Islam into the service of property-based capitalism). The bloody police response led to a mass uprising centered on Taksim Square, but which became national in scope and within which opposition to Erdogan's developmentalism was primary, but now one of a range of complaints against the state and structure of society. The taking and holding of Taksim Square (and other public spaces around the country) opened up all manner of new ways of living, new ways of interacting, new ways of using urban space. 'Business as usual' was put on hold. Pretty soon, a lot of people all around Turkey were not just questioning whether there was no alternative to how Turkey was inserted into global capitalism, but actively inventing alternatives. When, in turn, Taksim Square was violently cleared out, people in Istanbul moved back into their neighbourhoods, occupying local parks and squares and creating collaborative councils – 'park forums' – to govern everyday life (the councils, in fact, looked an awful lot like the 1871 Paris Commune). Park forums organised new modes of consumption, based on need rather than the logic of exchange; for a few weeks, money more or less disappeared. Self-management became the order of the day. Such developments were, of course, not without friction and contradictions, and for many reasons (including the violence of the state) the utopic moment did not last, but for a while the very logic of abstract space – capitalism's necessary tendency towards the production of abstract space – was fundamentally interrupted. New kinds of differential space were created.

Often, however, the creation of differential space is neither so mundane as homemaking nor so spectacular as an urban uprising. Forty-five years ago this spring, for example, a broad range of students

and residents took over a muddy lot in Berkeley, California, from which the University of California had cleared several houses. One Saturday, they showed up by the dozen with shovels, picks, sod, bulbs, bushes 'and a lot of grass' and made a park – People's Park. The state of California responded by fencing off the site and mobilising the National Guard to reclaim it. A riot ensued – not an urban uprising, but a defence of a particular space. The people won. Since that time, the University of California has repeatedly tried to reclaim the property and make it something else – a site for a dormitory hall for students, or a redeveloped park that would better meet the desires of nearby merchants – which has sometimes led to violence as 'Park defenders' have sought to retain the spaces as a user-designed, user-controlled park and especially as a park in which homeless and other street people have a place. From its beginning the Park has hosted a 'free stage' for concerts, speeches and the like, as well as a 'free box' where clothing and other items are dropped off for anyone who wants them. Hundreds of free meals are given away every week, to whomever shows up. People's Park is scruffy, sometimes dangerous, and a thorn in the side of merchants and the University alike. It is a place where *de*commodification, not commodification, rules. It is a commons. And most days it just chugs along, offering nothing spectacular, but meeting the needs of the very poor, providing a bit of open, green space and refusing to be enrolled in the process of abstract space production, which is the process of capitalist accumulation (no matter how hard the University, the city, merchants' associations and developers have tried).

A generation later, and a continent and an ocean away, a small group of nearby residents decided to reclaim what had become a waste-ground north of the Kelvin River in Glasgow.[2] For years the plot of land – about 1.4 hectares in size – had served as a sports ground for students at two nearby schools. By the 1990s, however, the schools had been closed and the city council had stopped maintaining the fields. Even before then the tennis courts had been abandoned and trees started growing up through them (they now host a rather robust forest). As the city withdrew services, residents slowly reclaimed the space – sowing grass seed where the running track had been, cleaning out trash, securing an old changing room that drug users had made into a convenient den (it now serves as a gardening shed). In 2004, a community trust sought to build housing on the site of the tennis courts, but this fell through. In 2008, the city sought to sell the whole site to a developer to build 115 flats (Glasgow said it would use some of the proceeds to build sports grounds in nearby Maryhill). Residents mobilised and have fought since that time to keep what they call the North Kelvin Meadow as an open, community-controlled space. As they point out, not only have they turned the Meadow into a desirable space – a community space – but if flats are built on it, then that will be the end of it. It's not impossible to return built-space to open space, but neither is it easy; and besides, what is now a community asset would become private property. Residents have been creative in their activism (they're good at getting the attention of the media and politicians), as well as persistent. In doing so they have created a community, a sense of belonging in and on the land, and thereby turned the land into something other than just an exchangeable commodity. Through their labour – maintaining the meadow, picking up rubbish, building raised garden beds, as well as scouring planning documents, attending countless council and planning meetings, and so forth – they turned the space of North Kelvin Meadow into a differential space, interrupted the (potential) circulation of capital and made it a new kind of community place. To do so they have had to become experts in bureaucracy and the planning process, master the language of 'regeneration' and become ecologically astute (the cultivation of roosting bats as well as wild orchids have both made private development on the site more difficult).[3]

These two examples – together with the Homebaked Community Land Trust and Co-operative Bakery Anfield – are just as thrilling as the example of the neighbourhood park forums that developed across Turkey after Taksim Square was cleared out. They show that urban space can be collectively taken and collectively remade, that use can dominate exchange, that our fate is not necessarily a fate written by the tendency towards abstract space in capitalism. That tendency is powerful, and it has the support of the state at every scale (from local councillors to national governments to the big international agencies, not

excepting many of those affiliated with the United Nations). But here's the secret: that tendency itself, the tendency towards abstract space, requires an enormous amount of work, both to push it forward and to maintain the actual space – the exchangeable space – that results. Just as the making of iPhones and lasagnes requires the never-ceasing work of planning, designing, managing and maintaining (abstract labour is *not* natural, but has to be enforced; Foxconn assemblers and Marks & Spencer shelf-stockers are as likely as any to slack off) so does the making of abstract space require enormous amounts of management and enforcement (including the work of the riot police who clear out occupied parks, lawyers to parse property law, market analysts to determine the likelihood of a development paying off, and so much more). Any system so reliant on the labour of multitudes in order to support an image of naturalness is eminently interruptible.

Urban activists and urban scholars have long known that it is vitally important to understand how space is produced in capitalism. But more and more we are coming to understand the vital importance of collectively *taking* space and making it ours, of differentiating space and making it use*ful*, of stopping in its tracks the tendency toward the abstraction of space and instead making spaces in which to live life in ways not dictated by the crazy, inhumane logics of capitalist development.

Further Reading

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Lynn Staeheli and Don Mitchell, *The People's Property: Power, Politics, and the Public*, Routledge, New York, 2008.

1 Of course, the commensurability of labour is much more complex than I have let on. As Marx showed, the value of labour power (in capitalism, the ability to do work – labour power – is a commodity) possesses a 'historical and moral element', which is to say, it is dependent upon all manner of historical and social factors – such as the development of Foxconn's (and other Chinese manufacturers') dormitory labour system, or the fact that in Britain the value of labour now includes a right to medical care and a pension, no matter how strongly both are under attack.

2 This paragraph draws on research that I am conducting with my colleagues Kafui Attoh and Lynn Staeheli.

3 So far, activists at North Kelvin Meadow have not sought to create a community trust to own the land; like other activists in Glasgow, they consider that they already own the land, collectively: it is part of the Scottish commonwealth.

Don Mitchell

Don Mitchell is Distinguished Professor of Geography at the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University. He received his Ph.D. from Rutgers University in 1992. He taught at the

University of Colorado, Boulder before joining Syracuse in the late 1990s. In 1998, he became a MacArthur Fellow, and in 2008 a Guggenheim Fellow. Considered an influential and radical scholar, Mitchell starts from the position that scholarship and political commitment cannot be divorced, and is best known for his work on cultural theory and the People's Geography Project. Mitchell is concerned with examining and explaining the ways that "culture" has become a primary arena of social struggle, and a principle means for exercising power. He works on labour struggles, human rights and justice and is particularly interested in the theorization and historical study of the production of landscape, particularly as it relates to labourers and the working classes. He was awarded the Anders Retzius Medal from the Swedish Society for Anthropology and Geography in 2012.