

Critical Urban Studies

Literature Review

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Research Question:

How do non-conformists survive in the commoditised area of Rummelsburger Bucht?

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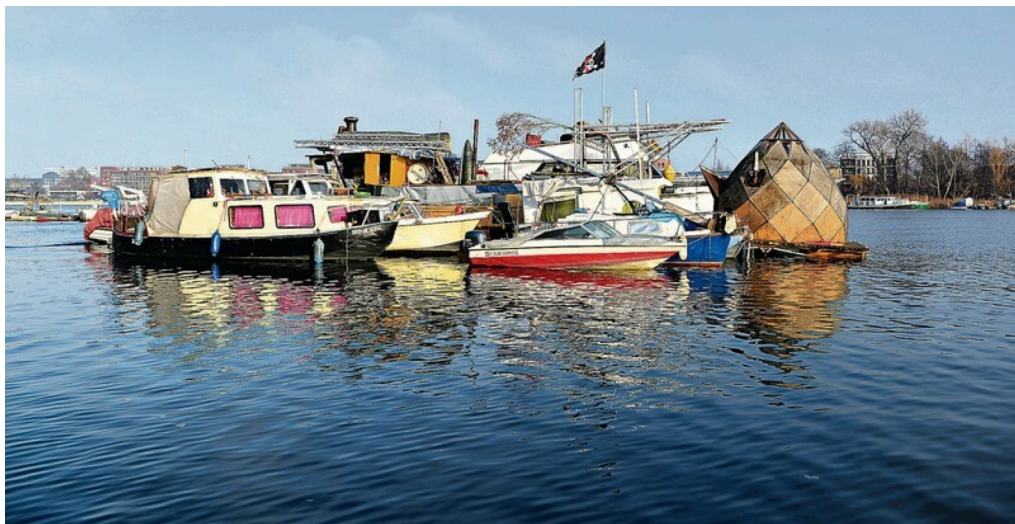
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Introduction:

Rummelsburger Bucht, an overview

Over the last decades, the metropolis of Berlin has seen a rapid transformation and deviation from its former 'poor but sexy' image. An increase in investment, redevelopment, industry and population has made the city increasingly gentrified, leading to displacement and segregation. For a finite future, the former industrial zone of Rummelsburger Bucht remains one of East Berlin's last large free spaces void of excessive development and gentrification. Investors have repeatedly recognised the potential of the area, wherein the last ten years have birthed luxury apartments from the otherwise almost barren land. It is home to a myriad of non-conformist groups, including houseboat dwellers, anarchist boat collectives and social and cultural impact-driven rafts-persons that claim a right to the area.



Neu-Lummerland, photo by Mike Wolff (Klages, 2020)

An extensive Ostkreuz redevelopment plan by foreign investors has recently been given the green light by the State of Berlin. The adoption of the plan will transform the northwest side of Rummelsburg Bucht into luxury condos, a hotel and an upmarket tourist attraction, Coral World (Kaiser, 2019). There has been fierce disapproval by many Berlin locals and non-conformist groups who see the plan as incomprehensible in view of the rising rents, lack of affordable housing, and the dwindling Berlin culture.

Introduction to the literature

Critical urban theory suggests “that another, more democratic, socially just, and sustainable form of urbanisation is possible, even if such possibilities are currently being suppressed through dominant institutional arrangements, practices, and ideologies” (Brenner, 2012. p. 11). The current and proposed urbanisation of Rummelsburger Bucht has demonstrated this battle between hegemonic powers surrounding urbanism and non-conformist inhabitants fighting for a more just alternative to the space they appropriate. The question is then, how do non-conformists survive in the commoditised area of Rummelsburger Bucht?

In order to evaluate this research question, critical urban theory will be used. A general introduction to the process of urbanisation will highlight and contextualise the current struggle for survival and motivation behind seeking a change in urbanisation. In order to do this, entrepreneurialism and interurban competition will be used to define a form of urbanisation. Lefebvre’s notion of the right to the city will then examine how an inhabitant of a space should have a claim to authority over how that space is created and used. Invoking the difference of use value against exchange value will demonstrate how space can be used with different interests at heart. It will then examine how space is socially produced through a trialectical process, leading to an abstract space that is open to appropriation. Lastly, through DIY urbanism, this malleable abstract space will be examined to show how the right to the city can be appropriated.

Process of urbanisation

Urbanisation is an important process to highlight in order to uncover a cause of and to contextualise non-conformist group struggles, motivations and survival mechanisms. A seminal problem surrounding urbanism is that it has “very little to do with meeting the needs of people. It has been all about absorbing surplus capital, sustaining profit levels, and maximizing the return on exchange values no matter what the use value demands might be” (Harvey, 2014. p. 29).

Entrepreneurial form of urban governance and interurban competition

City governments have vested social, economic and political interests in putting their city on the map. Cities around the globe are in competition to attract investment, vying for a heightened desirability to attract businesses, tourism and high-income earners, ultimately anything or anyone that can improve image quality and make the city more entrepreneurial. In *From Managerialism To Entrepreneurialism*, Harvey (1989) highlighted a transition in the form of urban governance from managerialism to entrepreneurialism. With entrepreneurialism, urban policies hold the idea of a "public-private partnership" at its core. As stated by Harvey, "the new entrepreneurialism has, as its centerpiece, the notion of a "public-private partnership" in which a traditional local boosterism is integrated with the use of local governmental powers to try and attract external sources of funding, new direct investments, or new employment sources" (Ibid. p.7). As a result, the production of space is often made for investment and economic benefits, insofar that urban governance has become more concerned with "the provision of a "good business climate" and to the construction of all sorts of lures to bring capital into town" (Ibid. p.11). This form of governance ultimately is oriented toward competitiveness, the market and profit making, which can have detrimental consequences on social commitments, for example, affordable housing. Further problems can arise, and as seen from the United States, "problems of impoverishment and disempowerment, including the production of a distinctive "underclass" (to use the language of Wilson, 1987) has been documented beyond dispute." (Ibid. p.12).

In East Berlin, real estate used to be centrally distributed and state-owned. However, similarly to Harvey's description of the shift to entrepreneurialism (1989), Fordist-Keynesian policies yielded an entrepreneurial form of urban governance that tried and still attempts to re-vitalise Berlin as a global 'go-to' city. The previously state-owned land in East Berlin has been privatised to private landlords and investors, who then reproduce the space in a capitalistic form that aims to generate profit. Examples that fit the capitalist criteria include beautification, rent increases and public spaces transformed into private and/or commoditised spaces. In regard to Rummelsburger Bucht, the result is clear: the space is being reformed by capitalistic driven incentives. High rise luxury apartments, hotels and an upscale tourist attraction that cannot be used by just anyone, only a selective group of 'desirables' that can contribute to the capital accumulation: cash-rich residents and tourists. A consequence of this change in the

urban environment is that disenfranchisement and poverty have occurred, but anger and a zealous drive for reclamation of space and mobilisation of non-conformist groups continues to increase.

The process of inter-urban competition and entrepreneurialism can be a critical lens to analyse the city government's decision-making process in the redevelopment of the contested area. It will give the research area a foundation for understanding how and why the area is and continues to become more commoditised. This then has the effect on the livelihoods and activist motivations and momentums of non-conformist groups claiming their right to the space. Applied to the real-time unfolding of events, understanding the motives behind plan approvals can equip critical urban theorists and local Berlin residents critical of this entrepreneurial form of urban governance and surplus accumulation with deeper knowledge surrounding the issue. They can use said knowledge to criticise and challenge the government and investors on the current proposal and try to generate further awareness and support for an alternative. Furthermore, they could create and promote an urban plan that benefits the people of Berlin rather than investors and neo-liberal economic interests.

The right to the city

An overview

The whole capitalist system of perpetual accumulation, along with its associated structures of exploitative class and state power, has to be overthrown and replaced. Claiming the right to the city is a way-station on the road to that goal.
(Harvey, 2012. p. xviii)

The notion of the right to the city is based on the declaration that an inhabitant of a space should have a claim to authority over how that space is created and used. The city should belong to the people who live and use it, which thus becomes a "powerful democratic antidote to the forms of authority or 'titles to govern' based on wealth, nationality, technocratic expertise, and even electoral popularity that pertain in actually-existing cities" (Iveson, 2013. p. 945).

Lefebvre's seminal and ever omnipresent notion of the right to the city has long been used by actors such as academics, urban theorists and grass-roots activists as a

conceptual idea to help visualise and pave the way for more alternative and just urban structures. As defined by Harvey,

The right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city. It is, moreover, a common rather than an individual right since this transformation inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the processes of urbanization (2008. p. 23).

It must be noted that the right to the city can be appropriated in misleading ways, wherein individuals or groups could forward their own social, political or economic agendas under the guise of the notion.

In regard to the research project, the right to the city can be examined to highlight how and why non-conformist groups are appropriating the contested space and claiming it to their use: by use value, and subsequently, via DIY urbanism.

Use value vs. exchange value of urban space

The struggles for the right to the city that centre on use value against exchange value are significant to examine. It is particularly paramount when the conceptual, ideological and physical power of exchange value in urbanisation is considered. Lefebvre (1972, as cited in Merrifield, 2006. p. 69) has defined the city as “an exquisite oeuvre of praxis and civilization” wherein the oeuvre “is use value and the product is exchange value.” The use value of urban space can afford a variety of pleasures, free for anyone to indulge in irrespective of their socio-economic standing: “And this unproductive pleasure was a free-for-all, not a perk for the privileged” (Ibid. p. 69). This use value can help to establish what Harvey (2008) terms urban commonalities, where spaces have the potential to create and enable new social forms. This highlights the importance of social functions and use value of a space being prioritised over the capitalistically interested exchange value in order for more social cohesiveness, relations and potential activism to form. This necessity to move away from exchange value is further demonstrated by Merrifield, who examines that a city cannot exist “without a dynamic core, without a vibrant, open public forum, full of lived moments and “enchanted” encounters, disengaged from exchange value” (2006. p. 71).

In regard to the research question, non-conformist groups and activists have been fighting against evictions of informal settlements and for prioritizing the current and potential social value of the open land around Rummelsburger Bucht. The use value of the space could be investigated, and may include the building of affordable housing and open public recreational spaces, which in effect, would also benefit those who are marginalised (the poor, the homeless, local Berliners seeking to maintain its culture), thus superseding the exchange values of these urbanisations for further capitalistic investments and ventures. The focus is then on creating and maintaining the "oeuvre" in contrast to the space becoming or being reenacted as a commodity. Ultimately, those seeking a right to the city with use value that is embedded in the area are confronted by the right to the city of interests who aim to fill the urban space with exchange value. This struggle can be a class struggle, wherein those with political and economic power have a greater ability to enact and shape the urban plane with exchange value. This is highlighted by Harvey (2008, p. 38) whereby "the right to the city, as it is now constituted, is too narrowly confined, restricted in most cases to a small political and economic elite who are in a position to shape cities more and more after their own desires." The survival for non-conformist groups in a commoditised space is thus a challenge, a class struggle for the right to use, appropriate and embed space with use value. The ways in which urban space is enacted and produced will subsequently be highlighted and examined.

The production of space

Theoretical standpoint

The production of urban space is highly contested and complex. It is a process shaped by multiple actors vying for power as to how and why the space is used, the result being a space that is multilayered, shaped, reshaped and often challenged (Iveson, 2013. p. 942). According to Lefebvre, the production of space is an amalgamation of three components: the physical, mental and social space (Merrifield, 2006. p. 104). Space has the ability to be socially and actively produced: "it's an 'active moment' in social reality, something produced before it is reproduced, created according to definite laws, conditioned by 'a definite stage of social development'" (Merrifield, 2006. p. 107). This highlights how space is produced through both material conditions and social practices at a specific point in history.

In order to gain a more profound understanding into how space is socially produced, Lefebvre theorised a 'trialectical' process: representations of space, social practices and spaces of representation. *Representations of space* are how space is conceived by professionals such as urban planners, architects and engineers (Ibid. p. 109). *Social practices* focus on how people perceive space, on the ordinary facets of everyday life in an individual's world (Ibid. p. 110). *Spaces of representation* consist of spaces of everyday life and experiences, evoking the image of the 'inhabitant' and 'user.' This lived space is often dominated by the former two modes, which are utilised and controlled by the capitalist system (for example, by plans, schedules and bureaucratic politics). As a result, these spaces of representation can get "crushed and vanquished" (Ibid. p.111) by the hegemonic or conceived abstract space, which is a product and materialisation of the former two spaces. This trialectical process thus helps to explain the social patterns that produce this abstract capitalistic space, wherein it is produced through plans and schedules, both utilized and dominated by the capitalist system of production.

Despite this domination by abstract space, it is in this latter space of representation where the imagination can strive for change and appropriation, a space wherein the power lies to reconfigure the conceived and perceived spaces: "the conceptions or 'representations' of the proper uses of urban spaces that are authored by urban authorities are powerful but not all-powerful, and spaces are always available for reappropriation" (Iveson, 2013. p. 943). Merrifield (2006. p.110) mirrors this notion of the ability of spaces of representation to transcend from the other more repressive forms of spatial production: "Usually dominated by the other modes of spatial production, these are clandestine and underground spaces lived by artists and others who seek to describe alternative spaces." This point will be further elaborated in the forthcoming section on DIY urbanism.

Due to its multifaceted definition, it is therefore paramount to understand, decipher and examine the production of space from a theoretical unity of the aforementioned points. In doing so, it can allow for the advancement of epistemologies of place and space in the urban world, as is it then relative to and reflective of a specific context and history. A weakness of this theory, however, stems from the detachment between Lefebvre's abstract and objective theory to the real-time embodied struggle in the urban streets (Shields, 2013). Resistance is tangible, produced at the moment and in the middle of the repressive space. It is on the street, being lived and embodied by people. Abstract theory

fails to include the people resisting as active subjects, therefore it could be argued that the theory cannot translate nor understand the depth of resistance as a result of the distance that its objectivity creates (Shields, 2013). A further point of limitation is the Euro/West – centric context of this theory. It may not successfully be applied outside of these zones.

In regard to the research project, examining the production of space in Rummelsbruger Bucht is paramount in order to understand how the space has become contested. Firstly, it can be used to uncover how dominating groups (for example, investors or the State of Berlin) have organised the social space in order to achieve their own goals (beautifying Berlin for more investment, economic or political gains). Subsequently, it can be used to highlight at what expense these productions of space have on less dominant groups and their survival. Furthermore, it may examine how non-conformist groups can and have found gaps in the space to then appropriate for themselves, the topic of which will be reviewed in the following section of this paper.

Reappropriating gaps in the urban system through DIY urbanism

As previously discussed, abstract space can be malleable for appropriation, be it for modes of hegemony or liberation. Lefebvre, through the right to the city, stated that people could seek to challenge the repressive urban institutions and reappropriate space in order to alter urban life. This is often found in:

“various forms of self-management or workers’ control of territorial and industrial entities, communities and communes, elite groups striving to change life and to transcend political institutions and parties” (Lefebvre, 1972, as cited in Merrifield, 2006. p. 117).

As space is never concrete, efforts to order and govern the urban sphere cannot be absolute. As a result, inhabitants of a space can resist and escape some of the order, and find and enact their own visions (Iveson, 2013. p. 943). This is thus an enactment of the right to the city: a declaration for a new form of authority based on the assumption of equality for the inhabitants of the space through “finding ways to stage a disagreement between these competing forms of authority” (Ibid. p. 942).

Inhabitants can be unwilling to wait for urban improvements to happen in the future,

and thus seek ways to manifest the space for their belief systems now, albeit often without permission. Through DIY urbanism, people inhabiting a space can take their right to the city and declare and verify it in practice, creating cities within cities (Iveson, 2013). There is a shared desire to remake space and lifestyle into an alternative realm from the capital driven excesses of neo-liberalism. The right to the city with DIY urbanism can function to enfranchise people, whereby they are no longer just a consumer of space, but an active force in its creation. It can then be argued that strong ties to community can form and be maintained, thus enabling their possibility and longevity for survival.

It is precisely this last point that can shed light upon the survival of non-conformist groups in Rummelsburger Bucht. Being inhabitants of the space gives shared motives and authority for the right to the city, which is further enacted by DIY urbanism, thus reinforcing stronger ties to community. It can be a means to generate further support for the plight to reimagine the urban space that is now undergoing so much change and reappropriation by exchange valued interests. With the thoughts of Lefebvre vibrating through the words of Harvey (2012. p.xvi), we can:

“imagine and reconstitute a totally different kind of city out of the disgusting mess of a globalizing, urbanizing capital run amok. But that cannot occur without the creation of a vigorous anticapitalist movement that focuses on the transformation of daily urban life as its goal.”

This goal, manifested into tangible form, can rampantly be seen floating on the waters at Rummelsburger Bucht.

Performing research into non-conformist groups will examine how exactly they enact their right to the city as a result of shared inhabitation of the space. What is their vision of an alternative urban space? How does DIY urbanism enable such groups to survive despite multiple bouts of harassment, hostility and attempts at eviction?

Conclusion

In this review, the process of urbanisation highlighted and contextualised the current struggle for survival and motivation behind seeking a change in urbanisation. Entrepreneurialism and interurban competition showed how capitalistic driven motives

are behind urban development that often only benefits an elite few. Looking at Lefebvre's notion of the right to the city, it examined how an inhabitant of a space should have a claim to authority over how that space is created and used. The importance of use value of a space being prioritised over the capitalistically interested exchange value were highlighted, wherein use value allows for social cohesiveness and relations to form. The production of space through a trialectical process, leading to an abstract space open to appropriation was explored. Lastly, this malleable abstract space can be appropriated, and through DIY urbanism, the right to the city can be enacted, thus creating possibilities for systematic changes in the urban world.

Harvey once stated: "The freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves is, I want to argue, one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights" (2008. p. 23). The struggle of non-conformists groups to survive against the process of urbanisation unfolding in Rummelsburger Bucht is thus an example of this human right being put to use, this right to the city in full blown action.

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