



Vancouver's Contemporary State of Architecture

spatial productions and the consumption of spectacle

Christopher Chan
Dr. Wylly, Urban Studies 400

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The history of urbanism under capitalism has produced much of what we encounter in our cities today. Our urban environments have been produced regularly, thoroughly, and politically. Twentieth century planning and architecture have developed as specialized ways of constructing power into urban environments; design philosophies, various 'isms', and the agendas and influences of regional schools have been responsible for this. In short, over the last one hundred years era, our urban environments have changed at a speed incomparable to any other epoch in urban history. This has as much to do with advancements in communications, technical innovations, and the process of globalization, as it has to do with the maturation of a capitalist urban framework.

I am interested here in the urban form of our contemporary cities. Under a capitalist mode of social production, urban space has been captured and used as a political device by certain elite groups. The focus here will be on the ways in which capitalism, urban form, visibility, and knowledge intersect, struggle, and resist in contemporary urban space. Though a holistic treatment of urban form would be ideal, architecture will be favoured in this discussion in an attempt to focus the analysis.

The main questions that frame this paper are: in what ways does capital shape urban space in Vancouver? How then does this urban space of capital shape visibility? Furthermore, what does this visibility mean to us? And finally, how might we subvert this hegemonic visibility and capitalist production of architecture?

This paper will explore these ideas in two parts: first, a review and synthesis of relevant literature and research will identify the 'roots' and logic of which the understanding and analysis of part two comes out of; second, by looking at Vancouver as a case study, we might see how contemporary urban development in a trans-local, advanced capitalist space is impacting society. While cities of post-war Europe and Atlantic America have been greatly influenced and

produced under the thinking of high-modernism, cities such as Vancouver could be said to represent a post-modern, and critically 'new' mode of urban production, one that is based on the same capitalist creation of that of modernity but with new material consequences. This, combined with Vancouver's success in capturing the 2010 Winter Olympic games and the socio-spatial productions that are sure to follow, provides an incredibly rich environment for observation and investigation.

The Spatial Production and Consumption of the Symbolic Economy

Two main concepts that influence the perspective of this paper are the symbolic economy and spatial productions; however, their wide-ranging nature overlaps with other ideas, and as such should remain unfastened. Lefebvre's concept of spatial production posits that space is not passive. He organizes his thought around three main conceptions of space: the perceived, the conceived, and the lived (Gottdiener, 1993, p.3). Perceived space, in other words physical space, includes the material environment of the visual arts, architecture, and the urban environment. Conversely, conceived space, or in other words mental space, can be explained as a space where flows of power and consciousness exist, an understanding of space to the extent where we negotiate it daily. This space is one where the first space, the material space, bears great influence. Urban environments represent in visual terms the space of the city from which we construct our mental maps. These maps, it is argued, guide us in our experience and knowledge of the city (Gould and White, 1974). The third space, the space of the lived, is set as an ambiguous, infinite space that destroys the dualism created by the space of the perceived and space of the conceived. The purpose of this third space is to provide an undefined and unlimited space for a meta-realm of society, one where the interaction of material and mental space produce a unique social space. The space of the lived is a process; it is in this space that the production of social space occurs.

Lefebvre's conception of space as process carries important implications for the way we experience urban landscapes and the power inherent in them. As we will see, the symbolic economy relies heavily on this capitalist mode of socio-spatial production.

Fundamentally, the symbolic economy enshrouds our urban experience as the visual and perceptual representations of capitalism. For Zukin, "a significant number of new public spaces owe their particular shape and form to the intertwining of cultural symbols and entrepreneurial capital" (Zukin, 1995, p. 3). She notes that these symbolic productions carry intense political connotations by way of signifying what kind of aesthetic is created. Through these visual representations decisions about which groups belong in a space are made. A framing of space takes place that allows those who control the mode of production to control space. Beyond this, there is a more abstract plane on which the symbolic economy operates: on an international scale, where perception of a city's image influences international investments, the urban elite circulate the symbols of their city in attempts to promote and build their reputation. Boosters play into this global competition by enhancing the desirability of their symbolic economy, mainly through the manipulation of artistic, architectural and urban design capital. Finally, a third way which the symbolic economy is produced is through the local class hegemony of any particular city. This is especially tied into urban politics through the creation of institutions, events, and spectacle. In the contemporary world city, all three levels of the symbolic economy interact and as a result produce a space that is at once symbolic, capitalistic, and global.

These symbolic economies are used strategically within the cycles of production and consumption. Starting with the concept of a 'space of flows' (Castells, 1997, 2002), networks of symbols that circulate as currency between world cities create a world hierarchy based on constructed desirability. This space of flows taps into a constant stream of world city symbols, such as gentrified artist neighbourhoods, mega-project condominium developments, paramount

entertainment complexes, heritage designation sites, and spectacular urban environments and events. These are the material manifestations of an otherwise abstract process of capital and power. For example, the circulation of the Olympic games is a political affair with capitalistic intentions and material consequences once it arrives at a locality, when the space of flows condenses into a space of place (Castells 2002). Additionally, it perpetuates a world-city hierarchy in that it continually seeks out the current locale with the most desirable and potent symbolic economy; in other words the locale with the best image and reputation and the one that will provide an infrastructure that facilitates spectacle. The world-City hypothesis (Friedmann and Wolff, 1986; Beaverstock, Smith, and Taylor, 2000) emphasizes the importance and linkages a select (but increasing) group of cities that relate to each other through their shared participation in a space of flows. The games are but one example of the plethora of world circulating mega-events that play into and sustain the symbolic economy.

The change in urban governance from a managerial, growth machine model to an entrepreneurial, entertainment machine model has been an important development in twentieth century urban history, certainly in relation to space productions and symbolic economies. This paradigm shift in urban governance follows a broader historical change, that of a space-time compression through the process of globalization. It still remains that “the very essence of a locality is its operation as a growth machine” (Molotch, 1976, p. 310), however growth in the contemporary, and perhaps postmodern city is expressed in different ways. Under the entrepreneurial framework of urban governance, “the spatial division of consumption” (Harvey, 1989, p. 9) changes the dynamics of the production model of urban development, which was characteristic of the past. In order for localities to compete with each other for the “preconditions of growth” (Molotch, 1976, p. 312), they now need to participate in the space of flows as a flexible network society city (Castells, 1997 and 2001), instead of a rigid city locked into localized and

regional competition for industrial production. The space of flows liberates the processes of production and consumption. In many world entrepreneurial governed cities, the processes of production and consumption exist simultaneously (Sassen and Roost, 1999, p. 147), as cities are now “...made up of bits and pieces of different cities across the globe” (Castells, 2001, p. 554). What was once a managerial, top down application of power has shifted to a more lateral application of power where the government partners with local business elites to shape the productions of urban space. The current model of an entertainment machine aligns with Harvey’s recognition of an entrepreneurial mode of urban governance. Instead of using production, “urban public officials, business, and non-profit leaders are using culture, entertainment, and urban amenities to ... enhance their locations” (Clark, 2004, p. 1), all of which are consumption strategies. This mode of boosterism relies on the circulation of the symbols of culture, entertainment, and urban amenities in what Zukin has described as the symbolic economy. The symbolic economy is the new economy of the growth machine. The strategies of this economy call upon the material productions of architecture and urban design as well as visual art and advertising. Thus “symbolic nodality reconstructs spatial meaning in the city”, largely in part through “the marking of places ... and urban forms in relation to culture and meaning” (Castells, 2001, p. 556) by architecture and urban design. More concisely, “spectacle and display [have] become symbols of the dynamic community” (Harvey, 1989, p. 9).

The production of architecture in this framework is a result of the space of capital flows materializing in a space of place, where, when mixed with power, produces a materiality to social space that reflects itself. However, for this to occur, there needs to be a consensus on the receiving end of the equation; the city has to adopt a mode of urban governance that allows for such capital logic to materialize. This is precisely what is happening in Vancouver.

Vancouver in the Space of Flows

Vancouver's transition to Neo-Liberal urban politics came relatively late. It is generally associated to the overseas business initiatives of the 1980's, the entrepreneurial mode of attracting the Expo in 1986 (Mitchell, 2004), and the recent concessions made in light of the 2010 Olympics. The creative-destructive cycle of land development (Harvey, 2003) was evident in Vancouver during the late 1990's with the intensification of financial capital flows and continues today.

The rate of transformation of Vancouver's downtown peninsula is unprecedented in a North American context. The situation of Vancouver's development from a local to global city is a unique one. The advent of a post-industrialist era and the rise of the new middle class (Ley, 1996) have reproduced a global space in the downtown core of Vancouver since the 1960's. Flows of immigrants in the 1990's and flows of tourists in the past decade have given Vancouver a place in the network society. Altogether, the governance and capital development of Vancouver as a global city has resulted in an urban fabric aesthetic that serves itself. Architecture and urban form are produced in the logic of capital.

Unique to North America is the zoning of the downtown peninsula; unlike many world cities, an increasing portion of downtown Vancouver consists of residential condominiums constructed on top of row houses (Sandercock, 2005). Restaurants, retail boutiques and stores, and entertainment complexes are also being built rapidly as a result of Vancouver's inclusion into the space of flows. The spectacle of consumption has literally materialized through these developments, using architecture as a proxy, a façade for a space of sterility. These urban forms are produced under a capitalist and consumptive logic, a logic that yields certain consequences.

The symbolic economy of Vancouver's downtown peninsula can be examined through a Lynchian view of the city. Lynch stressed the importance of imageability in our experience of

urban space (Lynch, 1960). With this in mind, we will examine the imageability of the symbolic economy of the downtown Vancouver peninsula.

Seeing and Knowing

Much of Lynch's original readings of city form and text have been expanded upon, albeit indirectly, by geographers in later decades. There are many complimentary theories that, like Lynch, deal with questions of perceptibility. The notion of the visual, and practices of seeing – visibility – stirred discussions on the conquest of space (representational) by knowledge, then power (Cosgrove, 1984). Images then, are not neutral or passive in any way; they are very much active and work within a hierarchy of social relations (Rose, 2003). To consider what is seen and why it is seen is as important as considering what is unseen and why it remains unseen. The ongoing productions of urban social space produce direct and clear urban forms in its own logic; the architecture, the monuments, the streets, and the visceral and psychological environment of the urban spectacle represent a certain politic reflective of, and perhaps shaped by, advanced capitalism, consumption, spectacle, and shifting ideologies.

Urban semiotics, popular in the 1970's and 1980's, remain useful in terms of its analysis of how 'readable' the city is, or in Lynch's terms, how decipherable its imageability is. Derived from semiotics in general, urban semiotics treats the city, urban space, as a text (Gottdiener, 1986). Images of landscapes make up meaning through their relations to other images in terms of place (order), prominence (orality), and etymology (history). Syntax can be architecturally produced in this way, as characters produce language. Sign and signified relationships are relevant as well. The form as the sign – here expressed in material landscape texts – expresses the concept – here expressed as spatial productions in a globalized capitalist society – which takes on the position of the signified (Chandler, 2002: 18).

A content analyses of the city as text was in many ways what Lynch sought to accomplish in the first place. However, without acknowledgement or explicit use of linguistic theory, or environment psychological theory (Bell, 1978), his work remains primarily descriptive in nature. That being said, it continues to be useful because it leaves open the possibility for critical engagement with the imageability of space. Lynch's often considered seminal and classical work is the foundation on which more nuanced understandings of urban space can be considered with the strategies of post-modern geography.

A geographical treatment of content analysis methodology has been offered, most prominently, by Rose (2001). For her, a systematic categorization, coding, and reading are ways in which to derive ideologies and meanings behind seemingly stagnant visual materials, in the spatial-temporal sense. The same methodology follows in this paper: by treating the visual landscapes of three neighbourhoods in turn, observations, followed by categorizations and coding will help tease out certain patterns and ultimately meaning as urban space is comprehended.

Vancouver: Case Study

There are three 'new' neighbourhoods within the downtown peninsula that are worth noting for the purposes of this paper: the Concord Pacific developments along False Creek, the interstitial 'east-west' space of Gastown, and the properties that make up Coal Harbour.

Perhaps Vancouver's most iconic development of recent years, Li Ka-Shing's mega-project on the north shore of False Creek has set the precedent for many developments throughout the lower mainland, especially in the downtown core (Olds, 1998). The imageability of the Concord Pacific towers extends in all directions but is most prominent from the south. The sight line from Broadway and Cambie is picturesque: a cluster of glass high rises in the foreground traces the contours of the North Shore mountains in the background (which for Lynch make up

the 'natural monuments' of a city); the reflections of light from the water mimic the reflections of light off the glass facades and exudes a west coast modernism; and the teal and grey colour palette suggestive of a typical pacific-northwest physical geographical landscape. These images of Vancouver, while truthful to some extent, are embellished imaginatively and produced in circulation. Representations of this particular symbolic assemblage can be found in the media and local literature (Coupland, 2000; Taylor, 2006), which in turn characterizes mental maps of both locals and tourists.

Coal Harbour sits on the north side of the downtown peninsula and, like Concord Pacific False Creek, is a cluster of residential high-rise buildings that have been very rapidly built within the past few years. Collectively, these high-rises create a northern skyline that serves as Vancouver's face to incoming cruise ships, the north shore and West Vancouver, and commuters coming over the Lion's Gate Bridge. This is a heavily used image of Vancouver as civic monuments and landmarks such as the Canada Place convention centre, the Harbour Centre Tower, Stanley Park, and the Lions Gate Bridge are included with the high-rises. Like the developments along False Creek, Coal Harbour uses an identical building aesthetic.

Gastown exists as a zone of ambiguity between the downtown core and the impoverished East Hastings area. It is a space where political ideologies and class converge. Although an established community of the disenfranchised, recent gentrification has created new tensions and this is reflected in the text of this space.

A reading of these landscapes results in some interesting observations: first is the architectural aesthetic of the new housing stock. The homogeneity of the appearance of the high-rises is astounding (that is, of Coal Harbour and False Creek). It seems to be formulaic in conception, and uneventful in realization. All use form as a means of presenting an edgy, hip, and flashy new building typology. This is evident in the facades of these buildings as well as

miscellaneous advertising brochures for any given building. There are some design cues that are puzzling: random curves and twists of lines, light use of ornamentation, and unrefined programming of space in general (dealt with later). Materially, there is a heavy reliance on glass. Almost everything is glazed in a glass skin with white, grey, teal, or blue structural elements to support it.

The aesthetic of Gastown is slightly different. Although there will be new developments which bring with them their own aesthetics (predictably the same glass tower aesthetic), much of the area is composed of older housing stock. This space provides a stark contrast to a space such as Coal Harbour or False Creek. However, there are contemporary architectural forms taking shape in Gastown, for example the creation of parking garage that brings colour to the street (Henriquez & Partners, 2004), re-appropriations of space (Satoshi Matsuoka & Yuki Tamura, 2005), and most of all, the redevelopment of Woodward's. Slowly, the new architecture is gentrifying, selectively, the old with more or less the same use of, it seems, a Vancouver specific architecture.

Second is the positioning of these neighbourhoods. They are all on the edges of the peninsula, so as to create a façade constructed of individual building facades, of downtown Vancouver. The effect this has is one of territorialization. So as to enclose the urban space of downtown with a certain architectural aesthetic, the positioning of developments in these neighbourhoods clearly demarcates the presence of downtown Vancouver. In the case of Gastown, it seeks to capture space from the disenfranchised through gentrification and erect a west-east visual border.

Third is the design for spectacle and display, for seeing and being seen. The seawall, an incredibly scenic path/bikeway that traces the western edge of the downtown peninsula, has its endpoints at Coal Harbour and False Creek. Each neighbourhood is designed in such a way that café's, restaurants, retail shops, and residences are moved to the immediate background, allowing

amble space for public use in front. This allows for a lot of activity in these neighbourhoods: there are performers (public uses of the space in front of the buildings) and audiences (public/private uses of spectator spaces) in the same space. Alternatively, the duality between performer and spectator is easily destabilized; places of spectatorship become spaces of performance as well when performances of taste and style occur within the spaces of patronage. Altogether, these social spaces are consumed at one level or another, but from all vantage points. These spaces are intense concentrations of a consumption society.

Architecture and urban space as a singular aesthetic, a façade for the whole of downtown Vancouver, and displays of spectacle for consumption are the three main similarities of the neighbourhoods. One way to organize this information is to scale it: the processes that occur within the spectacle consumption realm are well grounded, for the most part. People have to be in the space of spectacle to consume it in the most direct sense, which is on the ground, in the shops, and in the units. Thus, this realm of spectacle represents the smallest scale, the unit of the neighbourhood. Architecture as a singular aesthetic asserts a singular vision and thus power over civic space. Certain elites who are involved with the development process dictate the aesthetic of their projects; consequently, their politics of aesthetics are imposed visually on the landscape, specifically as far as the image travels, physically. With this reasoning, the singular aesthetic of these neighbourhoods represents processes on the scale of the city in general. For those with local knowledge of the city, the aesthetic can be read as an elite play of power. Altogether, the consumption of space at the neighbourhood scale and the representation and transmission of mono-aesthetics at the citywide scale creates the image of the city at the global scale, the façade of downtown Vancouver. Within the symbolic economy the downtown peninsula represents a singular image of Vancouver to be exported and consumed in other localities.

Discussion

Aesthetics is not used here to simply mean a judgement of taste of art and fashion. Instead, there is a sense of moral sentiment within the word aesthetic. I mean to imply a universal sense of moral judgement, one that taps into an a priori sense of good and bad. In this sense, I wish to critique the aesthetics of the façade, but by doing so, critique the signified processes of power that lie beyond the immediate image of the trendy and fashionable.

First, the use of glass in architecture, it has been argued, manifests political contexts of their production (Fierro, 2003). What the glass comes to represent in Vancouver is a prioritization of image and spectacle over people. The city of Vancouver, under a Neo-Liberal mission to attract more investments, compete with other world cities, and in general promote the reputation of the city, has designed for consumption of the landscape instead of for the utilitarian concerns of the citizens. The practicality of glass buildings, for one, is little, when buildings are exposed, as they are in False Creek, to the sun all day; although this allows a spectacle of Vancouver to be presented, the residents do not receive the same benefit. Secondly, as alluded to earlier, the transparency of glass facades reduces residential housing to a visual event; it allows the residents to be consumed by the gazing public.

Second, the program of space that characterizes these buildings suggests a design for maximum profitability in place of the interests of the user. Decorative balconies and cramped layouts are signs of a developer driven project, not architecture.

Third, while the new neighbourhoods are successful in creating a lively social space, the spaces are not inclusive. They are constructed in such a way so that certain social groups feel out of place while others feel very much in place. This is evident in the types of retail stores, the price points, and security guards. There are even private property signs to signify areas which may look public, but are in actuality private.

These three neighbourhoods represent the global – finascapes, ethnoscaples, mediascapes (Appardurai, 1990) – in the local, and as such serve as good case studies for understanding the processes of production at play within the space of symbolic flows which include the use of architecture as imagery

Conclusion

Going global has had material consequences for the city of Vancouver. A neo-liberal governance, operating on an entrepreneurial mode of governance has exposed Vancouver to a logic of capital that creatively destroys and rebuilds urban land in its own interests. What this does is removes the social responsibility of architecture from the people; instead a developer culture of commodifying architecture for consumption is the new reality.

Moreover, in an attempt to reproduce their capital, developers reproduce a certain aesthetic of architecture. Specifically, as in the case of False Creek, Coal Harbour, and Gastown, aesthetic is used politically, to signify power over space and over people. Architecture is used to simultaneously create and preserve hegemony of the elite – the circle of businesses which partner with civic government to promote the city.

Visuality is shaped by these aesthetics. When we attempt to read the city as text, we receive the same message: spectacle and consumption have become what the city desires.

The façade is the major strategic device in which hegemonic powers communicate their agenda. The façade is easy to control and easier to consume, especially when constructed to be consumed within the symbolic economy. Architecture has lost the utopian ideals it once held in high regard when urban governance was playing a more supportive, managerial role. The selling of the city in response to financial hardship does not have to include the selling of architecture. In a way, architecture can be used to resist capital logic. The capitalist mode of spatial production is

exclusionary and hegemonic. By resisting the capitalist logic of urban fabric – by designing thoughtfully, sensitively, or radically – architecture has a hope of balancing the politics of space.

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