

Methodologies for Reconstructing New Landscapes of Consumption and Production

Larissa Begault, Research Fellow, Healthy Materials Lab,
Parsons Design Lab, Parsons School of Design
begal436@newschool.edu

Julia Borowicz, Part Time Lecturer, Parsons School of Design
boroj211@newschool.edu

Abstract

This working paper outlines a new methodology, actionable theory, for critically investigating the 'public' spaces produced within large-scale luxury developments in New York City. Actionable theory offers different means for intervening in such processes and new openings for a proposal that challenges the production of highly uneven urban landscapes, by shifting existing power dynamics within a development site. The proposal is a legislated body called Public Action Review Collaborative (PARC). PARC works to counter the stratification of publics along racial and class lines by moving past distributive notions of justice and offering institutionalized mechanisms in which a representational public can participate in the decision making process affecting their environment.

Keywords:

Citizenship, Participatory Urbanism, Representational Justice, Urban Development, Public Space, Belonging.

This research project engages in the processes and negotiations that take place in the creation of new landscapes of consumption and production. Landscape here refers to the spaces produced through the need of surplus capital to be invested in fixed and human assets. Their built form derives from cycles of valorization and devalorization, land speculation and profit maximization, and is produced for a new ascendant class identity born out the most recent labor force restructuring.¹ Situating this within the growing trend of public-private partnerships, our work is born out of a trans-disciplinary methodology, actionable theory, for investigating, interpreting and intervening in the production of 'public' space within such landscapes.² This methodology includes a reflexive theory practice binary. Theoretical analysis, site observation, and site analysis are at the core of this approach. Of particular interest are the areas of intersection among these three methods, where productive spaces are created for investigation – as new ways of conceptualizing space – and generation – as the fertile ground for the production of

such space.

This allows for the creation of new mechanisms for the participatory production of 'public' space within which participatory and democratic acts are possible. In order to investigate the current development of public-private space, we are looking at large scale luxury redevelopment projects in New York City.³ These sites are significant to study because they are one of the current manifestations of the production of such new landscapes being packaged through a number of provisions, namely affordable housing and open, 'public' space, within neighborhoods with established communities. To what extent do these spaces meet the objectives they promise to communities, typically in need of more green space? How do these benefits weigh against the potential costs of development? This research questions how the process of production of such landscapes and its outcomes participate in the shaping of citizenship, belonging and representation.⁴

Through actionable theory, new openings are established for multiple publics to take part in such space production through a proposal for a legislated body, which we have called Public Action Review Collaborative (PARC). PARC is a participatory model, with binding authority that expands democratic practices by including representational justice in local politics.⁵ It oversees the production and management of 'public' space, creating long term structural change and challenging the power imbalance in urban development. The objective is a city mandated model that is replicable across New York. Applying the model of agonistic pluralism, which involves relations between adversaries who share common (symbolic or physical) space but seek to organize it in different ways, allows for the recognition that a politics without adversary falsely seeks to reconcile all interests provided that they align with the project at hand and can be part of the 'people' or thus legitimate public (Mouffe, 2000). PARC draws on this conception by enabling productive agonism within space production, recognizing the failure of consensus, and advocating for the necessity of multiple publics, while concurrently seeking change within the existing system.

It is our contention that the 'public' spaces produced within such redevelopments participate in a broader trend of spaces of amenity for the adjacent luxury developments generated through public subsidies but do not consistently contribute to the welfare of the general public. The formulaic design typically creates predefined uses tied to commercial entities, creating spaces that become commodified and depoliticized sites for consumption and passive recreation. Further, their effect is not neutral but rather they carry agency in contributing to rising land values, speculation, and the ever increasing upscaling of the city. We argue that the conceived cost-benefit calculus represents a consensus amongst the status quo — public officials, private developers, and the public — and goes unquestioned. Thus, they contribute to existing contradictions in the urban process and decision-making inherent in public-private partnerships.

PARC reconfigures the current distribution of exchange rather than use value generated from 'public' space and new landscapes of consumption and production. Currently, private interests, vested in these spaces, radically limit access and a sense of belonging. Activating belonging and represen-

tation adds significant value to current democratic structures and enables new conceptions of publicity to be generated (Fraser, 1990). Here publicity entails firstly, the establishment of a site for communication, engagement, and contestation; secondly, the relationships within a site between multiple publics; and thirdly, the various ways in which publics express themselves and form discursive spaces (Young, 2000).

The purpose of such design is to create spaces that reveal and challenge existing power relations by providing openings for dissent and new possibilities for action (Di Salvo, 2010).⁶ PARC introduces a new means of envisioning space production that is contra to the status quo. Its purpose is to enable contestation around issues of ownership, displacement, disagreement, access, and representation. PARC draws on our concept of productive agonism through, first, exposing the root of such conflicts and unmasking a fake sense of consensus; second, providing the essential deliberative spaces for contestation; and third, granting the legislative power to institutionalize its outcomes.

In examining the multiscale forces that shape our new landscapes of consumption and production, we bear witness to economic and political structures that infiltrate numerous aspects of our daily lives, from sites as intimate as the body and home, to our public spaces, urban localities, and global sites of encounter. It is fundamental to look at the interstices of human action, capital flows, cycles of investment and disinvestment, and everyday spaces of deliberation and struggle in order to begin to carve out openings for alternative modes of cohabiting and commoning that are more just and representative. This also means we must radically shift our understandings of where such critical sites for action reside. We need to look to state institutions for the generation of new modes of exercising our citizenship within new democratic spaces of struggle, contest, and productive agonism. This requires a more expansive idea of what state institutions can offer, beyond merely a means for opposing corruption and power, as spaces of difference, social change, and representative justice. In introducing PARC as an institutionalized body, we aim to harness the critical potential of institutions as deliberative spaces of action.

Notes

1 For a more in depth discussion of these processes, see Harvey (1978) and Deutsche (1996).

2 'Public' refers to privately owned or managed, publically accessible spaces. Also known as open space within mixed use developments.

For a critique of public- private partnerships, see Julian Brash's (2011) examination of New York City under the Bloomberg administration. For a more general and historical critique, see Harvey (1989).

3 This research was completed during 2014-2015 in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, where both practitioners reside. Some of the research methods included historical document and archive collection, individual interviews, expert interviews, workshops, and participant observation.

4 Holston and Appadurai (1996) provide a more expansive notion of citizenship that we draw on in our work. We also apply the framework of Insurgent citizenship – citizenship that is not bound by the nation state and seeks other forms of legitimacy – which is critical to rethinking what 'social' means, and the realm of possibility rooted in heterogeneous lived experience (Holston, 1995).

5 For a discussion of representational justice, see Iris Marion Young (1990). Representational Justice involves providing mechanisms that account for and give voice to marginalized populations regardless of the proportionate representation of the group in relation to the rest of the public.

6 As academic practitioners, we continue to shift between feeling unable to accept working within current development processes and by default participating and perpetuating highly uneven structures. On the other hand, we are also aware that structural systemic change in the organization of city development and building is unlikely to fundamentally happen, so we question whether completely stepping back from business practices serves the communities we seek to protect.

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