

Mobilities, Crises and Removals

I live on the eastern periphery of downtown, literally on the access road of I-37 as it roars its way South of the Alamodome. Open my front door and there is the highway, the Tower to your right; to your left is the federal green sign that points you coastward, where I was born. Behind my house run the Union Pacific tracks. You can sit on my front stoop and twice yearly watch the fireworks bloom from the base of the Tower. You can sit at the writing desk that I pushed up to the window and gaze out across the highway to the Lavaca neighborhood on the other side, imagining that by unfocusing your eyes just so, you can suture the two neighborhoods back together, making whole what the highway split. Imagining that the respiratory timescale of trees and season persist, just perceptible, pulsing just below the skin of the highway with its line of cars blurring past, so constant as to be negligible. Almost. I moved into this little house of my uncle's, east of downtown, when I came back home from Kansas. Other neighborhoods have begun to change to the North and East of the Dome, but here on this street and the streets behind, it's still the barrio. Just a matter of time, though. They've started to shut down my street for UTSA games at the Dome--my uncle and aunt and neighbors scrambling to scoop up the cash dropped for parking by impatient fans, \$20 or \$30 per backyard spot--and I wonder how long it will be before developers start buying up houses or pushing for eminent domain if they have to, like they did to build the interstate highway that serves as my front yard.

When I can, I like to ride my bike to work. Lately, I've been using the Hays Street Bridge to get from the Eastside to downtown and beyond, and it's gotten me thinking about mobilities, a term sociologists use to talk about the importance of flows--of goods, information, bodies, images, wastes--to the workings of power within post-industrial societies like ours. What kind of

mobilities, and whose, have been given priority in the city's historic development North at the expense of the urban core? Whose mobilities, and what kind, are given preference now in the plans to reinvest in downtown, whether we're talking about bridges or parks or streetcars? Whose uses and rights of passage through urban space count, and who gets cut off or shut out or displaced? Who has a right to the city, and why? As I cross the bridge, as

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Xochitl plays in front of our casita by the highway. Photo by Marisol Cortez

I pass under the highway--past sidewalk encampments, backed by chainlink fencing serving as impromptu clothes racks--I think about whose bike riding counts: the recreational riders able to afford bike rental from the B-cycle program? Or the day laborers who ride without helmet, against traffic, on their beat up mountain bikes? I think about the homeless man who helped us collect petition signatures opposing the city's brewery deal and land sale last July 4th, before the fireworks display. A participant in a clinical trial, he was intimately familiar with the bridge, using it daily to walk back and forth from where he stayed on the Eastside to the trial downtown. When we explained the purpose of the petition to him, he immediately understood its implications for him as a foot traveler and as a poor person. Build the brewery, and the bridge would no longer function as a connector between Eastside and downtown. Not for people like him, or for the man who patrols the bridge in his wheelchair each evening, who lives at the base of the bridge. Build the brewery, and the bridge would instead become a destination for those with other kinds of mobility, traveling by car from other places, with cash to spend upon arrival. Not a bridge for inhabitants walking from point A to point B, but a bridge for visitors. Not a structure that facilitates historical memory, or deeper still, an ecological memory of the respiratory timescale that persists beneath the industrial landscape. Rather,

a structure for harnessing the flow of capital, positioning the city within a global economic order.

What are the longer historical forces behind the present trend toward privatizing public spaces like bridges and parks? This second segment of the series begins to provide an explanation, for my own desire to understand where I live and what I live amidst as much as for the community of readers. To that end, these next couple of segments run the risk of being a little didactic and dense, but with good reason: as I mentioned in my first article (February 2013 issue of *La Voz*), understanding why we fight over the fate of a house or a bridge requires an understanding of the deeper historical and sociological forces that shape urban space for some interests and not for others. When we understand this wider context, we are in a better position to understand why city efforts to redirect capital to the deindustrialized urban core, the “decade of downtown” called for by SA2020, often means displacement rather than revitalization, profit for developers rather than redistribution of wealth. In short, we see not a reversal of neglect and disenfranchisement, but the newest phase of its manifestation. Same wolf, different costume.

Boom and Bust

Understanding the fight over the Hays Street Bridge as a land struggle first requires a basic understanding of the logic of capitalism as an economic system, as this logic makes up the most big-picture set of limits within which cities make decisions about land use. While some of this information may feel a little like Marxism 101, it’s important to recognize (as I tell my students) that Marxist theory is one of the foundations of sociology, which emerged as a discipline in order to understand the new forms of social organization and inequality historically specific to industrialized societies. Far from being an ideological position, these early insights into the nature of capitalism continue to inform basic sociological understandings of structural inequality (racism, sexism, classism, colonialism, environmental injustice) in the 21st century.

Here is how I’ve explained it to my students. Capitalism is not simply an economy based on money, but an economy based on commodification--what we might think of as “thingification.” Within capitalism, everything (nature, goods, human labor) is reduced to the status of a thing, an object capable of exchange between buyer and seller. Exchanged for what? Not for other useful things, but for a surplus--profit--which can then be reinvested to produce more profit the next go round. Carrots are produced not to eat directly or to trade for potatoes to eat, but to maximize the production of a surplus that can be used to produce more carrots, ad infinitum. It’s not that carrots can’t still be eaten, but that this is no longer the point of the system. The value of carrots as something that satisfies a human need is secondary to their value as things useful in maximizing profit for those who control the process of producing them.

Two other familiar fea-

tures of capitalism as an economic system are important here. The first is class society, or the inherently unequal balance of power between those who control the process of production (the land, machines, and factories involved in making stuff) and those who do not, and who consequently are forced to work for wages in the employ of those who own. Although Marx was clearly writing in a very different historical context, in which divisions between owners and workers was much more simple and stark, recent attention to the 99% versus the 1% continues to capture the reality that while capitalism as a system produces vast wealth, this wealth is concentrated in the hands of a very few, both within the U.S. and globally. According to Marx, this is because profit comes from an appropriation of the wealth that workers produce above and beyond their wages--but also, significantly, from an appropriation of the commons (land, air, water as resources and waste sinks) as “free” gifts of nature.

The second feature of the system important to this discussion is the set of contradictions inherent to the capitalist logic of “grow or die,” manifesting as a boom-and-bust pattern of repeated crises. Some of these contradictions are socioeconomic, as we have seen with the housing market collapse and, arguably, the fracking boom south of SA. Here, boom conditions (like the discovery of natural gas deposits trapped in shale) lead to speculative reinvestment of profit, which produces a ‘bubble,’ or an artificially inflated set of market conditions. Eventually the bubble bursts; eventually, the continual reinvestment of surplus to produce more surplus leads to a crisis of overaccumulation: too much surplus with no way to reinvest it, no further potential for profit. This is the point at which companies pull out of once-impooverished communities, leaving them impoverished once more; at which the stock market crashes and unemployment spikes, at which the housing market collapses and an epidemic of foreclosures ensues. And some of the contradictions of capitalism are ecological, in that an economy geared toward infinite growth bumps up against the finite nature of its resource base--as we see with the current climate destabilization produced by a carbon-intensive industrial economy that needs to blow off the tops of mountains, or transport tarsands crude from Native lands in Canada to the cancer-stricken neighborhoods of the Houston Ship Channel, all to keep the whole thing going just a little while longer.

What do these inherent tendencies toward social inequality, ecological destruction, and boom and bust have to do with land use decisions within cities? As urban geographer David Harvey explains, urbanization has historically functioned to regulate crises of accumulation by absorbing and disposing of surplus. What this means is that when bubbles have burst, building and tearing down and rebuilding urban infrastructure has been one way that governments have attempted to regulate crises of overaccumulation and unemployment (war is another). Or, as stated more simply by historian Dolores Hayden, “home building [becomes] as a business strategy for economic recovery” (2002, 39).

This is not a new pro-



cess historically. Harvey points out that in mid-19th c. Paris, the urban planner George-Eugene Haussmann headed a massive public works project that absorbed “huge quantities of labour and capital by the standards of the time and, coupled with suppressing the aspirations of the Parisian workforce, was a primary vehicle of social stabilization” (2008, 26). Closer to home, urbanization (and war) helped pull the U.S. out of the Great Depression in the mid-20th century, with the construction of the interstate highway system and the flight of capital from the downtown core to the suburbs fostering the geographic expansion of cities. This was an era of what Harvey and others have called monopoly capitalism: think the stable, unionized factory jobs of Detroit that have become a thing of the past in a more recent era of deindustrialization and outsourcing.



NEWS FEED: INSTEAD OF ANY SUBSTANTIVE ISSUES, WE'RE GOING TO DISCUSS VERY IMPORTANT DIRTY PICTURES.

Cartoon by Stephanie McMillan, whose radical comix can be found @ stephaniemcmillan.org

Urban Renewal = Black and Mexican Removal

In the United States, the economic changes brought about by mid-20th century urbanization and suburbanization have been inseparable from histories of racial segregation. As Hayden writes, “postwar suburbs represented the deliberate intervention of the federal government into the financing of single-family housing across the nation. For the first time, the federal government provided massive aid directed to developers. [B]ankers, real estate brokers, builders, and manufacturers ... lobbied for government support for private development of small homes to boost consumption” (39).

However, people of color were largely excluded from this push toward subsidized homeownership, through segregationist practices in mortgage guarantees (ensured by the Veterans’ Administration for white male veterans only), redlining (refusal by banks and insurance companies to extend home loans to residents of particular areas of the city), and racial restrictions within suburbs. As white flight populated the suburbs, the flight of jobs and capital away from the urban core prompted by urban renewal meant, effectively, a policy of urban disinvestment, which created poverty that was not only spatially concentrated but also racialized.

Hayden calls this a “two-tier” housing policy, where “cramped multi-family housing for the poor would be constructed by public authorities, while more generous single-family housing for white, male-headed families would be constructed by private developers with government support. This policy disadvantaged women and people of color, as well as the elderly and people of low incomes” (41). In San Antonio, racially restricted housing covenants pushed the city’s majority brown and black residents to the South, East,

and West sides, while intentional investment in new growth on the Northside has starved these sides of town of funds, basic services and infrastructure. At the same time, investment to the North has encouraged sprawl that threatens the aquifer that provides water to the entire city.

As Hayden argues, the two-tier housing policy also significantly impacted how cities were designed and what they were designed for. In the mid-20th century, “the suburbanization of the United States was not merely a matter of new infrastructures. ... [I]t also entailed a radical transformation in lifestyles, bringing new products from housing to refrigerators and air conditioners, as well as two cars in the driveway and an enormous consumption of oil” (Harvey 2008, 27). As highways were built and cities rescaled,

urban planners increasingly designed urban space for cars, and hence for the auto- and petroindustries.

But the advent of “automobility” has had vast implications not only for public health and the wellbeing of the global environment, but for possibilities of creating and sustaining public life within urban spaces. In part, this is because highway construction and urban renewal programs have often meant the decimation of intact neighborhoods and community serving businesses; according to Gihan Perera of the

Miami Workers’ Center, since the 1960s urban renewal programs have undertaken the removal of 1600 black neighborhoods around the country (Tides Foundation 2007, 8). In downtown San Antonio, urban renewal meant the displacement of an estimated 1200 residences by HemisFair Park and the economic segregation of both Eastside and Westside by the construction of I-37 and I-35. But the threat to democratic public life arises also in the attempted solution to these histories of inner city neglect, which too frequently means the privatization of central city plazas, parks, and spaces, rather than true public investment in the most vulnerable neighborhoods and residents. In the context of historical disinvestment, “wholesale gentrification is then seen as revitalization. Frequently, however, this means existing residents are priced out and poverty migrates elsewhere” (19).

Understanding these more recent dynamics as the backdrop to current struggles over public lands at Hays Street and HemisFair (aka The Park Formerly Known as HemisFair) requires an understanding of the global transition to neoliberal forms of capitalism, as this transition has informed how city governments make decisions about local land uses. It also requires understanding the particular character of privatization occurring--more often via the civil, reasonable-sounding public-private partnership than via the brutality of eminent domain. Next month, then, we tackle Hays Street and HemisFair in the context of what scholars call “neoliberal urbanism.” Stay tuned! □

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