

PART THREE

Cities as
if Women
Mattered:
*a special series
of La Voz*

by Marisol Cortez

THINKING Hays Street AND HemisFair IN AN ERA OF NEOLIBERAL URBANISM



One of the common misunderstandings about the struggle over the fate of the Hays Street Bridge is that the struggle is merely about the integrity of the bridge as a physical structure. It's not: at bottom, it is about relations between people, about the relations of inequality that motivate conflicting desires for urban space. The struggle over the Hays Street Bridge exposes the bigger forces driving downtown redevelopment generally, forcing the question of whether those forces serve those most vulnerable or whether they work in the interest of the most connected and secure. What happens to the bridge and the land surrounding tells us much about how we relate to one another, and how we relate to the land itself, as nature: that's why it matters.

In previous segments of this series, we've been discussing the nature of these social and environmental relations, widening our lens so as to sketch out the basic characteristics of capitalism that inform land use decisions within cities. Overall, following urban geographer David Harvey, we've argued that the logic of capitalism is the logic of "accumulation through dispossession," the logic of the land grab: the creation of wealth for a few through the enclosure and privatization of the commons that the many depend on—the land, air, and water which belong to everyone and to which we all belong. We've also argued that urbanization is one way that the state attempts to regulate "crises of accumulation," or the patterns of boom and bust inherent to a capitalist economy. Building up cities to tear them down to build them up again is one way of absorbing surplus capital and labor during inevitable times of recession.

In the third segment of this series, we continue exploring the struggles around the Hays Street Bridge and downtown redevelopment in relation to these two arguments, asking: How do the city's plans for downtown and its peripheral neighborhoods represent a new phase of "accumulation through dispossession"—profit through land grabbery? The case I want to make is that we cannot understand the city's plans, nor resistance to them, without understanding what Julie Sze and other

urban scholars mean by *neoliberal urbanism*. Because if there is a single term that names what is happening, that is it.

Neoliberal What?

The importance of understanding a technical mouthful like “neoliberal urbanism” is the importance of placing local efforts to protect public spaces into the wider context of long term shifts at the level of both national and global economies. Within the past 40 years, the development of a neoliberal style of capitalism has produced new strategies of profit-making, new forms of urban governance, and new kinds of urban spaces and identities as well. As Gihan Perera from Miami Worker’s Center puts it: “Take New York, for instance. To really understand the economy and structure of New York, you need to understand its role in finance and real estate not only in New York but throughout the globe. ... [Similarly,] Miami holds almost every bank headquarters in Latin America, and most decisions about investment are happening in cafeterias across the street from those banks on Brickell Avenue in Miami. And it’s from that context that investment and economic and policy decisions are being made throughout the world.” To understand local fights around Hays Street and HemisFair, we have to think global, in other words—which means understanding the shift to neoliberal forms of capitalism insofar as these shape urban governance, and by extension, the production of urban space.

As urban geographer David Harvey put it in 1990, neoliberalism is a “different regime of accumulation,” a new stage of capitalism that has emerged since the crash of the global property market in the 1970s, prompting a shift in how capitalism works on the economic, political, and cultural levels. While the essential logic—accumulation through dispossession—has remained the same, this logic has a different style and flavor. On the economic level, no longer do we see the post-WWII triumvirate of big business held in check by big labor and big government. This earlier era of what Harvey and others have called monopoly or Fordist capitalism was marked by large, centralized manufacturing sites able to offer workers a standard of living approximating something called “middle class” (or, the ability to consume what one produces without actually controlling the process of production) via stable, lifelong positions with benefits.

Instead, we find ourselves amidst a new relationship between state and capital that goes by different names: postindustrial, flexible, postmodern, global, transnational, post-Fordist. Its biggest characteristics are *casualization* (the conversion of stable jobs for life into the uncertainty of “permatemp” positions based on short term contracts); the *deindustrialization* of traditional industrial centers as manufacturing relocates to third world spaces where production is cheaper and more profitable; the rise of a *post-industrial service-* and *knowledge-based econ-*

omy in the global North; and—perhaps most significantly—the *withdrawal of state regulation* to permit and encourage capital’s new border-hopping, globalized character. Where monopoly capitalism was stable and centralized, neoliberal capitalism is flighty and unstable, with even less of a commitment to location. Neoliberal capitalism is also notorious for restricting possibilities for a democratic political process, as it has meant the greater power of transnational corporations to shape the lives and wellbeing of local populations, with less input from those most impacted and with far less accountability to national governments.

Within cities, neoliberal restructuring has also meant “extensive changes in the institutions of urban governance,” according to geographer Mark Purcell. Whereas the function of local government in an earlier era of monopoly capitalism was to administer federal distributions, Purcell states that the “local economy [is now] increasingly less a function of the national economy[.] Local governments have become more concerned with ensuring that the local area competes effectively in the global economy”—as evident in the emphasis of SA2020 on becoming a “world class” city. In this shift, local governments have

begun to contract out previously public functions and services to “volunteer organizations and private forms, and [they] have developed quasi-public bodies—such as ... urban development corporations and public private partnerships—to carry out many of the functions of local government.” In this way, corporations become the model for public entities (education, health care, parks and recreation, arts), which more and more are forced to function like for-profit industry (witness the renaming of the city’s Office of Cultural Affairs as the Department of Creative Development, rid-

ing the wave of neoliberal rhetoric around “creative economies” driven by the “creative class”). As on the global level, the chief side effect of these developments has been the disenfranchisement of urban residents, as real decision-making is transferred from local governments to the developers and industry boosters whose investments cities frequently court just to stay afloat.

Under neoliberalism, even the mechanisms cities have created to redress histories of uneven development become tools for the transfer of wealth from poor communities to wealthy investors, without much say so from anyone at all. For instance, what we see in case of the Alamo brewery project is that, in the most cynical manner, the city is using programs intended to reverse decades of inner city disinvestment and resulting racialized poverty *as tools of gentrification, displacement, and resettlement*. As sociologist Robert Bullard and other transportation scholars have pointed out, the TEA-21 funds used by the Hays Street Bridge Restoration Group to restore the bridge have been used by many communities around the U.S. to mitigate the

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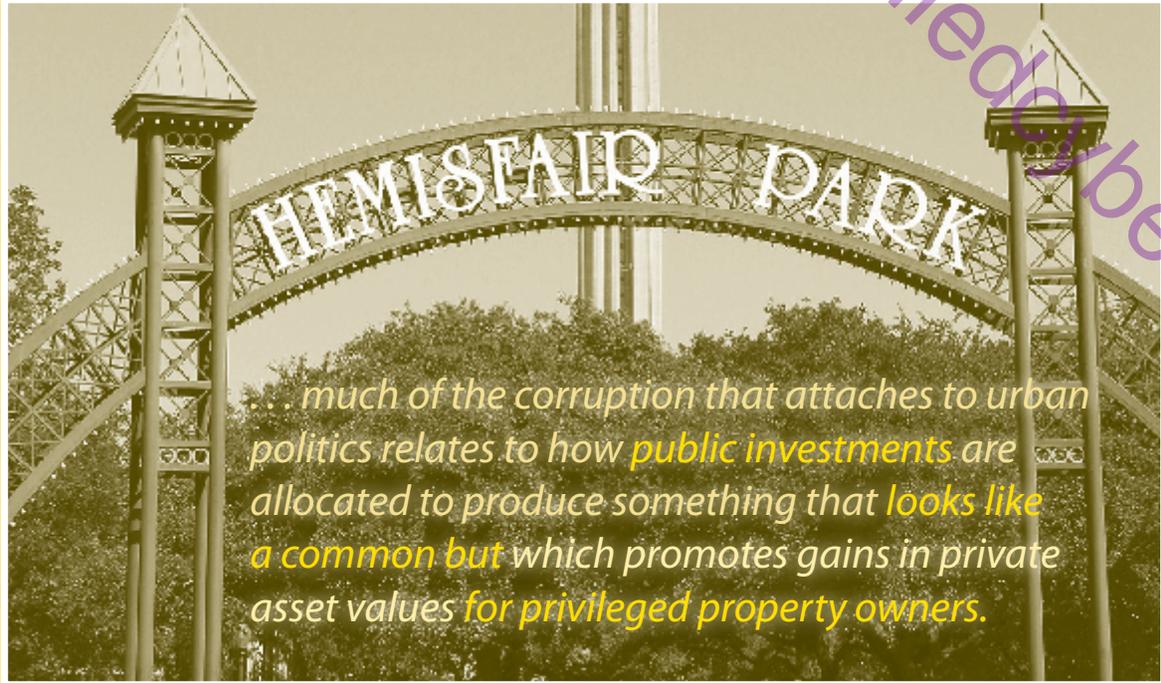
racist impacts of urban renewal, connecting inner city neighborhoods gutted by highway projects back to the downtown core. Additionally, inner city reinvestment money, infill policy fee waivers, and other public incentives offered to Alamo Beer have been given not to those historically excluded from this access, but to *those already privileged by their political connections*. Redistributive mechanisms that should be used to disrupt and correct histories of disinvestment are instead being used to *extend* a long history of transferring public wealth to outside investors rather than to local residents— except where residents can be redefined in accordance with neoliberal preferences as “paying customers.”

downtown living and increased green space to ask: what kind of residential space will be created? What kind of green space? For whom? If rents will be anything like those in the restored Southtown lofts cited by Mayor Castro in his recent State of the City address as an example of the success of the “Decade of Downtown” (\$1330 for a 1 bedroom apartment and \$1845 for 2 bedrooms, with no affordable units set aside or section 8 allowed), then these are not questions we can afford to stop asking. Moreover, while the city is not technically selling the public lands of HemisFair Park outright to housing developers, those developers will have long term leases with the city, proceeds from which the city will use as income for park upkeep. While this sounds like a tidy solution to austerity-era budgets, what it means in effect is that the promised increase in green space acreage will be subject to increased private surveillance. This green space will no longer be for everyone—public space as commons—but for those who can afford to live there.

The Park Formerly Known as HemisFair

In fact, journalist Alex Ulam goes so far as to argue that this

way of funding parks represents the “contemporary park privatization model,” in which public dollars fund park construction, while maintenance and operations budgets derive from revenue generated by private development constructed on park grounds, leading to a conflict of interest between public function and commercial interests. As Harvey says in his recent book *Rebel Cities*, “much of the corruption that attaches to urban politics relates to how public investments are allocated to produce something that *looks like a common but which promotes gains in private asset values for privileged property owners*.”



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But the controversy over the Hays Street Bridge is not an isolated or anomalous case—another common misunderstanding—but rather the visible outer edge of the exclusions and displacements inherent to downtown redevelopment generally, as evidenced in the case of the HemisFair redevelopment project. Briefly, for those not yet acquainted with the details of the 10-15 year project, the city’s intent is to revitalize downtown in part by recreating HemisFair Park as a “world class urban park,” in the description of the HemisFair Park Area Redevelopment Corporation (HPARC), the public-private entity tasked with the project. Features of HPARC’s plans include restoring the original street grid; widening the streets to accommodate pedestrians, bikes, and car traffic; demolishing the existing Convention Center to free up acreage for park land; and restoring the approximately 1200 residential units displaced in the creation of HemisFair ’68 by constructing downtown living space.

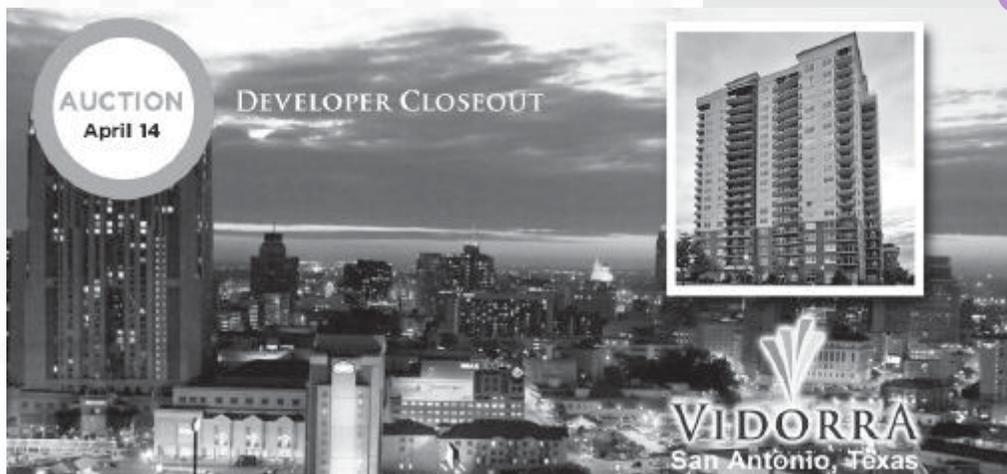
As always, however, we have to look beyond the promise of

in private asset values for privileged property owners.”

Tellingly, the rebranding of HemisFair Park to drop the “park” suggests this dual move to restrict physical access to urban space and political access to the decision making process over land use, displacing from both those who actually use city space to make way for a preferred class of urban identities. As an HPARC official reported in *La Prensa* in January of 2013, “another reason the word ‘park’ was removed is because research shows that in an urban setting people associate the word with vagrants and the homeless.” To redevelop The Park Formerly Known as HemisFair in these ways, the city moved to amend a state law protecting public lands from sale so that plans might proceed apace without the public votes otherwise required. While this move was blocked by state legislators, this same attempt to restrict public input on the question of public land sales has become the basis for the Hays Street Restoration Group’s lawsuit against the city. The statute is designed precisely for situations such as these,

so as to protect the right of those who use land held in common to say what should happen to that land. This is *especially* critical when the city's plans would effectively restrict access to public lands or displace a diversity of uses/users - homeless and residents and tourists in the same space - for a monoculture befitting a "world class" downtown. If plans are good, what can be the threat of a vote?

Understanding neoliberal capital on the economic and political levels ultimately helps us understand it as a set of cultural transformations seeking to "colonize space for the affluent," as Harvey puts it, especially in parts of the inner city previously treated as economic sacrifice zones. As with the Dignowity Hill neighborhood, as with the former neighborhoods of HemisFair Park, as with my dad's old neighborhood now bordering the new Pearl, as with the Broadway corridor and the near-Westside near UTSA downtown, city space is unmade and remade to attract desirable new cosmopolitan mobilities and identities. Thus BudCo land becomes microbrewery turf, while high end retail spaces where local elites can lunch over business decisions are constructed on the ruined factories and foundries and quarries and railway corridors of the deindustrialized city. High rises and loft living then change the fabric and character of the working class neighborhoods that remain. For instance, real estate speculation on the eastern edge of downtown transformed the local neighborhood association from an advocate of longtime residents—a



largely elderly, historically black and mexicano population—to a promoter of the city's preferred development model. With the influx of residents from the Vidorra high rises, the neighborhood association became mouthpiece and justification for city's privatization of the bridge and its surrounding land in an attempt to draw tourist dollars to the area, no matter that this project would betray the work of community groups that worked closely with the city to realize a more accessible vision for bridge and land. As with the role played by Avenida Guadalupe Association in the struggle to preserve Casa Maldonado from demolition, Dignowity Hill Neighborhood Association has functioned in the case of the Hays Street Bridge as a de facto public-private partnership, undercutting the work of community to protect the commons, and promoting instead the enclosures and removals required to make over a formerly working class neighborhood as a choice destination for preferred consumers.

To Gentrify Does Not Mean to Make Something More Beautiful

Understood within the historical and political context of neoliberalism, the neighborhood changes on the edge of downtown are less revitalization than gentrification, or the process by which "capital and affluent populations flow to low-income and working class city quarters often resulting in displacement for the original inhabitants" (in the words of urban studies scholar Jonathan Jackson). As community trying to resist displacement, this is also why it is important that we get our terms right. Gentrification cannot and should not be understood (as in the city's preferred definition) as a neutral process of neighborhood change, or worse, as making something implicitly ugly into something better or more beautiful. Within the historical and sociological context of neoliberalism, we can see how the rhetoric of redevelopment—terms like *blight*, *underutilized*, *surplus*, *renewal*, *revitalization*—is deeply racially and class-coded. Here, "underutilized," a term often used to describe land around the Hays Street Bridge and HemisFair Park, means not un-used, but more nefariously, used by the wrong people for the wrong reasons.

The point is not that places like HemisFair Park or the lot at the corner of Cherry and Lamar are better off the way they are (or were). The point is that scholars like Harvey accurately point out the dynamics shaping cities around the world, including here in San Antonio. The point is that powerful forces repeatedly build up the city to tear it down to build it anew, not to directly remedy histories of racialized and gendered poverty, but to continue ensuring capital accumulation for those who already own. The discourse of "economic development" is in fact a smokescreen for the dispossessions and displacements—the land grabs—on which redevelopment efforts

necessarily rest.

My task in this analysis is not to indict powerful individuals, but ultimately to understand the structural nature of power, the systemic forces involved in producing urban space in particular ways for particular interests. It is these structural forces, not individuals, which produce the historical repetitions we want to disrupt. It is not about the personal integrity of HPARC's well-intentioned CEO, or even of headline-grabbing former deputy city managers with conflicts of interests (well, maybe it is). While individuals change positions, what we want is an understanding of the *structural logic* that persists to produce the same outcomes. Because what we want is nothing less than a different logic altogether. Next in this series, that new logic: ***Right to the City, Rights of Mother Earth.***

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