

A Close Reading on Henri Lefebvre's Urban Form and Criticism

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This paper intends to perform a close reading and skeptical reflection on Henri Lefebvre's ideas of 'urban form' by referencing to the book – *The Urban Revolution* (1970; English translation published in 2003). Lefebvre's major urbanism debate – *The Urban Revolution* was published in the 1970. Despite nearly half a century this book was published, it continues to serve as a foundational literature for coming generations of urban thinkers or scholars. This paper is not a book review of Lefebvre's *The Urban Revolution*, but the intention of this paper is to appraise closely on the selected theme of 'urban form' as discussed in this book. The proposition in performing this close reading is principally to ask: how have the architectural designs and planning regimes of urbanism become an urban practice of ideology, utopia and power? The paper suggests a new framework of interpretation which could be useful for architects and architectural students to comprehend or reflect on this highly dialectic concept of urban form.

Keywords: Henri Lefebvre, Urban Form, Utopia, Architectural Criticism, Close Reading

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper intends to perform a close reading and skeptical reflection on Henri Lefebvre's ideas of 'urban form' by referencing to the book – *The Urban Revolution* (1970; English translation published in 2003). Lefebvre's major urbanism debates – *The Urban Revolution* was published in the 1970. Despite nearly half a century this book was published, it continues to serve as a foundational literature for coming generations of urban thinkers or scholars. Interestingly, Lefebvre gives no clear cut solutions to, for example, urban form, everyday life, production of space, and the right to the city, but these are indispensable concepts that he developed to allow us think and rethink urbanisation processes at every scale of social practice (Stanek, Schmid & Moravánszky, 2014). This paper is not a book review of Lefebvre's *The Urban Revolution*, but the intention of this paper is to appraise closely on the selected theme of 'urban form' as discussed in this

book. The paper suggests a new framework of interpretation which could be useful for architects and architectural students to comprehend or reflect on the ideas of urban form.

Close reading is one of the most essential skills in research and professional development. This textual analysis method requires careful attention paying to the process of interpretation - to examine what the text contains at various levels such as personal experience and interpersonal life. Not merely for gaining deeper understanding, the effects of close reading attribute to inferential thinking, critical evaluations, argument constructions and explorations new territories of knowledge (Lentricchia & DuBois, 2003; Allen, 2017; Brummett, 2019). There are three main sections in this paper. The first section sketches a background by identifying a historical context of urban form studies. It is important to first establish this specific intellectually, socially and politically situated background for following

sections to follow. In the second section, Lefebvre's ideas of urban form will be discussed and re-interpreted into three themes. These themes should not be understood as a separate entity, but rather as a sequential order or continual analysis of the ideas of urban form. In the concluding section, some reflections will be made to ponder over the critical knowledge of urban form, and suggestions for architects and urban planners why they should be aware of such a contingent, if not highly dialectic idea of urban form.

2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: THE RISE OF STUDIES ON URBAN FORM

This section provides a historical backdrop for understanding the rise of urban form studies as a practice of city-making professionalism. Urban form, is broadly a term that delivering multiple meanings of which can be physically, geometrically, socially or ideologically understood. Both the urban and form are interpretative, constitutive and manipulative. The studies of urban form are principally calling enquiries in making sense of what and how could these two indicators, the 'urban' and 'form' come together to inform our understanding of urban lives and conditions.

By agreeing on a premise that searching their relational meanings and uses is practically paramount for human habitat; it has therefore opened up a new horizon especially for the elites to respond to this prime question: What is a good form of city? It drove urban rulers, architects and planners to imagine and execute a modern form of city, and often project with futuristic fantasy of urban lifestyle. As a result, city/urban planning appeared as the key driver for social evolution and improvement. 'Garden City' by Ebenezer Howard (1902); 'Broadacre City' by Frank Lloyd Wrights (1932); and 'Radiant City' first presented by Le Corbusier in 1924 (book published in 1933 & republished in 1964), were among the grand visionary urbanism that receiving popular receptions; but at the same time, criticisms also pointed towards design regulation and utopian myths of urban form.

Apart from these city-scale architectural urbanism, another remarkable movement of urban form studies had also been initiated, of which directing a knowledge shift towards rationalist approaches. Scientific methods have been greatly developed by utilising the advancement of computational and technological techniques. Sociologists Robert Park and Ernest Burgess from the Chicago Urban School initiated a rationalist proposal namely 'The growth of the city' (1925; republished in 2019), suggesting a sociological-cum-ecological domain of urban study. They suggested this particular concept that exploring 'expansion, metabolism and mobility' into a form of urban loop. Also important to note that, in the 1960s, the Britain-based 'Archigram' and the Japan-based 'Metabolism' were the two anti-capitalist and pro-consumerist architectural groups, envisioning the emerging futuristic technologies to celebrate people's lives and civic mindedness.

To assist better visual understanding of the increasingly intricate urban forms, a mathematician Christopher Alexander proposes a new subject as 'Pattern language' (1970), which is a prime analytical device to study forms and spatial relationships in city. He believes that there is a set of universal pattern that allows people to design their city and community. Kevin Lynch's visual and communication patterns namely 'The image of city' (1981), emphasis both visual and cognitive recognition of urban forms and spatial qualities. The above cases were only some of the significant exemplars from the long list of urban form studies in the twentieth century. Different visions of urban forms were introduced by different domains of academics. Principally saying then, 'form' has become a vital method, language and representation to study, speak and express ideas of urban, urbanity and urbanism.

Until today, the studies of 'form' in relation to urban questions continue to deserve major interests of theoretical and pragmatic investigation. To give a chronological view in regard to the practices and studies of urban form since the 1900s, there are three mainstream developments:

1. 1900-1960: Modernisation and visionary planning – strongmen rule and utopia.
2. 1930-1980: Scientific intervention –

rationalist and positivist analysis of urban phenomenon (economic and sociological centric).

3. 1970-recent: Globalisation and neoliberalism – creative approach via scientific assumptions / technological advancement (post-modernism and futuristic imagination).

To take a point of departure from this background, if we look carefully on the trajectories of architectural role, position and production across the histories of urban transformation, we can learn insightful lessons from it. We discern that the role of architects is an integral part of urban revolution, at the same time, constantly adapting to the major shift of technological change.

3. HENRI LEFEBVRE'S REVOLUTIONIST PERSPECTIVE OF URBAN FORM

This section will present a close reading of Lefebvre's revolutionist perspectives of urban form. 'Urbanism' is a specific term which Lefebvre often calls to address his criticism. In order to understand the rise of Lefebvre's urban critique, it is essential to first allocate recognitions for the particular background. Speaking in the context of after world-war and massive deconstruction; urban restructuring of state-led urbanism; formation of neoliberal economy and scientific intervention; of all were undertaken savagely over the places especially in Paris. Lefebvre was responding to these chaotic and overwhelming urban phenomenon, by critiquing that the state's capitalism developments were influencing people's urban views forcefully, through a glorious packaging of 'a better future city'. Substantial criticisms were also pointing towards the institutionalisation and professional coalition forged by the role of architects and planners.

Lefebvre labels urbanism as 'decision-making centers' (Lefebvre, 2003:113) that constituting wealth, information, knowledge and power. He claims that, "the urban reality itself, with its problematic and practice, is hidden, replaced by representations (ideological and institutional) that bear the name 'urbanism'" (p.41). Methodologically, in Lefebvre's

terminology, 'urban phenomenon' is a critical lenses to examine the relations of production and productive forces of urbanisation (p.139). Urban phenomenon is a dialectic approach to theorise urban and urbanisation; also, a useful analytical framework to unpack the complexities of urban lives. Due to the fragmentation of ideological knowledge and specialised sciences, the study of urban phenomenon must be conducted in a non-subject manner and not being circumscribed by any subject domains. He rejects the descriptive methods of phenomenological and empirical analyses of which they would demarcate the sophisticated landscape of 'lived' and 'everydayness'.

Through the lenses of Lefebvre's 'urban phenomenon'; several insightful conceptual and methodological suggestions put forward in *The Urban Revolution*. Firstly, the 'dialectical method' says that, "we approach the urban phenomenon using the formal properties of space before studying the contradictions of space and its contents, that is, the dialectical method" (p.49). Urban form as in this context of methodology, becomes fundamental in guiding us to make sense of the 'property layer' of urban phenomenon; also because urban form contents substance of urban phenomenon. Secondly, Lefebvre's analytical method of 'levels and dimensions', distinguishing three urban level namely global, mixed and private. In specific, the built domain (physical entities) is existed at all three levels, but positioned at different dimensions.

At the global level (G), large-scale city building, broad avenue, gigantic public square and spectacular monuments are among the examples that signifying the institutional spaces for state capitalism or neoliberal markets. At the level of intermediary/mixed (M), it occurs principally at city scale but still entangles closely with global dimensions. The built infrastructures for public, religion and education can all be seen as relevant exemplars at this level. At the modest level of private (P), the built domain is catered for personal and family interests or belongings such as private houses, garden, campground and etc. This micro-social level P is however an important dimension to re-examine the abandoned notion of 'habiting' while the existing focuses only concentrate on 'habitat' as elementary mechanism of human life (p.81). It is argued that, 'habitat' is

an ideology itself, often informs ways and regulations of habitant (housing typologies: apartment, terraced house, town house, flat, bungalow) of how should the urban lifestyle be lived out.

The above methodological reading reminds us the scalar, level and dimensional issues that matter in the analysis of urban form. It also warns us that our perceptions and receptions of form could affect our judgement and consciousness of the urban. However, a mere acknowledgement of these reminders, it is insufficient for us to comprehend the inconvenient truth behind the urban creations, controls and consequences. The following discussions will be reflecting my personal interpretations by using three thematic analyses to appropriate Lefebvre's critical notion of urban form. These three parts are indeed interconnected and cannot be understood in separation.

3.1 THEME ONE: A CENTRALITY OF FORM AND CONTENT

There is an obvious observation to see the twofold character in urban functions and structures, of those 'dominate or dominated'; 'morphological or sociological', or 'geometry or plastic'. These multiple characters of urban form are mutually illusive and exclusive, unless we looks at its circulation, and to ask questions of why and how did it circulate in such ways. The problem of circulation is integral to 'urban problematics' (p.116); for instances the processes of distribution and accumulation. To take this point of departure, a more sophisticated level of urban theory is required to unpack the real urban form.

For Lefebvre, 'centrality' is the key component that will form relational functions and structures in urban, through an integration of network and circulation (the control mechanism). The centrality (of urban) will accumulate all different things (the content) but remain their particularities. In other words, it centralises creations, activities and situations by positioning every elements based on their mutual differences. Furthermore, centrality has both constructive and destructive of magnetic powers that will brings, unites and attracts elements of production. Like magnetic field, centrality is an empty field that consists nothing. It creates a void to monitor the assembling process (inclusive and exclusive) of

every differences. However, its circulation currents are in fact multidirectional of which unlike the consistent pattern of magnetic field lines. Thus Lefebvre claims that, 'the urban is, therefore, pure form: a place of encounter, assembly, simultaneity. This form has no specific content, but is a centre of attraction and life' (p.118).

The discussion of centrality will be incomplete if without a concern of periphery. Their symbiotic relationships are constituted beyond a supply and demand mechanism, but instead a coexisted stage for multiple movement and exchange. In this sense, periphery can also become another centrality in multiple relationships of different places. In the process of accumulation, different content is gather together and forming 'the dialectical content'. When 'centrality' is no longer able to hold content in their correlated positions, hence a 'rupture of the centre' might be happened. The accumulation of content is certainly not an ever unchanging and normalising process, the differential contrast of 'different content' will result conflict. At this stage, a reformation of centrality will the lead to the creation of poly-centrality, in order to reconfigure a new dialectical situation to hold elements back into place. Neutralisation, is one of the vital mechanisms to stabilise dialectical content to get over the rupture. The existing forms and contents will be neutralised from their historical circumstances, hence reinventing a new 'void' or 'homogenous space' for filtering the unwanted meanings and uses.

In essence, this first theme aims to deconstruct the concrete container and boundary of urban form. Urban form is a pure form that attributed to a complex web (functioning mechanism) of centrality and poly-centrality. In an opposite way, urban rulers and leaders would rather assume form is able to hold firmly of all contents from immediate surroundings, distant environment to the imaginary utopia. Next, we will proceed to a perceptual layer of urban form that hides its institutional power.

3.2 THEME TWO: UTOPIAN URBAN FORM

After unpacking some of the elementary issues of urban form in previous section, this second theme is enquiring: how do we perceive form and surrounding environment? How does it

matter our thinking? Lefebvre proposes three conceptual ways of knowing, arguing that our perceptions of environment are not only informed by the outer world but equally important from our own 'inner views' of the world. The entry dimension calls *isotopy*, which is a straightforward visual comprehension of physical spaces or immediate environment - of those lines, blocks, squares, volumes and materials. It will acknowledge the reader spontaneously. By this level of spatial recognition, one can identify this 'very place' or form based on the repetitions and uniformities of order and pattern. The second dimension is then concentrating on the 'different, distant or other place' namely *heterotopy*. It suggests that our conscience is also informed by the otherness (change, grow and progress), in opposition to our familiarised recognition of identical places. In other words, human mind is ready to capture the differences and changes that happen constantly in urban space; for an example the urban-rural heterotopies.

Utopia, is the next crucial stage that matters all our realisation and non-realisation of urban form. Utopia is 'non-place, the place for that doesn't occur'. It dissimulates from our direct or indirect identification of surrounding; of both physical and virtual spaces. However, it deserves 'a place of consciousness'. It is an imagined place that coexists with reality; so called 'concrete and abstract imaginary'. It can be found in our personal 'desire, power and divinity' or within a group of individuals that sharing similar visions. One may ask, why is utopia often reflected onto built domain of the urban? This is largely because utopia needs to be objectified into the immediate and distant environment for realising its desire and power.

Practically speaking, it can be undertaken in a multiplicity of ways for examples, a creation of monument, city map, city model, or at the larger scale of urban form such as new town, housing estate and business district. Furthermore, if someone has a capability to build the environment, it signifies a power that enables to author the environment, thus manipulating and concurring the natural counterpart. This is also due to ideological beliefs that exist between 'environment' and 'built environment', of which they provide a political space for distinguishing

the authoring power between nature and manmade.

Due to a multiplicity of recognitions in our concrete and abstract urban forms (isotopy-heterotopy-utopia), our consciousness are easily trapped into a 'blind-field', that confused by the transformative urban forms that exist in different spatial-temporal dynamics (rural-industrial-urban). Lefebvre elaborates insightfully that, "the future illuminates the past, the virtual allows us to examine and situate the realised" (p.23). The trajectory of utopia can only traced out via political and dialectical analysis. This leads us to the next discussion in relation to the politics of practising and implementing utopia.

3.3 THEME THREE: IMPLEMENTATION OF URBAN STRATEGY

After understanding the pure form of centrality and the utopian imagination, in this theme three, the 'urban' will proceed back in a concrete form of manifestation as an indictment for urban strategy (the politics of power). The 'pure form' is no longer accumulated and operated innocently; it's instead driving by underlying forces of 'the strategy of knowledge'. Power, as it will require a representation for its existence through ideological, spatial, scientific or even imaginary strategies. These strategies will lead to the formations of 'logics' or 'sciences' as instruments in order to appropriate a designated aim for demonstrating and delivering power. The 'logic of form' (p.119) can generally be seen in two formats, mathematical form (calculable, quantifiable, programmable) and geometrical form respectively (line, plane, block).

The elites of urbanism offer their utopian plans. In order to objectify the utopia in an immediate urban form, it needs to institutionalise the process of decision in the first place. The process of institutionalisation will require substantial power from the state (p.109). The state will take this opportunity to sell urban visions for the sake of their political reinforcement and empowerment. In this regard, Lefebvre argues that, "the science of urban phenomenon cannot respond to these demands without the risk of validating external restrictions imposed by ideology and power. It constitutes itself slowly,

making use of theoretical hypotheses and practical experience as well as established concepts. But it cannot exist without imagination, that is, without utopia” (p.141).

For Lefebvre, the critiques of urban contestation are not a mere disagreement with different visions of urban form. More controversially, the urban strategy is closely related with imperialism. Urbanists are often holding power at the core of urban centrality, and practising the utopia urbanism, said for ‘the people’. It becomes even worse when the imperial urbanists use various utopian manifestations of urban form to achieve their unscrupulous agenda of surplus value and capitalist mode of production (p.156). At the end, “the strategy devolves into a strategy of knowledge and a political strategy without any separation taking place” (p.141), of which everyone is then set into a blind spot of urban lives and conditions (urban illusion). Until here, we can ask a relational question: how does urban sell ideas through form? And how does form inform ideas of urban? They are in fact two sides of a same coin - as urban strategy for specific political agenda. In essence, this theme acknowledges the limitations of visionary, rationalistic and scientific visions of urban form. Lefebvre disapproves those misleading urban knowledge as they are aggressive, reductive and partial.

4. CONCLUSION: THE DIALECTICS OF URBAN FORM

Lefebvre’s notion of urban form is a highly dialectic concept. He opened up a new horizon to problematise the existing ideologies and representations of urban form. It is apparent to read how has Lefebvre used such complex approaches (of those historical, semantic, metaphor, scalar, dialectic) to examine the planning and architectural practices. Most importantly, not only for illustrating his criticisms on urbanism; but the analyses as both materials and methodologies to leverage the entire discourse of urbanisation/urban revolution. To encapsulate my close reading and reflections, Figure 1 illustrates a conceptual framework which helps to explain the relationships between urban form, utopia and knowledge strategy. This conceptual framework suggests that ‘utopia’ is the most crucial component which leads the production of ideology and the politics of space.

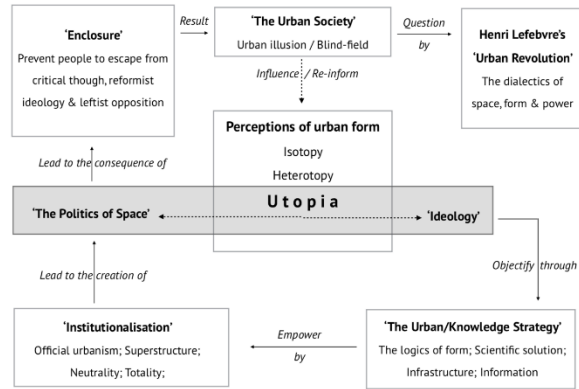


Figure 1: The relational diagram of urban form, utopia and knowledge strategy

One may however disagree with his provocative criticisms towards urbanism, by arguing that: can't we have a pure and scrupulous utopia for the sake of human well-being? Instead of reading Lefebvre as an anti-urbanist, he was always fascinated with urbanism. He mentions in the book that, ‘not everything about urbanism is negative’. One may further enquire, what is then a good form of urbanism? Indeed, there are no direct indications for answering the question. However, there is one key message from Lefebvre’s criticisms. His critiques serve an important reminder to prevent us to escape from an ‘urbanist enclosure’ of reformist thought, social justice and civic pride. Regardless any types of urban forms, architects and urban planners should always remind themselves with the trap of ‘urbanist enclosure’ – because this can prevent us from ‘blind-field’, or more specifically, speculative utopia, superstructure-hierarchy, and inequality.

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