



Henri Lefebvre for architects

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Reviewed: Łukasz Stanek. 2011. *Henri Lefebvre on Space. Architecture, Urban Research, and the Production of Theory*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 369 pages.

Although Henri Lefebvre is well known for introducing the concept of “the right to the city”, his work is little used by urban planners and architects. In Henri Lefebvre on Space, Łukasz Stanek reveals the practical ambitions of the this thinker’s work and how they can be put to use not just by academics but also by professionals in search of a theoretical frame of reference.

By revisiting the philosophy of the man considered, in France, to be one of the last “global” urban thinkers (before the scientific focus regarding the urban object shifted massively to the local scale and the observable context in the 1980s), Łukasz Stanek’s book invites the reader to discover and explore an interdisciplinary theory of the urban question that was formulated over 40 years ago by one of the great Marxist thinkers of the 20th century. This work comes at a time when division of labour, specialisation, and disciplinary separations make it difficult – perhaps more so than ever – to understand the city, for both academics and practitioners (architects, etc.).

In the English-speaking literature, which is rediscovering the ideas of the philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre (1901–1991), or using them to develop a new theory of capitalism and its spaces (David Harvey, Edward Soja, etc.), this book appears as an original work, and a true exegesis of Lefebvre’s writings and declarations on space and architecture, sometimes flirting with hermeneutics. All this would seem to classify Stanek’s work as part of the abundant philosophical literature on the subject of space (cf. the renewed interest in Heidegger’s work among contemporary architects and theorists, whether in France or elsewhere), except for the fact that the author seeks to keep a certain distance from the figure of “Lefebvre the philosopher”, instead preferring to emphasise “Lefebvre the fieldwork sociologist”. Unlike other lines of philosophical thought, Lefebvre’s work is only superficially known in architectural circles – at least in France. The publication of this book thus fills a gap in the architectural literature in a most timely fashion (in particular for French readers, for whom a translation would be very welcome).

An architect’s view of Lefebvre

The originality of Łukasz Stanek’s work lies in its standpoint: here, Lefebvre’s spatial thinking is presented from an architect’s point of view. The author is part of the small international network of specialists on Lefebvre, who have studied, and devoted their research to, his work for many years. This alone would confirm Stanek’s legitimacy if this work were merely a textbook presenting the thoughts of Henri Lefebvre; however, contrary to what the book’s title may suggest – which is perhaps a little linear in its juxtaposition of key terms (space, architecture and urban research) – it is anything but a textbook. It is above all a work of research, with a thesis that the author seeks to illustrate with numerous arguments, theories and details. This thesis, from time to time repeated in

the manner of a mantra, involves demonstrating that Henri Lefebvre is not just an abstract theorist of space, but that his thinking, in tune with the architectural debates of his time, results from empirical studies and could therefore be of considerable practical use in terms of architectural design and conception.

To support his claim, Stanek has spared no effort. His book, divided into four largely self-contained parts titled “Henri Lefebvre”, “Research”, “Critique” and “Project”, is full of stimulating interpretations of the writings of Lefebvre, as well as details and anecdotes from archives, interviews and other published works, some well known, others less so. It is, in short, the result of very thorough and erudite research on Lefebvre’s relationships – personal, intellectual, political and philosophical – with architecture, which proposes nothing that cannot be proved (in particular via the 50 or so pages of notes, in the form of bibliographical references, that illustrate Stanek’s assertions, in addition to the bibliography *per se*, which covers almost as many pages). First- and second-hand sources are, however, often treated in the same way and not put into perspective, which sometimes belies a lack of critical distance.

Lefebvre’s view of architects and architecture

Stanek also looks back, in a very factual and well-documented manner, on Henri Lefebvre’s personal relationships with architects, and in particular his empirical work – from his rural sociological work on Pyrenean communities, conducted from 1940 onwards at the Centre d’Études Sociologiques (a research unit within the CNRS, the French National Centre for Scientific Research), to the research conducted under the auspices of the Institut de Sociologie Urbaine (ISU) from 1960. Lefebvre’s works of urban sociology could therefore be said to be doubly marked by the context of French state-controlled spatial planning on the one hand, and a willingness to dialogue with architecture on the other. Furthermore, these works are all situated – as Stanek points out – in a short, pivotal era in architecture marked by the death of Le Corbusier in 1965 and the postmodern transition of the mid-1970s. The author attempts to capture the way in which Lefebvre, through successive field studies, apprehended social change in the making, and also analyses how Lefebvre revisited Marxism in crisis from the standpoint of spatial theory and the rise of the famous “new working class”, which he uses to critique the instrumentalisation of architecture. In this way, Stanek describes the architectural, political and historical background of the intellectual construction of this atypical sociologist and Marxist.

Although it is perhaps regrettable that this reconstruction of Lefebvre’s thinking on space sometimes indulges in what looks like a juxtaposition of lecture notes, we enter more specifically into the content of this thinking when Stanek addresses – often in the form of a close reading – the ISU studies on private suburban housing and large system-built social-housing estates, their results, and the influence they have had on the development of the theory of the production of space in Lefebvre’s work (1974). Although Henri Raymond, Nicole Haumont, Antoine Haumont and a few others are often considered followers of Lefebvre, their influence on his thinking since the 1960s is far less often mentioned. Through their work on housing, critiques of a certain form of modernity, consumerist society and, of course, the architecture of housing found their way into Lefebvre’s *Critique de la vie quotidienne* (1981, 1968b), the crafting of which began in the 1940s. Stanek also re-examines Lefebvre’s critique of need theory and functionalist urban planning, which chimed with the theses of Herbert Marcuse and Jean Baudrillard at the time; however, he notes that these critiques of housing came very late, as they had already been developed by architects (within Team 10 and by Le Corbusier himself).

The role of Marxist theory in projects

Of course, Lefebvre's theory on the production of space originates as much from these empirical studies on housing as from Marxist philosophy. Stanek therefore also focuses on the "philosophical genealogy" of this theory, which proclaims itself to be a "unitary and transdisciplinary theory of space". Space, in terms of Marx's theory, is understood as a "concrete abstraction", homogenised by postwar capitalism and at the same time paradoxically fragmented and hierarchical. Rather conventional references to Hegel and Marx explain the workings of the theory of the *Production of Space* – perceived, conceived and experienced – inspired upstream by ISU's research into housing, as well as Lefebvre's experience at Mourenx (where a new town was built in the 1950s, designed according to Modernist theories in the middle of the Béarn countryside in south-west France, and on which Lefebvre worked).

Indeed, in the concluding chapter of the book, "Project", Stanek seeks to create a dialogue between Lefebvre's thinking and architecture, without wishing to "apply concepts" to architecture, but rather by taking architecture as a "guideline for interpreting Lefebvre's work" (pp. 168–169). Accordingly, we see Lefebvre dialogue with the writings of Charles Fourier on the "Phalanstère" project (1822, 1829), with those of Ricardo Bofill on the "city in space" (1968), and with the Dutch situationist Constant Nieuwenhuys's "New Babylon" project (*Internationale situationniste* 1959, 1960), which Lefebvre also often cited or discussed, and which embody some of his concepts formulated before or after: the transformation and dealienation of everyday life, relations between the centre and the suburbs, relations between social and spatial scales, playfulness and difference, appropriation, etc. Here, it is surprising to see that all these projects are Utopias, without Lefebvre's hopes for a transformation of the world truly being discussed; critiques of the production of space do not automatically lead to a possible emancipation through space, and, as pointed out here, "society cannot be changed by architecture" (p. 245). The book ends with the (unrealised) project in which Lefebvre participated, together with architects Serge Renaudie and Pierre Guilbaud, for the New Belgrade competition in the 1980s, and with the announcement of an unpublished manuscript by Lefebvre titled *Vers une architecture de la jouissance* ("Towards an architecture of enjoyment").¹

A critical theory of architecture

This study, which focuses on the determinants and impacts of the theory of the production of space, its ins and outs, and its challenges, leaves aside a whole section of Lefebvrian thought that does not concern space, and even a part that does concern it (what of the famous "Right to the City" (1968a) has been so much talked about in recent years?). Nevertheless, it makes an undeniable contribution to Lefebvrian studies at international level and to architectural theory, at least in France. It allows us to revisit Lefebvre in a new and original light, based on reading, research and meticulous and methodical archive work, providing details – sometimes unpublished – regarding the life and work of this Marxist thinker, his encounters, and his influences (his dialogues with Tafuri, the fact that he "almost" got to write his rural sociology thesis under the supervision of Maurice Halbwachs before Halbwachs was deported, etc.).

In conclusion, we might say that this book has faults that are inherent in its qualities: it is dense, bursting with information and details, and bears all the hallmarks of the work of a researcher who wants to tell everything there is to tell on his subject. It is perhaps just a shame that important information is sometimes relegated to the rank of detail – for example, Lefebvre's relationships with the second left-wing self-managing movements in the 1970s, with the group that edited the magazine *Utopie*, are barely mentioned. Most importantly, the lack of hierarchy between different

¹ The publication of this unpublished manuscript, dating from 1973, by Łukasz Stanek is announced for 2014, also with the University of Minnesota Press, which has played a major role in the dissemination of Marxist thought in the United States (Fredric Jameson, Antonio Negri) as well as of urban Marxism, with the translation of Lefebvre's *La Révolution urbaine* (1970) and the publication of Edward Soja's theories of spatial justice.

elements, combined with an almost abrupt entry into theoretical aspects, will surely hinder readers unfamiliar with Lefebvre's work or with the French political and intellectual context of the 1960s and 1970s; the result is an unfortunate impression of decontextualisation of Lefebvre's spatial thinking. To put this criticism into perspective, however, we must nonetheless emphasise that this is a work of research driven by a practical ambition. Its goal, in addition to championing Lefebvre, is to contribute to the critical theory of architectural practice by reconsidering the work of one of the greatest thinkers of the social space of the 20th century. In this respect, it represents an indispensable tool for architects in search of a theoretical and critical framework.

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