‘Something more, something better, something else, is needed’: a renewed ‘fête’ on London’s South Bank

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Summary

This chapter is interested in some of Lefebvre’s more optimistic ideas about the possibilities of urbanisation and in exploring these through the analysis of an actually-existing set of urban public spaces in and around London’s Southbank Centre (at the heart of the wider ‘South Bank’ district). Drawing on data collected over the course of a 4-year ethnographic study of the transformation of the Southbank Centre, the chapter will seek to theorise and understand the ongoing transformation of the area via recourse to Lefebvre’s ideas about play as a transcendent, productive force in the city. The chapter will be most interested in the more practical, institutional and pedagogic dimensions of subordinating to play in the city according to Lefebvre, and how aspects of the transformation of London’s South Bank might be interpreted in this vein. While not entirely uncritical, the chapter will adopt Lefebvre’s sometimes optimistic stance to argue that there may yet be some hope for ‘the creation of places appropriate to a renewed fête fundamentally linked to play’ (Lefebvre 1996: 171) in contemporary cities.

Introduction

> [T]here is today…no theory without utopia. The architects, like the planners, know this perfectly well.
> Lefebvre 2009: 179

Although Lefebvre’s writing on rural sociology has been the subject of recent revisits (e.g. Elden and Morton 2015), his work, and uses of it, has left an indelible mark on urban sociology and in particular on scholars interested in the nexus of urban design, architecture and social theory (especially Stanek 2011; Stanek, Schmid and Moravánsky 2014). Within this body of work, a number of ideas developed in Lefebvre’s writings have been increasingly influential

in scholarship concerned with the urban public realm, the material focus of the present paper, in particular. Of the many conceptual approaches articulated by Lefebvre, three feature most prominently in the urban space literature.

First, Lefebvre's (1974) spatial triad or trialectic has been theoretically advocated (especially Harvey 1990; Soja 1996) and empirically deployed as a means to explore processes of urban spatial (re-)production (especially Low 2017: 40-42). For instance, describing the approach taken in her comparative study of the sensuous dimensions of public space in Barcelona and Manchester, Degen (2008: 10) states how:

> In order to link transformations of space with an analysis of sensuous experience this study follows the tradition of thought initiated by Lefebvre (1991), who began to look beyond space as a 'container' for social action and instead started to interpret space as a product and producer of multiple forms of spatial practice.

Such foundational invocations of Lefebvre's work on the dialectical relationship between urban morphology and social relations are routine in scholarship on the production of urban public space (e.g. Low 2000; Jones 2014; Moravánsky 2014; Leary-Ohwin 2016), and in particular on resistance as a constituent element of spatial (re-)production in such settings (e.g. McCann 1999; Dhaliwal 2012).

Linked to this interest in how urban public space *is produced*, and in particular how it is produced through practice, various scholars have turned to rhythmanalysis (Lefebvre 2004) as a means to explore the productive qualities of everyday life in cities (e.g. Borden 2001; Williamson 2016). Thirdly, Lefebvre's (1996) writings on the right to the city is at the heart of another body of work, in particular in social geography, concerned with arguments about public space and social justice (especially Mitchell 2003; also Low and Smith 2006; Butler 2013). In addition to these deployments of some of Lefebvre's theoretical work, Lefebvrian concepts (including those developed in *The Production of Space*) have also featured routinely in scholarship concerned with users or 'practitioners' of public space, including, but not limited to, skateboarders (Borden 2001; this volume), immigrants (Ugolotti and Moyer 2016), traceurs (Ameel and Tani 2012; Kidder 2012; Daskalaki, Stara and Imas 2007), cyclists (Spinney 2010), homeless people (Speer 2016), 'street-involved youth' (Kennelly and Watt 2011) and walkers (Fenton 2005; Williamson 2016).

Reviewing the social scientific urban public space literature, then, it is hard to find works that fail to draw heavily on Lefebvre's scholarship, let alone merely reference it. What is striking about the deployment of Lefebvre's work in this literature, however, is the routine use of his conceptual treatises as the basis of critiques of the urban condition (of the pernicious effects of top down urban visions [de Certeau 1984] and of the dilution of 'rights to the city' in particular). In practical terms, there has been an emphasis in considerations of Lefebvre's work vis-à-vis public space on problematizing contemporary urban (public) space production and on situating tactical uses of space at the interstices of an increasingly unforgiving and revanchist urban fabric (especially Mitchell 2003). In this respect, Lefebvre's work is used not only to reveal the multifaceted nature of processes of spatial production but also to theoretically account for struggle for radically different city forms and the social and spatial orders that structure them (e.g. Brenner et al 2012; Harvey 2012).

But what of the more optimistic, utopian strands of Lefebvre's writings on cities and urban space? As Stanek, Schmid and Moravánsky (2014: 3) put it, 'Lefebvre not only critically analysed the phenomenon of urbanization and its implications, but at the same time explored and revealed its potentials.' Lefebvre's own interest in the transgressive potential of urban space – and in particular in the importance of 'play, festival and creativity in the remaking of public space' (Butler 2013: 137) – has been relatively underplayed in the subsequent literature (cf. Pinder 2015). In the following discussion I draw on the findings of my own work on the (re-)production of public space on London's South Bank (Jones 2013; 2014) to sketch a more optimistic reading of the production of public space inflected by the theoretical work of Lefebvre. In doing so I hope to encourage other analyses of *realised* urban form that have an eye for the utopian as well as the dystopic.

Fête-less space: be wary disneyfication

For recent accounts of urban public space, its transformations and practices therein, Michael Sorkin's (1992) edited volume *Variations on a Theme Park: The New American City and the end of Public Space* is a highly influential work. This volume arguably prefigured a range of more and less empirical engagements with urbanisation processes linked to the titular 'end of public space.' Among other things, authors have written about the role of revanchism (Rogers and Coaffee 2005), securitisation (Atkinson 2003; Raco 2003; Dixon, Levine and McAuley

2006; Ruppert 2006; Herbert and Beckett 2009; Minton 2009; Blomley 2010), fortification (Davis 1992), commodification (Loukaitou-Sideris and Banerjee 1998), urban entrepreneurialism (Boyle and Hughes 1994) and gentrification (Paton 2014) in the demise of urban public space.

Most important for this paper, however, is the *association* Sorkin makes between the (re)production of urban spaces that have been increasingly endowed with the aesthetic and regulatory characteristics of 'theme park' design and the end of public space. This association, described elsewhere as the 'disneyfication' of public space (Zukin: 1995; Bridge and Watson 2000; Webb 2014: 193-205), has arguably underpinned many critical accounts of the contemporary urban public realm (cf. Carmona 2010), such that planning efforts to enliven and regenerate urban public space are interpreted inversely; as signalling the loss and effacement of fragments of public realm that may provide room for the 'pleasure principle' and *jouissance* (Lefebvre 2003: 32, 85).

It is towards this paradox that the present paper is oriented, and that Lefebvre's (1996) discussions of the role of the fête are deployed. Via recourse to my fieldwork on London's South Bank I want to make the case for more optimistic readings of urban interventions that could be characterised as displaying theme park tropes. Here I am interested not only in the 'emancipatory possibilities' (Lees 2004) of urban public space, but also material *realisations* of urban public space that embody the qualities of Lefebvre's notion of the fête and that play with, rather than foreclose, 'the Dionysian dimensions of life' (Tonkiss 2005: 136). Against a social scientific literature in which the role utopia can 'play in contemporary critical urban studies…has often been treated warily, sidelined or dismissed' (Pinder 2015: 28), this article seeks to make an empirical contribution to a burgeoning interest in exploring 'urban worlds that are different and better' (ibid 2015: 28).

Extending the possible

In his recent critical engagement with Lefebvre's work on utopia, David Pinder (2015: 28) 'explores Lefebvre's emphasis on the possible, and in particular the importance he attached to extending and realizing the possible through struggling for what seems impossible' (see Lefebvre 1976: 36). While Lefebvre's work has been used to make claims about the possibilities of and for urban life (Harvey 2000; Lees 2004) and public space (Stevens 2007),

and for how we might more broadly reimagine the urban (Amin and Thrift 2002), it is worth noting that Lefebvre himself was interested in the *realisation* of the possible; in moving beyond the rhetoric of imminence that characterises much work on (potentially) virtuous qualities of the urban condition. This interest of Lefebvre's speaks to a crucial distinction made a number of times in his work between 'utopist' and 'utopian'. As Pinder (2015: 32) puts it:

> In contrast to abstract and transcendental ideal plans for living associated with the former, he [Lefebvre] favoured more 'concrete' explorations of what was possible that were rooted in everyday life and space.

In this chapter, I will use my ethnographic work on the ongoing transformation of London's South Bank to explore an example of the (at least partial) realisation of a *utopian* urban vision. In the analysis that follows I will draw, in particular, on Lefebvre's (1996) work on the fête in relation to the urban, using his conceptual musings on this topic to ground my analysis of the transformation of the public realm of the Southbank Centre (and of how this transformation was envisioned and described by those responsible for it).

The 'possible-impossible' on the South Bank

The Southbank Centre is Europe's largest arts complex. Comprising a number of arts institutions (including the Royal Festival Hall, the Queen Elizabeth Hall and the Hayward Gallery) as well as substantial areas of constituent public realm, the Centre occupies a 27-acre estate at the heart of the wider 'South Bank' district on the south embankment of the River Thames in central London. This estate, which the Southbank Centre (as a charitable organisation) manages 'on a long lease from the Arts Council, who hold the freehold on behalf of the Government' (House of Commons Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport 2002), has been the subject of a sequence of architectural and urban design 'masterplans' that have envisioned its redevelopment. The ongoing 'transformation' of the Southbank Centre is guided by one of these (Rick Mather Architects 2017).

For the purposes of the present paper, however, the first such visioning exercise is of particular importance, namely Cedric Price's (1983) proposals for renovating the site. Cedric Price has been dubbed 'the most influential architect you've never heard of' (Milmo 2014), well known for radical architectural proposals that were not built at the time of their design but have

subsequently been constructed (especially Hardingham 1983). Among these proposals that Price is famous for not building is a giant ferris wheel by the Thames, which was a central component of his architectural vision for the Southbank Centre and is a structure that has since been realised (the 'London Eye').

In a very real way, urban design interventions dismissed as fanciful and impossible at the time of their conception have, and are being, realised on the South Bank– radical architectural motifs in the work not only of Cedric Price, but also the avant-garde architectural group Archigram. Notably, this modernist and avant-garde architectural group contemporaneous to Lefebvre developed projects that were very much of the kind to which he was drawn (i.e. those 'working across theory and practice' [ibid 2015: 37]). In fact, there are clear links between Lefebvre, Cedric Price and Archigram; for instance, Jean-Paul Jungman (the 1967-70 editor of the journal of the French architectural group Utopie – a group that included Lefebvre's former assistants Jean Baudrillard and Hubert Tonka [Pinder 2015: 41]) recalls in interview how all three men attended a conference by Utopie (Buckley 2010: 350).

Among the members of Archigram were Ron Herron and Warren Chalk who were part of a team of architects at London County Council responsible for the design of the Queen Elizabeth Hall and the Hayward Gallery complex of buildings on the South Bank (Borden 2014). Significantly, some of the ways that this complex was envisioned as being used have recently been reinvigorated. This includes the addition of 'clip-on' design elements that were a central design concept for the group (e.g. 'A Room for London' [David Kohn Architects] – a boat-themed architectural installation constructed on top of the Queen Elizabeth Hall) and the creation of a rooftop garden on the Queen Elizabeth Hall [Figure 1] that, after decades of delay, starts to take seriously Archigram's utopian vision for the site (Kelly 2013).

Please place figure 1 near here. Caption: A rooftop garden on the upper terraces of the Queen Elizabeth Hall [Credit: Alasdair Jones, 2013]

Reversing a longstanding policy to preclude the use of some of the raised terraces characteristic of the buildings of the South Bank [Figure 1] and so to effectively abandon these spaces, this resuscitation of much of the local public realm has been achieved primarily through the leadership of the Southbank Centre's committed pursuit of a transformation of the area

premised on the idea of 'melting the walls' of the Centre's constituent institutions and bringing the arts outside (see Jones 2014: 215).

Notably, another architectural feature of the Hayward Gallery/Queen Elizabeth Hall complex of buildings – namely the undercroft of the Queen Elizabeth Hall that has since the 1970s been appropriated as a skate spot (and, latterly, as a graffiti canvas as well) – has recently been preserved precisely through the popular 'struggle' to which Lefebvre (1976: 36) refers. A *de facto* skate park has been *produced*, through campaigns organised by the 'Long Live South Bank' group (Blayney et al. 2014), in a central London setting where critiques of the redevelopment of public space would have us expect commodified spaces characterised by revanchist management policies designed to exclude non-consumers, minority groups and un-aesthetic public space users (Rogers and Coaffee 2005: 321-2); policies that have been argued to affect young people (given their relative lack of wealth and often noisy presence) in particular (e.g. Valentine 1996) . Against such representations, through institutional will, and popular struggle (and an at times highly antagonistic relationship between these forces), 'something else' (Lefebvre 1996: 173) has been realised on the South Bank.

Notably, this utopian fragment (or spatio-temporal 'moment' in the language of Lefebvre [Pinder 2015: 36]) is not a purpose-built 'skateplaza' (Vivoni 2009) but rather is the result of a characteristically dialectical spatial production process. When they designed the material space now understood to be the South Bank skate park (by users and passers-by alike), the architects 'really – and quite deliberately – had no exact idea about…who would use the Undercroft and in what ways' (Borden 2014: 67). The space was subsequently appropriated, and often physically adapted, by skateboarders and finally 'preserved' (and effectively produced) as skate park through ultimately successful social activism that culminated in an agreement by the Southbank Centre to shelve their plans to redevelop the space (Blayney et al. 2014).

A renewed 'fête': putting art at the service of the urban

However, the Queen Elizabeth Hall undercroft does not demarcate the extent of a Lefebvre-inspired utopian reading of the South Bank. Rather, the inscription of a definitively playful use value in that space can be seen to reflect a wider disposition towards play, spectacle and encounter that underpins the production and performance of public space around the South

Bank (Jones 2013; also Spinney 2010). At the heart of this is an institutional desire to revisit and revive some of the tenets, including what might be understood as more utopian ideas, that (whether or not they were brought into being) informed the various planning proposals that have been drawn-up for the Southbank Centre since the site's germination as part of the 1951 Festival of Britain (especially Mullins 2007).

Thus, as well as actively pursuing Archigram's ideas about how the Hayward Gallery/Queen Elizabeth Hall complex might be used (Kelly 2013), the transformation of the site has also been influenced by the ideals of the earlier Festival of Britain. As a senior Southbank Centre executive responsible for shaping the overarching vision of the Centre put it to me in interview:

> [T]he most profound influence on me about the site was its original purpose […T]his phrase, that they [the Festival of Britain organisers] used, 'landscape of the imagination', it seems to me to be a unique heritage.

As part of this re-visioning, a key implication for urban public realm in-and-around the Southbank Centre is that it would no longer be treated, or left, as merely the space between buildings. Rather, it was better understood as an extension of the internal space of the constituent arts institutions of the Centre. Just as Archigram had intended (albeit in an ideologically loose way) the external surfaces of the Southbank Centre buildings, and the public realm in-between, would be reconceptualised as canvas or stage. This process – of revisiting former creative visions in the appropriation of space, and of rejecting the sanctity of built architectural form – strongly resonates with Lefebvre's writing. As he puts it:

> To put art at the service of the urban does not mean to prettify urban space with works of art. … Rather, this means that time-spaces become works of art and that former art reconsiders itself as source and model of *appropriation* of space and time. … Coming back to style and to the *oeuvre*, that is, to the meaning of the monument and the space appropriated in the *fête*, art can create 'structures of enchantment'. Architecture taken separately and on its own, could neither restrict nor create possibilities. Something more, something better, something else, is needed.
>
> Lefebvre 1996: 173 [emphasis in original]

Lefebvre's invocation of 'something else' as the basis for 'space appropriated in the fête' can be read into both the cause and effect of the utopian features of space being realised on the South Bank. Thus, not only do the spaces realised there have heterotopian qualities – qualities that enable these spaces to 'stand outside a conventional order of space' (Tonkiss 2005: 131) – but the conditions of their emergence are also characteristically 'other'. Rather than being driven by commercial considerations, a 'creative vision' for the Southbank Centre (albeit one that includes commercial interests) underpins its transformation (Jones 2014: 232-233); a vision that revisits the heritage of the site embodied in the profoundly utopian and social democratic remit of the 'Festival of Britain' (especially Mullins 2007).

Lefebvre's interest in the fête is a relatively underexplored feature of his work on the 'right to city' (Lefebvre 1996). While, as Dijkstra (2000: 7) laments, 'Lefebvre did not suggest a way of operationalising that right [to the city] or, for that matter, even a way of measuring a lack of it,' he does provide clues as to how it might be conceived. Among these, of particular importance to this chapter is the 'playful' character of 'the *urban*, which survives in the fissures of planned and programmed order' (Lefebvre 1996: 129). The importance of 'play' to Lefebvre is clear at the very start of his essay *The Right to the City*, where he posits that the 'commercial and cultural infrastructures' with which planners are typically concerned do not satisfy 'the need for creative activity, for the *oeuvre*…, symbolism, the imaginary and play' (Lefebvre 1996: 147 [emphasis in original]). Lefebvre (1996: 147) goes on:

> Through these specified needs lives and survives a fundamental desire of which play…, sport, creative activity, art and knowledge are particular expressions and *moments*, which can more or less overcome the fragmentary division of tasks. [emphasis in original].

In Lefebvre's reading, 'play' is not superfluous, but rather expressive of a decidedly human need (Jones 2013). Furthermore, playful 'moments' allow urban dwellers to transcend the rational fragmentation of the city and rediscover 'the urban'. As Lefebvre (1996: 158) puts it, '[t]he *right to the city*…can only be formulated as a transformed and renewed *right to urban life*' [emphasis in original]. Play is of 'supreme value' in this formulation for Lefebvre (1996: 172), and is identified as the source of the 'contents of the principle of assembly' (171) or urban public life for him. As he puts it:

> [S]hould [old places of assembly] find a meaning again [this] does not preclude the creation of places appropriate to a renewed *fête* fundamentally linked to play.
> Lefebvre 1996: 171

In Lefebvre's conceptual work, therefore, the realisation of meaning in the urban should take seriously the renewal of the 'fête' and the contribution of play.

As well as places of assembly, play can be seen as constitutive of social spaces for Lefebvre. These are spaces he describes as follows:

> [S]ocial spaces are related to social times and rhythms which are prioritized. … To *inhabit* finds again its place over habitat. The quality which is promoted presents and represents as *playful*. …Already, to city people the urban centre is movement, the unpredictable, the possible and encounters. For them, it is either 'spontaneous theatre' or nothing.
> Lefebvre 1996: 172 [emphasis in original]

As a productive force, Lefebvre argues that 'play' has been marginalised in urban development. It has only 'survived', as he puts it, 'in the holes of a serious society which perceives itself as structured and systematical and which claims to be technical' (Lefebvre 1996: 171). So, how to recover play in the production of space? Lefebvre's work, while typically not conclusive on this count, points to a few principles for action.

Among these, Lefebvre (1996: 166) makes a purposive distinction between 'strategic' and 'tactical' variables when it comes to relating urban research 'to the concrete of urban drama', the former comprising 'the transformation of everyday life', the latter being weak interventions in society. As an example of the former, Lefebvre (1966: 166) proposes the 'constitution of a very simple apparatus of social pedagogy' – the purposive provision of spaces *for* youth – as a transformative gesture in cities.

Elsewhere, and with specific reference to his discussion of '*fête*', Lefebvre (1996: 171) iterates that '[t]he proposition of this project is to gather together *by subordinating to play* rather than to subordinate play to the "seriousness" of culturalism and scientificism' [emphasis added].

Here, Lefebvre (1996: 173) draws our attention to the 'structures of enchantment' that meaningfully 'putting art at the service of the urban' can achieve. This notion of enchantment can be seen to characterise not only architectural interventions at the Southbank Centre [Figure 1], but also ways that being at the Southbank Centre was experienced by visitors (as recorded in my fieldnotes [Jones 2014: 250-1]).

Finally, and of methodological interest, Lefebvre also makes the case for 'an experimental approach towards utopia' (Pinder 2015: 37). Reflecting his concerted, but often overlooked, engagement with a range of architects, planners and other urban design professionals (Pinder 2015: 37), here Lefebvre was interested in possibilities for evaluating the implications and consequences of utopia on the ground. In very practical terms, as Pinder (2015: 37) argues, this included 'considering the criteria by which places are judged "successful", and "the times and rhythms of daily life which are inscribed and prescribed in these 'successful' spaces favourable to happiness" (Lefebvre 1996: 151).'

Conclusions

This paper has explored, via recourse to ethnographic fieldwork on the transformation of London's Southbank Centre, the tension between pejorative accounts of the 'disneyfication' of the urban public realm and Lefebvre's (1996) assertion in *The Right to the City* that it is *la fête* ('a celebration which consumes unproductively' [66]) that 'must be revitalized!' (150). At the Southbank Centre, with its functional roots in the Festival of Britain, and architectural heritage in modernist utopianism, the case can be made that Lefebvre's demand is, at least partially, being met. Beneath the surficial prettification of space with works of art a more meaningful desire to allow former art to be recognised 'as source and model of appropriation of space and time' (Lefebvre 1996: 173) is evident.

Importantly, Lefebvre's 'everyday utopianism' (Gardiner 2013) needs to be understood as a distinctive conceptualisation because 'it did not involve prescribing an already fully formed ideal as the term utopia is often construed and, indeed, derided' (Pinder 2015: 32). Rather, it allowed for an engagement with the real and the possible – a position no doubt informed by Lefebvre's active engagement with urban design and planning practice (and practitioners). Intriguingly, Lefebvre's own emphasis on such material engagement is often sorely missing in critical urban studies deployments of his work that operate at a more abstract level. This is

certainly the case in discussions of urban public space, and in this paper I have therefore sought to think through Lefebvre's discussion of a renewed fête, in particular, via recourse to an in-depth empirical study of a particular set of urban public spaces.

The optimistic edge to Lefebvre's work, and his willingness to consider the value of transgressive spatio-temporal 'moments' in urban development, invites us to think again critically about urban spaces characterised by tropes of 'theme park' design. In its current morphology much of the public realm of the Southbank Centre can be characterised in this way, as those responsible for the site seek to revive the ideological impulses of designs on the space since the Festival of Britain (which was itself described as 'a gigantic toyshop for adults' in *Brief City* [a short film about the Festival of Britain by Jacques Brunius and Maurice Harvey, 1952]). Through Lefebvre, however, rather than uncritically characterise such spaces as 'disneyfied' we can not only seek out and celebrate moments of 'unproductive consumption' – of fête – among them, but also think through the implications of such space for urban practice. At the South Bank, I would argue, surrounded by hard, worn concrete, the 'possible-impossible', and the utopian possibilities of putting art at the service of the urban, can be glimpsed.

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