

Uncommon Competition

Jeff Derksen, 2007-01-21

Notes from Jeff Derksen's panel presentation for Urban Subjects US—a cultural collective formed with the goal of researching and developing artistic projects focusing on urban issues—at the Dr. Kris Old's lecture: Mega-Events, Olympic Games and Housing Rights, presented by the Impact on Community Coalition, 2007-01-21.

Neoliberalism Generally, Cities Specifically

The second action that the new revanchist mayor of Vancouver did, after pulling power from a progressive coalition and upon taking office, was to cut the percentage of social housing that will be put into the Olympic Village housing complex in a former industrial area once it is turned over to general use after the 2010 Olympics. Unfortunately, this roll back is not surprising in these neoliberal times where public housing (and housing in general) is eroded and understood as public-private agreement that is a hindrance to developers more than a social policy or a right tied to the contract between citizens and cities. But the mayor's explanation of the cutback to the original social housing percentage (which was agreed to by the former City Council and all other players in the development) was highly reflexive and mediated by neoliberalism as a logic that sparks people and places in competition with one another. The official explanation was simply that other cities in Canada and in the USA do not have as high a percentage of social housing as that project had planned. Embedded in this decision are several key elements of neoliberal urban governance: that competition between cities must be shaped to the benefit of developers and not toward citizens; that the standards that neoliberal competition sets become the unquestioned standards to meet rather than a place-based and contextual standard, or even a standard forged through democratic or civic debate (or capital will flee to another global destination); that social policies must give way to economic policies (and that economic policies are to solve social problems rather than specific place-based social policies); and lastly, that neoliberal policies are the only possible policies. It also shows the degree to which governmentality and policy "adjustment" or outright restructuring are part of a neoliberal strategy -- despite the neoliberal discourse of small government and nonintervention economically. The brittle and brutal contradiction is that neoliberal discourses are based on nonintervention in the market -- of levels of government to stand aside to free the market to produce wealth in the manner it can when unbridled -- but that at the social level a strong hand is used to intervene in policy and in social matters.

"I Back the Bid", or Global Megastructures

Vancouver's global courting and local romance of the 2010 Olympics and the megaprojects tied to it (which were millions over budget even before any ground was broken) is another example of the shift in scale of urban redevelopment within neoliberalism and with the globalization of gentrification. That the city and the province will have to cover the extra expenses, rather than the developers, shows how the downloading of risk and of responsibility has dropped debt and risk from higher levels of government and the so-called private sector onto the urban and regional level (which, of

course, is an offload onto citizens). The scale of this Olympic development represents the way that such megaprojects, “while being decidedly local, capture global trends, express new forms of national and local policies, and incorporate them in a particular localized setting” (Swyngedouw et al 2002 543). Laced into the competitive software of neoliberalism, ‘These projects’, Eric Swyngedouw proposes, “are the material expression of a developmental logic that views megaprojects and place-marketing as means for generating future growth and for waging a competitive struggle to attract investment capital” (546). Yet, this Olympic project, and other projects of such a scale (like the Olympic Village in Athens or the DonauCity in Vienna) are both products of and a shaping influence of the neoliberalizing of urban governmentality. This shift is described by Swyngedouw (in a collaborative study of 12 European large-scale urban development projects) as a “new choreography of elite power” that sees local democratic participation restricted or contained – not usually outright excluded, but brought in and consulted, even included on commissions in a “politics of recognition’ that recognizes groups, or “stakeholders” yet grants them little power. The “social returns” on such megaprojects, in terms of Swyngedouw’s analysis, is negative and hardens an “institutionalization of public-private partnerships, [and] high-income groups as clientele of social democracy” (table 4). In Swyngedouw’s description of this process, ‘The newly emerging regimes of governing urban revitalization involve the subordination of formal government structures to new institutions and agencies, often paralleled by a significant redistribution of policy-making powers, competencies, and responsibilities (556). Following the neoliberal discourse of smaller government function but increased governmentality, these extragovernmental bodies are fractured and multiple (Swyngedouw et al), made up of the varied “stakeholders” driving or affected by the project. In reality, this model is implemented very unevenly and can override and transform the existing form of democratic accountability and not operate with a clear set of guidelines. Thus the Olympic Legacy is often not a built environment of sports complexes and housing, but a refigured process of decision-making.

Culture & The Soft Coup

Now, we want to point out that culture and artists were famously called the “bulldozer blade” of gentrification – honing in on the idea that as soon as artists “discovered” a neighbourhood like incoming pioneers, gentrification was soon to follow and the original residents of the neighbourhood would be pushed out as galleries and restaurants moved in, rents rose, etc.. This is and isn’t the case in Vancouver, for “culture”, in a general sense, is being deployed or used in more subtle ways than a bulldozer blade to reshape the city. Both spatially and culturally, culture has become an accumulation strategy, particularly at the urban level, as culture in general (from galleries to museums to granting agencies), is retooled through a neoliberal logic that collapses the cultural into the economic, as an aspect of the soft coup of gentrification – its edges softened up with a new ecological vocabulary of “regeneration” and “sustainability”. As in all things Vancouver, this is both unique and paradigmatic: unique in the way that the

arts community can organize against harsher forms of gentrification; paradigmatic or all too common in the way that culture is the new lever of urban transformation. This is a shift from the days of cultural critique when culture was seen to be overly directed by the hand of the state and its funding agencies, and cultural producers and institutions sought a degree of autonomy from the state and its fatherly interference. Culture, once seen as part of a national, regional, and local life that was managed by the state, and opened or altered by the critique of the challenges of identity politics and regional formations, has now migrated into the hands of the local elite & taste-makers. In Vancouver's case, this local elite is increasingly tied to the real-estate market and shapes notions of culture, works the private-public agreements sought after by cultural institutions in need of space made scarce by the "frothed" real-estate market, and drives the commoditization of art and the production of cultural capital through their art collections (and the savvy collectors in Vancouver _love_ conceptual and post-conceptual art!). Of course, local elites always had a hand in shaping culture, but we think this has intensified as the city has turned to culture as a means to define the city globally – as its added value in the global competition of city versus city in the hunt for global investment – and to transform the centre city as a consumptive playground for the newly developed urban-class (although the language of "life-style" began in Vancouver in the late-1970s). For culture makes a soft front to gentrification – who can be against the expansion of cultural institutes in the city— particularly given the attention to multiculturalism and the politics of recognition as a mission for institutions. And who can be against culture, given the hostility to it by previous governments (of all levels) – to be *for* culture is what artists and the arts community asked for, yet it has arrived in the form of a Frankenculture of developers and consumers (having pushed producers increasing out of the picture). Yet, we have to be aware of where the decisions about what kind of culture, and the mandates of cultural institutions, are coming from: the kind of soft but real power that cultural decision-making brings has drifted more to private foundations, private donations, and public-private agreements as governments off-loaded the management of the culture industry and as neoliberal policies turn more and more to "experts" and local elites. Often these new arrangements do not have any democratic accountability. In a tight loop, culture becomes an added value to the city, an added value to the real estate market in a complex system where the city gives credits to developers who pull gallery spaces into buildings or drop plop art in front of a generic no-name architecture glasstower. And the very way that cultural projects engage with and define place, history, and the city is decided by the local elite who benefit from it.

Works Cited

Swyngedouw, E. (2002) (with F. Moulaert and A. Rodriguez) "Neoliberal Urbanization in Europe: Large-Scale Urban Development Projects and the New Urban Policy", *Antipode*, 34(3), pp. 542-577