Blighted Spaces and the Politics of Everyday Life

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While a great deal is known about the demographic and historical trends that shape the built environment of American cities, much less is known about the politics of everyday life among residents who continue to live in postindustrial neighborhoods. This study seeks to compensate for the current gaps in academic research by conducting *spatially informed ethnography* in a North Philadelphia community. Specifically, the study will explore the issue of urban "blight" from a cultural geography perspective, primarily by looking at the ways in which "blighted" spaces shape everyday life, and everyday life in turn shapes and produces the spatial environment. In response to these concerns, my study poses the questions: What would it mean to focus on the ways in which human agency, imagination, and subjectivity are shaped by "blighted" geographical locations? What would it mean to pay ethnographic attention to how subjects in given historical conditions are shaped by "blighted" spaces, as well as how they respond to these spaces in culturally specific ways? By incorporating critical interdisciplinary approaches, this study offers a new way of looking at the various practices of daily life – including flexible, informal economic activities and post-welfare related "lifestyles" of resistance. Through the lens of spatial ethnography, the study seeks to elucidate the ways in which postindustrial space interacts with culture, poverty and addiction; as well as the ways in which users continue to appropriate postindustrial spaces in culturally meaningful ways under the aegis of the semi-welfare state.

Problem Statement/Formulation of the Research

As replacement strategies for capital accumulation have taken flight to locations unrestrained by the social and political commitments of industrial capitalism, the modern city in many respects seems to have become its own graveyard. The ruins and detritus of this once glorious engine of production span the contemporary cityscape as the discarded motifs and structures of a bygone era, recognizable in the myriad forms of urban blight that are perhaps most visible in the form of property abandonment. Victim to the structural violence of uneven development, deindustrialization, and suburbanization, the modern city now stands as a debased and anemic capillary system through which globalization pulses in all of its forms. Philadelphia, oft described as the quintessential post-industrial rust belt city, has been especially hard hit in this regard. The visible fallout from these forces is evident in the erosion and abandonment of the built environment, with current estimates standing at 26,115 abandoned houses, 30,729 vacant lots, and 2,950 vacant commercial structures within city limits. Other cities are facing similar problems in their urban cores but Philadelphia is said to have the worst problem with property abandonment - even worse than Detroit, the city most often associated with the woes of rust-belt decline. In fact, a recent Brookings Institute survey of 83 cities found that Philadelphia had the highest number of abandoned structures per capita in the country at a rate of 36.5 abandoned structures per 1000 residents (Pagano & Bowman 2001).

In recognition of the widespread postindustrial urban decline reflected in these numbers, Philadelphia Mayor John F. Street is currently staking his 25-year political career on a citywide "anti-blight" campaign in hopes of revitalizing the city. Street's self-proclaimed "war on blight," or "Neighborhood Transformation Initiative" as it is known in formal terms, was signed into existence on March 14th, 2002 (Burton 2002). The anti-blight bill is a $295 million dollar bond initiative that is expected to induce an additional 1.4 billion dollars in state, federal and private spending over the next five years. Street's plan has been dubbed the "biggest political gamble of his career," and the media expects that it will provoke "nothing less than a citywide revolution" (Yant 2000, p.A1). Discussions of urban blight in Street's political discourse are typically replete with references to the usual suspects: abandoned houses, abandoned factories, vacant lots, abandoned cars, graffiti, dirt, crime, rats, tires, garbage, illegal dumping, and other general signs of urban decay. As part of a tightly synthesized and highly effective political rhetoric, Street's discussions of blight generally extend to the expansive rubric of its correlative problems, such as crime, disorder, drug dealing, poverty, declining tax bases and depressed land values, white flight, disinvestment, poor schools and community breakdown – all processes that are said to deteriorate quality of life in the city.

Undoubtedly, the issue of urban blight weighs heavily upon the conscience of Philadelphia, thus making it a compelling topic for academic research. But the issue of how to make sense of "urban blight," or urban decline, is indeed a deeply complex matter that holds many risks and challenges. It is my contention that the conventional ways in which "blight" has been talked about - in the Philadelphia media and in the academic literature - is deeply problematic and in many cases densely ideological. The major theoretical paradigms seeking to explain urban blight offer myriad insights into the problems associated with urban blight, and each body of theory has advanced the knowledge base on blighted spaces in incrementally significant ways[1]. But as I will show in this study, each of these theories is also limited in important and specific ways, particularly in terms of their restrictions on what can be known about the people living in blighted neighborhoods. Accordingly, this research seeks to offer an alternative way to talk about urban blight through the methodological lens of what I will refer to as *spatially informed ethnography*. It is my contention that spatially informed ethnography will produce new ways of understanding and talking about blight that are precluded by the dominant theoretical paradigms and channels of knowing in contemporary Philadelphia. Spatially informed ethnography offers an opportunity to re-tell the story of urban blight in such a way that foregrounds the agency of the residents living in blighted neighborhoods – a factor that is conspicuously absent in conventional research, policy discourse, and media coverage. In order to accomplish these objectives, I propose to conduct spatially informed ethnographic research in the lower North Philadelphia community, primarily in the neighborhood of West Kensington. Specifically, I intend to explore the issue of urban blight from an ethnographic perspective, primarily by looking at the ways in which the built environment produced by uneven geographical development[2] shapes the politics of

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[1] For a comprehensive review of the theoretical paradigms seeking to explain urban blight and urban decline, see Fairbanks (2001), *A Theoretical Primer on Urban Blight*. This paper provides a thorough analysis of micro-economic/market theories; the ecological paradigm; racial/underclass theories on the inner city; suburbanization theories on urban decline; and theories on postindustrial decline and the spatial development of capitalist markets.
[2] In the context of this proposal, use of the term uneven development refers to the theoretical postulations of Marxist geographers such as Neil Smith and David Harvey. Uneven development is described as "the systematic geographical expression of the contradictions inherent in the very constitution and structure of capital" (Smith

everyday life, and the politics of everyday life in turn shape and produce socio-spatial relations.

While there are many ways of knowing, ethnography is an especially cogent framework for an alternative exploration of urban blight based on its appreciation for the immanently human configurations that play out in "blighted" neighborhoods. Ethnographic research is valuable as it allows us to grasp the intertwined dynamics of cultural and material processes as they are played out in particular geographic locations, thus generating new forms of knowledge that elude the heuristics of conventional research methods. Recent transformations in urban anthropology suggest new ways to study the built environment through the integration of a broad array of spatial theoretical perspectives from cultural geography, political economy, urban sociology, and regional and city planning. The new emphasis on spatial relations provides insight into material, ideological and experiential aspects of the urban environment, while the reliance on ethnography allows researchers to present an experience-near account of the politics of everyday life in urban neighborhoods. Simultaneously, this work addresses macro processes such as globalization, commodification and the new urban social order in the context of local environments. Spatially informed urban ethnography incorporates critical interdisciplinary approaches en route to advancing our understanding of the city, thus providing geographical insights that are integral to our knowledge of the growing inequality of urban lives (Low & McDonough 2001). The proposed research is informed by these nascent academic trends, seeking to introduce new understandings of the specific issue of urban blight by introducing the following preliminary questions: What would it mean to focus on the ways in which human agency, imagination, and subjectivity are shaped by blighted geographical locations? What would it mean to pay ethnographic attention to how subjects in given historical conditions are shaped by blighted spaces, as well as how they respond to these spaces in culturally specific ways?

In advancing a new way to conceptualize urban blight, it is the primary objective of the proposed research to uphold the primacy of *space* and spatial theory[3] not only in relation to questions of blighted environs, but also in relation to questions concerning the politics of everyday life. The questions raised by Henri Lefebvre's realization that daily life depends on the production (and consumption) of space remain largely unanswered, even in academic works coming out of Marxist geography that hold the category of space as their primary *raison d'etre* (Gottdiener 1994). As the built environment is critical to understanding the production and transformation of social relations, space is an important concept for social analysis. It is a multi-dimensional concept that is at once economic, political, semiotic and experiential, and in this sense it is an integral component of social interaction and an indispensable vector for critical theory, particularly when added to the vectors of time and being. The proposed research aspires to refrain from talking about space merely as an idealist or abstract category, in addition to avoiding simple discussions of space as strictly a container for the political economy. Conversely, the proposed research will show how the consideration of socio-spatial relations can enhance our understanding of "blighted" urban environments by introducing an appreciation of culture in relation to material forces such as space, and by

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1984, p.xi). It results from the inherent tension in accumulation strategies between the spatial fixity of capital and the need for capital mobility in order to resolve the problem of diminishing profits. This tension results in permanent contradictions that manifest in differential spatial environments and periodic crises involving the restructuring of geographical space through processes such as suburbanization and deindustrialization.
[3] For further analysis of space and spatial theory, see Fairbanks (2003), *A Theoretical Primer on Space*, in *Critical Social Work,* Volume 3, spring 2003.

emphasizing the social relations that these material forces evoke. The primary objective will be to forge a relationship between the analytical categories of *political economy*, *space,* and *culture* through the lens of ethnography; as such the challenge will be to consider the reciprocal construction of culture within certain spatial locations, particularly in relation to processes of capital accumulation and politics.

As Michael Dear contends, "space is nature's way of preventing everything from happening in the same place" (Dear 2000, p.47). Henri Lefebvre staked much of his intellectual life on this simple proposition, yet the core of his work becomes infinitely more sophisticated when he draws our attention beyond mere inventories of what exists in space or a basic discourse on space – neither of which can produce a true *knowledge of* space (Lefebvre 1974). In contrast, Lefebvre's ontology asserts a greater importance for space as being present and implicit in the acts of creation and being, whereby the process of life itself is inextricably linked with the production of different spaces (Dear 2000). Contrary to the idea that space is merely a reified alembic that boxes things in, Lefebvre implores us to appreciate the built environment as being structured through social relationships. People create space; thus the production of space is an inherently political project in which space is a mediating force that integrates an infinite number of active and dynamic cultural processes. In appreciation of this premise, proponents of a revitalized cultural geography are seeking to advance the theoretical developments of cultural studies and social theory by informing these disciplines with a geographical sensibility (Jackson 1989). Arguing that geography is not merely incidental to cultural variation nor relevant only to the explanation of diversity but rather fundamental to the very *constitution* of culture, Peter Jackson asserts the following: "If social processes do not take place on the head of a pin, then we need to take spatial structure seriously, not least in the production and communication of meaning that we call culture" (Jackson 1989, p.xi). Jackson's work insists that culture is a domain in which political, economic and social relations of domination and resistance are contested, negotiated and resolved (1989). He further contends that culture is not merely socially constructed and geographically expressed but rather *spatially constituted*, thus it is vitally important to refrain from analyzing these domains in isolation. Such a conception lets on to an analysis of spatial manifestations of culture through a theoretically informed yet empirically grounded research methodology that places the relationship between culture, political economy, and space at center stage. Yet much of the literature coming out of cultural geography remains highly abstract and theoretical, and in this sense the discipline engenders a persistent yearning for ethnographic research that my own work seeks to fulfill.

The stakes of such a contribution become even more important when we consider the growing inequality of urban lives in the contemporary present. As Judith Goode & Jeff Maskovsky argue, we are facing a "new poverty" in the neoliberal era that has been shaped by the interconnecting phenomena of economic polarization, political demobilization, and market triumphalism (2001). While these forces are not necessarily new in terms of the history of American poverty and politics, the extent to which each of these factors are mutually reinforcing one another en route to a wholesale dismantling of the liberal welfare state is virtually without historical precedent. Yet little is known about the conditions of poverty within the midst of these transitions, and as Goode & Maskovsky suggest, many of the cultural strategies taking shape are new and in urgent need of study (2001). The transition

from a welfare state to a mode of spatial governmentality[4] vis-à-vis a law and order state has created an influx of flexible, informal economic activities and post-welfare related "lifestyles." In recognition of these trends, this study proposes to offer a new and provocative way of looking at the various practices of daily life that are emerging in postindustrial neighborhoods. Exploring the lived realities of devolutionary measures, welfare reform, neo-conservative welfare retrenchment, and the withdrawal of city services will produce a picture of poverty informed by spatial theory which belies or at least displaces conventional representations. Linking larger policy measures to the ground level of lived reality may elucidate such varied aspects as the regulation of the poor through policy; the engagement in strategies of underground economy as a viable mechanism to compensate for retrenchment and the macro-geographical shifts that have reshaped employment markets; and the act of carving out a coherent lifestyle through the utilization of welfare programs.

The proposed research seeks to ask questions concerning the ways in which the row homes of the former working class and the factory neighborhoods of a former economy are utilized in the present for purposes of rescuing, housing, accommodating or sheltering the [victims] of modernity's demise. At the outset, questions such as the following become germane: How do spaces create opportunities for people? How do they limit opportunities? How do people continue to use "blighted spaces" as a means to an end, and to what ends? How do people manipulate, re-appropriate, make and take up postindustrial space in order to meet their needs in culturally specific ways? What different spaces exist in "blighted" neighborhoods, and how do people make sense of these spaces across separate groups? How do spatial relations affect users of space? What do people in these neighborhoods do, and how do these activities relate to one another spatially?

My experience in the proposed fieldsite to date suggests that answers to such questions on the re-territorialization of space can be effectively rendered through the lens of drug addiction and recovery houses, as one of many viable approaches to understanding how human landscapes are produced. The trials and tribulations of living in the numerous "recovery houses" (many of which were previously abandoned shells that have been restored) typically includes a host of activities such as attending outpatient treatment programs (most of which are 9 hours per week for a period of 9 months to a year); attending 12 step meetings; attending medical appointments to procure eligibility paperwork; looking for work "on the down low;" avoiding dealers, debt collectors and child support officers; and seeking out dealers en route to a relapse. Those who "relapse" typically come in with stories that chronicle their plight of ending up in an "abandominium" (a term for abandoned houses that are utilized for drug use and shelter) strung out for weeks on end; or about walking Kensington Avenue under the El to sell themselves to get high. Trips to emergency rooms and police stations are also frequent, and these events typically mark "bottoming out" phases, which are usually followed by the beginnings of another run on the recovery track. New attempts are made to stay clean through

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[4] The term *spatial governmentality* borrows heavily from Foucault's notion of governmentality, which refers to the rationalities and mentalities of governance as well as the range of tactics and strategies that produce social order (Foucault, 1991). Foucault describes governmentality as techniques that govern the self as well as society through a set of apparatuses operating across distances of time and space. Theorists of spatial governmentality argue that under globalization and neo-liberalism, new forms of regulatory mechanisms have proliferated which target spaces rather than persons, often by excluding offensive behavior from specified places rather than attempting to reform offenders. For examples of scholarly works in this vein, see Theresa Caldeira's *Fortified enclaves: The NewUrban Segregation* (1999); Mike Davis's *City of Quartz* (1990); and Setha Low's work on gated communities (2001).

the processes of enrolling in a recovery house; procuring a nine-month general assistance welfare provision; enrolling in Medicaid; and enrolling in a requisite outpatient program.

This preliminary discussion suggests that in many ways "recovery" has become something of a way of life in post-industrial neighborhoods, as evidenced by the emergence of an estimated 250 unregulated recovery houses in North Philadelphia (Shaffer 2001). What becomes cogent here for the purposes of this research project are the ways in which poverty, drug addiction, and the act of "doing welfare" each entail a set of spatial qualities. There seems to be a way to render, vis-à-vis the world of addiction, a certain production of space through the temporal processes of devolution, evacuation, and the disappearance of employment. How does the neighborhood become a coherent space beyond the fallout of historical forces? Is there a way to look at the production of contiguous space and everyday life trajectories by studying the ways in which bodies circulate between welfare offices, recovery houses, treatment centers, "crack houses," "cop spots," and emergency rooms? To do so once again requires an important shift in consciousness, as common conceptualizations which frame "blighted spaces" and drug addiction as sites of negation, decline, and evanescence, must be re-appropriated toward an appreciation of the generative trialectic between space, time and being in postindustrial urban neighborhoods. The bulk of the theory on postindustrial decline and its emphasis on the obsolescence of the city precludes a certain reverence for the ways in which people continue to live in postindustrial spaces. In contrast, the spatial geography of drug use and its correlate in this case, recovery on welfare in Kensington's recovery houses, can provide a way of thinking about and representing the everyday use of postindustrial space.

I intend to argue that the processes of drug addiction and welfare-subsidized recovery are co-extensive with the postindustrial economy, and that these acts are culturally produced vis-à-vis their own spatio-temporal economies. The central argument here is that doing welfare and doing recovery is a way to talk about "blight" by viewing various practices as manifestations of the ways in which uneven development and postindustrial decline organize time and space. Spatial analysis takes us beyond conventional understandings of such entities as welfare and addiction by elucidating the everyday rhythms and spatio-temporal elements of how these processes are contested, negotiated, produced, and lived spatially. By acting upon space and the resources it contains, a set of social relations emerges that are inseparable from the vagaries of place, economy, and policy. Addiction can therefore be re-theorized less as a disease and more as a set of spatial patterns and relations, characterized by the loss of control to one form of relation and the denial of a full range of social relations and social experiences. By looking at the ways in which spatial environments produce various forms of addiction to one way of relating, addiction is elucidated not as an isolated or intrinsic evil within the person, but rather as part of the cultural politics of everyday life.

Research Questions and Objectives
The proposed research adopts a certain reverence for blighted spaces as active sites of cultural production that generate social meanings and social relations, as opposed to the common conception of blight as a site of absence, abandonment or death. Blighted spaces generate certain life trajectories that can be explored by focusing on the actual production and utilization of space vis-à-vis the tactics of everyday life. Under this intellectual orientation and guiding set of assumptions, the proposed research will explore the following set of Questions:

(1) What is the relationship between territory, blight, work, production, culture, and social practices? How does the spatial environment of Kensington interact with political,

economic, social/cultural, and aesthetic spheres of everyday life? What practices are co-extensive with postindustrial spaces and what are the spatio-temporal economies of these practices? In other words, how do historical processes of devolution, postindustrial decline, uneven geographical development, and retrenchment of the welfare state generate new forms of being, new forms of identity, and new ways of engaging in daily life? How are older, abandoned spaces reconfigured strategically for purposes of survival, aesthetics, or pleasure? Or in turn, how do older, abandoned spaces reconfigure strategies of survival, aesthetics and pleasure?

(2) How do individuals and collectivities make and take up culture in the production of public space within unequal relations of power? What tactics do residents or "users of space" deploy in order to escape the effects of power en route to generating meaningful, coherent lives? What conflicts, signs, or ways of being manifest in space as the effects of blighted spaces? How are blighted spaces contested, renegotiated and re-appropriated in culturally specific ways?

(3) How does uneven geographical development produce or limit specific "ways of operating," "ways of being" or "doings" in postindustrial neighborhoods? What types of economic practices are most common in blighted spaces? How does the spatial environment generate certain ways of "doing welfare," "doing recovery," "doing business," or "doing low wage service sector work"? How do "blighted spaces" impact social relationships and cultural politics in each of these realms? What are the spatio-temporal economies of the social practices involved in each of these realms within "blighted" spatial environments?

(4) In what ways can a space or a neighborhood be seen as a location for the production and management of knowledge? Is there a gap between popular/media perceptions or theoretical accountings of various spaces and their lived experience? And if so, how does this disjuncture disrupt urban scholarship on blighted spaces en route to generating new knowledge?

It is my contention that studying these types of questions ethnographically - by looking at the relationship between culture, space, and political economy - will produce an understanding of the politics of the everyday life in blighted spaces. The primary objectives of the proposed research are as follows: 1) To examine the ways in which space acts upon daily life, and the ways in which daily users of space act upon and in spatial environments in culturally specific ways. More specifically, I seek to examine the ways that territory shapes social life, and social life in turn shapes territory; 2) To examine the ways that space acts upon the political economy of a community by exploring capital accumulation strategies, business practices, employment opportunity, welfare practices from the perspective of the recipient, and political practices; and finally 3) To examine the relationship between space and the cultures of substance abuse; work; business; and other "ways of operating" in the community. This will entail not only an analysis of how space intertwines within each of these cultures, but also an exploration of the spatial practices by which those involved in each culture establish coherent lifestyles.

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