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Changing Urban Waterfronts: A Fixity And Flow Perspective

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Abstract

Tangier Many recent waterfront development projects bear witness to modernization's processes of creative destruction that are reshaping waterfronts around the world. Historic spaces at the water's edge that were once home to manufacturing plants, cargo handling facilities, passenger ship terminals, sailortowns, and warehouses slipped into a devalued, under-utilized, and feared conditions. Economic, political and biophysical processes are currently making those spaces come alive again with twenty-first century activities oriented to a globalized urban life housed in mixed-use buildings, convergence centres, entertainment complexes, centres of higher learning, and sleek corporate headquarters. Informed by deliberations from a 2008 International Network of Urban Waterfront Research conference in Hamburg, Germany and brought together in a forthcoming volume, *Transforming Urban Waterfronts: Fixity and Flow* (Desfor, Laidley, Stevens and Schubert, 2011), we suggest that 'fixity and flow' provides a new and insightful analytic lens through which to examine waterfront change processes.

Key Words: waterfront change, waterfront development, fixity and flow, harbour Development, port-city relations, urban growth

Report

1. Introduction

Policy makers, planners, and developers around the world are looking to waterfronts as locations for massive investments that can potentially elevate particular metropolitan regions within globalized urban hierarchies and, concurrently, reconstitute or create new forms of social interaction in dislocated or disused central city locations. So-called 'problem spaces' are being converted into spaces of opportunity for the new "creative class" (see Florida, 2005) as cities position themselves to compete in globally-scaled growth strategies.
Recent events demonstrate that the 'spaces of opportunity' proposed for many waterfront developments have generated considerable controversy, resistance and struggle (see for example, Not In Our Name, 2009). Such struggles to achieve a different understanding of the city and urban spaces are the kinds of issues which need to be analysed with a 'fixity and flow' lens. This lens expands the boundaries of conventional studies of waterfront transformations to include the ways that social, economic, cultural, political, and natural processes are intertwined at a variety of scales in the development of urban waterfronts.

2. Waterfront modernization

In port cities around the world, waterfront development projects have been hailed both as spaces of promise and as crucial territorial wedges in twenty-first century competitive growth strategies. Large investments have been made, and more are being planned, in urban waterfront development projects intended to transform derelict docklands into communities of hope with sustainable urban economies—economies intended to both compete in and support globally-networked hierarchies of cities.
But re-inventing port cities from the water's edge is not new. Waterfronts have been centers of urban transformation for centuries and will, no doubt, continue to be so. Whether the port or the city is the main influence on waterfront activities (see Norcliffe, Bassett and Hoar, 1996), we argue that waterfronts have been and continue to be spaces where an ensemble of actors, both societal and biophysical, and representing global, regional and local forces, engage in intense struggles that change the urban. The protagonists in these struggles frequently have dissimilar or contradictory spatial and temporal perspectives as well as class interests, and the waterfront projects that emerge from these struggles at any temporal moment have embedded within them the controversies, tensions and ambiguities from those processes. Internal tensions in particular development projects arise because waterfront spaces are dependent on local economies but are also crucial sites for competitive global growth strategies; these spaces embody the past and represent opportunities for the future; they generate growth within the city and impel growth outside the city; they are both subject and object of cities' ambitions and growth strategies; they are within a jurisdiction but are often outside that jurisdiction's control; they are both colonized and colonizing territories; they are represented as spaces of promise but have often been spaces of oppression; they are planned and unplanned; and of course, they are both natural and artificial.

3. The fixity and flow of waterfront change

The use of a 'fixity and flow' perspective captures many of the complexities and ambiguities that characterize processes of waterfront change. This perspective highlights a variety of fixities (such as built environments, institutional and regulatory structures, and cultural practices) and flows (such as processes of capital accumulation, information, labour, finance capital, energy, and knowledge) that we posit are central for understanding change, particularly on the waterfront, but also more generally in urban regions. 'Fixity and flow' allows us to go beyond exploring a simple dichotomy between static and shifting aspects of urban landscapes, and points toward more complex and contradictory meanings embedded in these terms.

'Fixity' and 'flow' are dialectically related concepts for understanding the processes of waterfront change. As Swyngedouw (2004, 21) notes "fixity is the transient moment that can never be captured in its entirety as the flows perpetually destroy and create, combine, and separate." The notion of 'fixity' is multidimensional with many lawyers of meaning. It carries the meaning of something that is solid, something that is secure and anchors space at a particular time. But, of course, within the dynamics of modernizing society, "everything that is solid melts into air" (Marx and Engels, 1848). To be modern means to know "both the thrill and the dread" of a world in which everything changes (Berman, 1982: 13). For us, focusing on processes by which 'fixities' are transformed is central to understanding not only the particulars of waterfront development, but also more general processes of social change. This transformation, as noted by Swynegedouw, can be best understood by unraveling the dynamics of relations between the perpetual movement of 'flows' and the transient moments of 'fixities'. In this reading, both fixity and flow are inherently active, and continually produced. Indeed, the 'fixities' that characterize waterfront developments are concerned as much with a constant turnover as are the 'flows' of waterfronts that are influenced by structure and inertia.

We are not the first to use the specific phrase 'fixity and flow', and its conceptual background has an important history. Tim Cresswell introduced it in urban geography when discussing the roles that various kinds of movement have played in Western society. Cresswell's 2006 book, *On the Move*, uses the phrase to summarize his ideas about the ways that place, spatial order, and movement inform thought and action. Cresswell is primarily concerned with understanding "how the fact of movement becomes mobility. How, in other words, movement is made meaningful, and how the resulting ideologies of mobility become implicated in the production of mobile practices" (Cresswell, 2006: 21). He argues that 'mobility' permeates Western society and that deeply rooted ideologies of mobility are pervasive in contemporary social and cultural theory. Mobility is, indeed, a concept that may be important in considerations of waterfront change. Waterfronts are typically places where the movement or flow of people, nature, goods and capital make their entrances to and exits from the city, and where they leave their marks on it. However, this understanding of mobility is only one aspect of the confluence of fixity and flow and the implications this confluence has for waterfront change.

Waterfronts are spaces best understood as operating within networks of historical relations, through the shipping of cargo, information, and people. And these historical relations greatly influence the formation of power relations throughout the networks. While Cresswell engages the cultural and societal implications of mobility as a power relation, the work of theorists such as Manuel Castells discuss the ways flows have similar implications in space.

In his 1996 book *The Rise of the Network Society*, Castells argues that information processing technologies have revolutionized our economies and in particular our life in cities. The information technology revolution in the 1980s was, he suggests, the start of a restructuring of the capitalist system. The rise of electronic communications and information economies lies at

the heart of a new mode of capitalist development in which a series of complex networks are influential in producing "spaces of flows." Cities operate within networked flows of production, distribution, consumption, and, most importantly for Castells, information. The physical territories of cities are considered to be the relatively fixed nodes of a network, whereas the flows of people, energy, information, disease, etc. connect these nodes in a network of relations. The dynamics of a spatial network of cities are greatly influenced by those spaces (for example, ports) that serve to enhance or retard flows and circulation in the network. One of the interesting consequences of Castells' analysis of networked cities is his suggestion that global flows of information in a post-modern society tend to homogenize places and dislodge local identities. As a result, relationships between architecture and society become blurred and the individuality of place becomes difficult to maintain. This is certainly reflected in the tendency during the late 1970s and 1980s for waterfront developments around the world to include strikingly similar festival markets, marine museums, and aquariums in the mold of the Rouse Corporation's projects in Baltimore and Boston.

This professed tendency towards a loss of local identity in conjunction with the importance of 'flows' in constituting urban change reflects Deleuze's "immanent flows of desire" that are central to the ways that identities are constructed and reflected in waterfront sites. With these Deleuzian 'flows' in mind, Kim Dovey's important book on Melbourne's waterfront posits that changes may be characterized by an "ungrounding" (Dovey, 2005: 3) of urban development—that is, the identity of place has been disassociated from the particularities of local history, traditions, events, memories, site conditions, and environmental characteristics. His narrative relates the story of a place becoming unhinged as "urban identity is reconstructed as it is commodified" (Dovey, 2005: 13).

Dovey reminds us of the important contribution that Deleuze and Guattari have made to the understanding of urban space. For them, urban space is both the basis for and a result of processes of urbanization, wherein the city exists in the midst of processes of *deterritorializing* and *reterritorializing*. Cities are constituted through circuits of circulating capital, commodities, energies, and labour. Because the city exists within such mutually-constituting spaces of different scales, it can be understood as being simultaneously deterritorialized and reterritorialized. It is deterritorialized in that it necessarily exists within a network of flows (both global and local), but it is reterritorialized as those flows materialize in space and time. Any particular city, then, while being simultaneously deterritorialized and reterritorialized in its abstract spatial relations, needs to be considered within a network of grounded (everyday) relations at any specified historical moment.

Here, then, we see the emergence of waterfronts as liminal spaces – spaces not only on the margins but also in transition and encompassing considerable ambiguity. Waterfronts embody the marginality and ambiguities that Deleuze and Guattari discuss. They are 'on the edge' in more ways than just their physical location. And they are deterritorialized spaces in that their identity is constructed by relations within a complex network of flows, but also reterritorialized by the particularities of the many fixities that exist in and on them at any historical moment in time. Sailortowns (see Hilling, 1988) are a good example of this liminality. They were, clearly, on the margins of mainstream society. Everyday life in a sailortown embodies a deterritorialized set of relations among shipping companies, international labour regulations, markets and processes, and shipping technologies. That same everyday life in a sailortown is reterritorialized by the particularities of local housing conditions, social practices, history, and so forth.

The 'improvement of nature' (Desfor, 2011) that saw the development of major infrastructure projects during the industrial and post-industrial eras also provides excellent examples of the liminality of waterfront spaces. On the waterfront, material forms of nature, such as water and

land, intersect with each other with great fluidity. And human attempts at manipulating the complex relationships among these components have left urban waterfronts not as pristine places, but as prime examples of the ways in which inseparable human and biophysical processes have produced 'socio-nature'. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, industrial practices were institutionalized in port, canal and railway infrastructure development as well as in land-fill technologies and the construction of factories adjacent to ports. Indeed, in many port cities throughout the world, the manipulation of socio-nature into spaces for industrial production and large-scale planning projects has defined notions of 'progress' and modernization. But, the liminality of these techno-nature projects soon became apparent as a supposedly domesticated nature gave rise to new and frequently more threatening problems—for example as straightened and encapsulated rivers increased the potential for flooding.

Liminal spaces tend to be highly contested and the politics of their specific form, as territories, rests, in Harvey's formulation, on dynamic relations between mobile and immobile capital (Harvey, 1982; Harvey, 1985; also Cox, 1998). The politics of urban land-use change frequently emerges from tensions and contradictions embedded in both spatially fixed forms of capital (such as airports, infrastructure and manufacturing plants) and more mobile forms of capital (such as information and financing). Prominent actors in these politics represent fixed and mobile forms of capital at a range of scales from the local to the global. These actors engage in processes that seek to reconcile their various interests and frequently opt to pursue spatial and temporal fixes that enable accumulation to proceed, at least temporarily.

Harvey (1996) offers us principles that enrich our understanding of spatial, temporal and environmental issues that are directly relevant to theoretical understandings of the ways that urban waterfronts change. In his dialectical analysis, he emphasizes that "processes, flows, fluxes, and relations" should be the focus of attention, rather than an "analysis of elements, things, structures, and organized systems." He goes further to say that, "A dialectical conception of both the individual 'thing' and the *structured system* of which it is a part rests entirely on an understanding of the processes and relations by which things and structured systems are constituted," (Harvey, 1996: 50). And he adds an essential qualifier: that these constituting processes operate within bounded fields. Harvey does not elaborate on what constrains bounded fields of operations, but we argue that introducing spatial or temporal specificity (for example) into a dialectical analysis grounds it to particular circumstances.

Our interest in the everyday convinces us that we must address the fixity of 'things' when considering processes within a bounded spatial and temporal field. For our analyses, 'things' foreground the importance of the everyday. While examinations of processes of change are vital for revealing the embeddedness of unseen and foundational forces, we believe that concrete experiences of everyday physicalities—such as spatial patterns of the built environment, institutions, legislation, and societal structures — need to be specified within case studies of waterfront change. These 'things' or structures do not usually change in short- and medium-term periods of analysis. For example, in many cases of waterfront property-led development, the institutional field (urban, regional and national governments, urban development corporations, property-rights legislation, and so on) is fixed during a particular temporal period.

This does not mean that we accept "a relational reading of place" (Amin, 2004: 34) that argues against a politics in which local actors can have effective control or management of a social and political space. We argue instead for re-ordered and more nuanced analyses, analyses that do not fixate on 'things' and that also give due regard to processes that constitute the everyday groundedness of space and time. Political actions at a local level are influential in altering

processes that produce the 'things' of waterfront development, but they cannot disregard networked flows of power.

4. Conclusion

A fixity and flow perspective focuses on analysing the complex array of dynamic and inseparable social and biophysical processes that come together to transform urban waterfronts. Whether it is the development of sustainable mixed-use projects on de-valued industrial and warehousing lands, the provision of high-priced waterfront housing, the re-structuring of port authorities and local governance agencies, the mobilization of social investments for constructing deep water and good land, the renewing of property-led development practices, or the production of new techno-nature infrastructural projects, all these changes are constituted through processes in which fixities and flows are centrally involved.

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