Shaping Cities: Culture as Development Work

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INTRODUCTION

Culture is (as Raymond Williams argued) a way of life, evidence and expression of a set of mutable values produced in but also conditioning people's encounters with the world. The question, now, is: what ways of encountering the world will produce sustainable urban development?

The challenge for policy and planning, then, is that change is produced in everyday life and often despite policies developed in political, social and cultural institutions to be delivered from a position of authority. This is not to say that policies have not at times been progressive; indeed, the planners and designers responsible for the concrete housing projects on the peripheries of many European cities were progressive, often socialists, and inspired by the modern promise that a new society can be engineered through design. The difficulty is, as Marvila demonstrates, it cannot be done through design alone, and perhaps does not begin there at all. If social change is to take place, perhaps it begins in a mutual interaction, a dialogic exchange in a space between dwelling and the ways in which consciousness becomes formalised in design or planning. Otherwise, in a separation of concept from actuality, of art from life, and of design from the occupation of space, is a hiatus in which fear and distrust are likely to grow. Opposition then takes the form either of vandalism or a desperate resistance which fails against the greater force of the dominant society or culture. But where do we look for alternative scenarios? This text reconsiders Paolo Freire, whose Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1972) followed his work in adult literacy programmes in Brazil and Chile during the 1960s. Freire writes, in its introduction:

«From these pages I hope at least the following will endure: my trust in the people ... and in the creation of a world in which it will be easier to love (Freire, 1972: 19)».

The text begins from the context of globalization, citing a UNESCO report on cultural diversity, reconsiders Freire, and moves to the question as to why radical social change is so elusive, looking to political ecology for a framework which brings some of Freire's insights into contemporary debate.

CONTEXT: QUESTIONS AND REVISIONS

We live in strange days when it is difficult to write, difficult not to be drawn into the futility and addictive adrenalin of a world at war. Yet the world has been at war for a long time: in the last century and the one before the struggle was class war, and was lost. To say its final act was the collapse of ideological choice with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 is not to apologise for a system in the eastern block which reproduced covertly many of the power abuses the European revolutions of 1789 and 1848 in Paris, 1917 in Petersburg, 1918 in Berlin,

and 1968 in Paris sought to overturn. But neo-liberalism has become naturalised in political discussion as the only ideology, while, consequently, the gap between rich and poor widens (Bauman, 1998), both within the affluent world and between it and the non-affluent world of the south (Seabrook, 1996).

The map, in postmodernity, is more complex than a division between classes - not only are differences also in terms of gender and ethnicity, but also difference rather than homogeneity is now seen as the condition of urban society. Part of the difficulty is that choice is too often presented as a duality of opposites – from a division of a thinking subject from an objectified world over which power is claimed, but which is in process reduced to its representation in a system of signs. Hence the plan, a sign-system depending on a remote viewpoint, takes precedence over the act of building, and the cleanliness of design over actualities which mess it up - the idea is always purer than the reality. Despite its limitations, the beginning of an alternative is found in Marx, in the philosophy of practice of his Theses on Feuerbach in a notebook of 1845. Ernst Fischer summarises:

The 'philosophy of practice' transfers the active, creative principle from the systems of idealist philosophy into materialism: reality as process, movement, change, and social reality as the intervention of objective and subjective factors, of objective circumstances and human activity (Fischer, 1973: 153).

In other words, although changes in conditions affect the person living in them, the person, too, can intervene in the process of change to affect conditions. This is the model of interactivity found, too, in Saussure's construction of a mutual relation between langue as the rules of the game, the structure of language which informs its use, and paroles, the game as it is played, language in use, acts of utterance which inform the structure. Categories condition cases, but cases reconstruct categories to which the cases belong only in as much as the categories belong to them. The point is that this is non-hierarchic. In contrast, most binary divisions in which the elements are seen as static - art and society, or beauty and use - lead to a privileging of one term over the other; and when terms are defined by their opposites - beauty is not-useful - there is no space for negotiation. But if that is so, what happened to all the hopes for a better world? If freedom is not-unfreedom, how does it come about? Or not?

The failure of successive avant-gardes which sought to reveal ideological truths as they saw them to the mass public is more than a failure of tactics, even than of inappropriate conditions. It follows a structural flaw in the concept of the avant-garde as revealer, as interpreter of the world for others who are assumed incapable of interpreting it for themselves. Again, one term, art, or artist, is privileged over the other, society, or mass public, to the exclusion of the creativity which people bring to ordinary life, often in their systems of survival, such as informal cultivation and house construction. But what else? Where is a way to reconstruction for a world which is sustainable - culturally, socially, economically and environmentally, for all of these are ecologies in their way?

The UNESCO report 'Our Creative Diversity' (1996) begins by

proposing a new global ethics to counter a globalization of capital which has no use for ethics. The report states its aims as

«To secure for all human beings in all parts of the world the conditions allowing a decent and meaningful life requires enormous energies and far-reaching changes in policies» (UNESCO, 1996: 16).

It seeks identification across national and cultural boundaries of shared values named as human rights, democracy, protection for minorities, conflict resolution, and inter-generational equality. But while the report asserts that "it is incumbent on all governments to give effect to such policies" (UNESCO, 1996: 17), there is little prospect of this under neo-liberalism. Economic policy in forms such as free trade agreements is currently made in global fora, largely by trans-national interests such as the oil industry and their governmental service providers such as George W Bush. Several trans-national companies have budgets larger than those of states such as Denmark, or perhaps Portugal, and it seems from press reports that only the largest countries have a right to speak: George Monbiot cites a delegate from an African country to the World Trade Organisation in Geneva in October, 2001: "If I speak out too strongly, the US will phone my minister ... I fear that bilateral pressure will get me, so I don't speak" (The Guardian, 6th November 2001, p17). But if this seems to invalidate hope, it can be noted that not only capital and its control of production and labour are globalized; communication, particularly by electronic (uncensored) means, and resistance are also global, and there is, perhaps, a new awareness that an alternative is needed if climate change as well as social exclusion is to be addressed (Houtart and Polet, 2001). The difficulty is in how the alternative is produced when it is the process itself, rather than the end (no longer the objectively given end of history of orthodox Marxism), which determines outcomes.

The question becomes acute in the case of sustainability, one version of which is appropriated by neo-liberalism, another seen as contrary to the interests of capital. Jennifer Elliott writes of contrasting roots of the concept of sustainable development since the 1980s: on one hand in economic development which seeks to secure future opportunities for growth which do not destroy the planet's eco- and social systems but maintain opportunity for wealth accumulation; and, on the other, in an environmentalism for which "economic growth and environmental conservation are contradictory", leading to a case for "a steady-state economy and the distribution of resources more equitably" (Elliott, 1994: 108-9). But if there is to be a radical shift - to acceptance that markets do not expand forever and the poor have as much right to a voice, and the fruits of the planet, as the rich - then what practices of everyday life, rather than institutional policies, will bring this about? Because any top-down approach, in city planning or economic development, reproduces exploitative, colonial power relations.

'Our Creative Diversity' sees a possibility for culture as empowerment. Carlos Fuentes writes:

«... the cultural question therefore is this: Don't we possess the tradition, imagination, intellectual and organizational reserves to elaborate our own models of development, consonant with the truth of what we have

been, what we are, and what we want to be?» (UNESCO, 1996: 22).

This suggests the making of new cultural narratives, stories of a world imagined as it might be rather than as prescribed, to offer people a scenario of their own making within which to act. Arran Gare writes, in Postmodernism and the Environmental Crisis, that "Narratives are not simply produced and received by subjects, but are temporal processes which constitute subjects" and, drawing on Paul Ricoeur's idea of emplotment - the making of structures through which to organize understandings of the world - adds that "People are provided with the means to think about the way they live and to appropriate the new structure to organize their own actions and lives" (Gare, 1995: 64). The model has its limitations, and is still linear, progressive like the model of ape to spaceman; but what can be grasped, perhaps more from Bakhtin's model of culture as a dialogic process (Bell, 1998), is that subjects are active in their own disempowerment and hence have a capacity to empower themselves through a change of interpretation. This means that cultural reception, rather than cultural production, is an arena for the work of a re-construction of consciousness - which Freire calls 'conscientization', or learning to perceive contradictions in the dominant society and to take action against oppression (Freire, 1972: 15 n1).

The importance of culturally produced narratives in framing how we encounter the world is demonstrated in the notion of a 'wild west'. It is specific to white immigrants to north America in the 18th and 19th centuries, a counter to the industrialised terrain of the eastern seaboard where capital is based, and its purpose is to legitimate the exploitation of the 'discovered' land. Because the new land has a negative image of wild(er)ness, and is inhabited by wild people called Indians, it must be developed, its blankness, like an empty space on the map, filled in. But Lucy Lippard, in Lure of the Local, cites Luther Standing Bear of the Lakota people:

«We did not think of the great open plains ... as 'wild'. Only to the white man was nature a 'wilderness' and only to him was the land 'infested' with 'wild' animals and 'savage' people. To us it was tame ...» (cited in Lippard, 1997: 129).

Cultural narratives, then, are effective in how we see reality when we cannot know it directly. Because reality is always changing, including our own as thinking subjects, narratives are open to revision. If economic development, or power, is naturalised - likened to weather or biology - it is set outside history and beyond intervention; but when this is seen to be a story, it can be re-written. Freire's importance today is in his efforts to assist people in undertaking such re-writing for themselves.

FREIRE AND LIBERATION PEDAGOGY

Freire begins by deconstructing the colonial frame by re-writing the student-teacher relationship. Conventionally, this is a power relation in which one, as it were, fills the other with new knowledge. This assumes implicitly that the other is an empty vessel into which

knowledge, for which gratitude is required, is poured. Freire calls this the 'banking concept' of education, and sees it as mirroring the relation of colonist to colonised subject. He makes a number of arguments against this concept: that the teacher describes reality as static, that elements are detached from totalities, and that "Words are emptied of their concreteness and become hollow" (Freire, 1972: 45). He notes the numbing power of repetition and mechanical memorization, and describes this kind of education as restricting the scope of learning to "storing the deposits" of the teachers. He states:

Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry men [sic] pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other ...

Adding that

«In the banking concept of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing. Projecting an absolute ignorance onto others, a characteristic of the ideology of oppression, negates education ...« (Freire, 1972: 46).

Is this reminiscent of urban planning and its cartographic conventions which assume a white sheet of paper, as if the ground does not exist?

The banking concept of education makes its objects manipulable while institutions such as regulated schooling produce disciplined publics, in Foucault's sense, and workforces for industry. In a post-industrial period it is consumerism which takes on this role. Sharon Zukin notes:

Styles that develop on the streets are cycled through mass media ... where, divorced from their social context, they become images of cool. On urban billboards advertising designer perfumes or jeans, they are recycled to the streets, where they become a provocation ... The cacophony of demands for justice is translated into a coherent demand for jeans (Zukin, 1995: 9).

Freire's context for the banking concept of education is exploitation; his work in adult literacy programmes - for which he was arrested in 1964, after the military coup in Brazil, jailed, then exiled to Chile, where he worked for five years in a UNESCO agrarian reform programme - impacted the power of land-owners for whom an illiterate peasant class was a labour-force. In countries such as Colombia or Nigeria today it is oil companies who carry on this role, employing their own or the state's compliant militias. But an interesting reflection emerges from Freire's account: that power is re-constituted by the oppressed in their own consciousness.

In a colonial situation, repressive thinking is ingrained in the subject population, the power of the colonist seeming inevitable. So:

«The central problem is this: how can the oppressed, as divided, unauthentic beings, participate in developing the pedagogy of their liberation? Only as they discover themselves to be 'hosts' of the oppressor can they contribute to ... their liberating pedagogy. As long as they live in the

duality where to be is to be like, and to be like is to be like the oppressor, this contribution is impossible. The pedagogy of the oppressed is an instrument for their critical discovery that both they and their oppressors are manifestations of dehumanisation» (Freire, 1972: 25).

Just as alienation dehumanises the owners as well as servants of capital, so does oppression. Realisation of this is the beginning of an alternative scenario:The truth is ... that the oppressed are not marginal ... living 'outside' society. They have always been inside - inside the structure which made them 'beings for others'. The solution is not to 'integrate' them into the structure of oppression, but to transform that structure so that they can become 'beings for themselves' (Freire, 1972: 48).

Transformation undermines power, and begins in conscientization. For Freire this is recognition that unlettered perceptions are of value alongside those of philosophy - that people in their ordinary lives have and state transformative understandings. His method was to identify what matters in the experience of the student, from which a politicised awareness grows - a dialogic form of education, like Bakhtin's dialogic culture. 'Our Creative Diversity' concurs:

The notion of creativity itself must be more broadly used, not just to refer to a new artistic object or form but to problem-solving in every imaginable field (UNESCO, 1996: 23).

And as Freire writes in his last book, Pedagogy of the Heart:

«Hope of liberation does not mean liberation already. It is necessary to fight for it, within historically favorable conditions. If they do not exist we must hopefully labor to create them. Liberation is a possibility, not fate nor destiny nor burden. In this context, one can realize the importance of education for decision, for rupture ..». (Freire, 2000: 44).

REFLECTION: WHY TOMORROW NEVER COMES

The difficulty is that, as Freire hints in his rehearsal of the idea of praxis, conditions are not always ripe. In 1967, at the Dialectics of Liberation Congress in London's Roundhouse, Herbert Marcuse argued for liberation from the affluent society. Seeing a possibility that technology will solve the economic problem of scarcity, he foresaw a libidinization of work, and a new consciousness in which, as he puts it, society becomes a work of art (Marcuse, 1968: 185).

Written in the days leading to the insurgency of 1968, hope was possible, and the new culture of dropping out and turning on seemed like a new society in the making. But 1968 failed, too. In a lecture at the Free University, Berlin, in the same year as the Dialectics of Liberation Congress in London, Marcuse identified a key problem, a flaw in the concept of revolutionary struggle. After his lecture 'The End of Utopia' a questioner says:

«...the center of your paper today was the thesis that a transformation of society must be preceded by a transformation of needs ... this implies that changed needs can only arise if we first abolish the mechanisms

that have let the needs come into being as they are. It seems ... you have shifted the accent toward enlightenment and away from revolution».

and Marcuse replies:

«You have defined what is unfortunately the greatest difficulty in the matter ... for new, revolutionary needs to develop, the mechanisms that reproduce the old needs must be abolished. In order for the mechanisms to be abolished, there must first be a need to abolish them. That is the circle in which we are placed, and I do not know how to get out of it» (Marcuse, 1970: 80).

For the new society to come into being, the need for its realization must previously be felt, yet the burden of creating that feeling which gives rise to the need is located in the new. If the work of creating the conditions for change is in the new, as Marcuse says, there is no exit from the dilemma.

Yes and no: as Marcuse expresses it the situation is bleak. And in his later work he withdraws to an aesthetic dimension as the one safe house left in which the revolution can be plotted in face of an unyieldingly grim reality. At the same time, he writes:

«... what appears in art as remote from the praxis of change demands recognition as a necessary element in a future praxis of liberation ... Art cannot change the world, but it can contribute to changing the consciousness and drives of the men and women who could change the world» (Marcuse, 1978: 32-3).

Which is close to Freire. And Marcuse is close to negotiating his dilemma: the problem of revolution is its temporality. Shift the ground of the problem from time to space and the new already exists intermixed with the old, and does not have to be invented but recognized. This relieves the new, which becomes the co-present, of the need for both the making of new conditions for its inception, and of the need for interpreters to reveal it as a new truth.

LIBERATION ECOLOGY

But what do Freire and Marcuse, both writing their key texts more than thirty years ago, have to offer now? Does Freire's trust in people remain? Or is the post-industrial world, seen through a post-structuralist lens, a place more stark than Freire, or Marcuse, imagined? The problem remains one of power: the oppression of new colonialisms; and the reproduction of power relations in the avant-garde as revealer of the new - for others, not by them. In an essay which argues that no general theory of economic planning is available despite the failure of both socialist and liberalist models through the 20th century, Charles Lindblom, emeritus professor of political science at Yale, writes that "our thinking about social organisation, including political organisation and planning, carries a powerful bias in favour of the authoritative mind" (Lindblom, 1999: 57). He continues that it is time to expose and thus be rid of it. Perhaps the place where this is happening is in the non-affluent world.

Richard Peet and Michael Watts, in Liberation Ecologies (1996) argue that the restructuring of capitalism has transformed the regulatory environment, noting "new institutional forms of globalization ... coupled with new and more destructive technologies ... in a climate of aggressive deregulation" (Peet and Watts, 1996: 3-4). Peet and Watts see problems in the non-affluent world as the result not of ignorance on the part of local people but of external constraints. They propose a concept of liberation ecology which has much in common, if expressed differently, with Freire's liberation pedagogy. Applying discourse theory to development studies, they write:

Such reconceptualisations of power-knowledge ... see development as perhaps the main theme in the Western discursive formation: ... the passage of time is understood developmentally, that is, *'Things are getting better all the time'*. By contrast, poststructuralism has increasingly come to see development efforts as *'uniquely efficient colonisers on behalf of central strategies of power'* (Peet and Watts, 1996: 16-17). adding that *«the modernist discursive formation privileges a core notion of development which subjugates alternative frameworks "which Third World peoples have articulated to express their desires for different societal objectives»* (Peet and Watts, 1996: 17) - and which might extend to include urban (re)development. Amongst those objectives is what the affluent world calls, in its new buzz-word, sustainability; but if the rich countries see this as sustaining a model of global economic growth, the objection is that Disneyfication and MacDonaldisation are corrosive factors in the lives, or deaths, of other cultures. It is not accidental that the one item of neon-like colour in the centre of Marvila, next to the mall, is a MacDonalds sign. As Zukin argues (above), displacing demands to consumer goods is a means to control, and in this respect Marvila is to trans-national companies no different from south Los Angeles or Mozambique.

But, it is easy to bemoan an economic colonialism which even more than its military-political predecessor subdues its recipients. Far away, informal settlements are more sustainable, producing more cultural glue, as it were, than government housing schemes; and the ingenuity of survival is regarded almost as an art form. But if the landless peasant can empower her/his self, what happens if liberation ecology, or pedagogy, is mapped back onto the affluent world? In Marvila the artists and cultural activists of the month-long programme capitaldonada, an antidote to European Cities of Culture, have through their presence drawn attention, politically and in the national media, to the plight but also resilience of dwellers here. Once such a process begins it opens eyes to hope, and there is no prediction as to where it ends, each encounter which fractures the dominant structures lending confidence for the next encroachment. The individual projects have had varying kinds of reception, not surprisingly, but, for instance, the unannounced arrival of a grand piano and opera singer in a play area, and public performance of high culture, immediately draws attention to the banalities of pervading cultural organisation and categories. In a different way, workshops in which children make drawings and models of their neighbourhood begin to open a possibility of a shift from passive description to active aspiration and expression. A month-long project cannot deliver the means to carry this forward, the experience of radical planning (Sandercock, 1998) being that nurturing (rather

than directing) such energies takes considerable time, but it is in any case for people themselves to do this - not to be asked to subscribe to the dreams of artists but to make visible and audible their own dreams. The role of professionals then is to facilitate, using their influence to validate and their technical or intellectual knowledge to collaborate in a process of transformation which is not about interpreting the world but about making it. To end with Freire:

> Cooperation, as a characteristic of dialogical action ... can only be achieved through communication ... thee is no place for conquering the people on behalf of the revolutionary cause, but only for gaining their adherence (Freire, 1972: 136).

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