The Work of the City
An Overview of 'Gendered Spaces'
Elizabeth Rechniewski

IT is no doubt the cultural and humanistic geographers who have, in recent years, thought most deeply about the social significance of place and space. Criticising the static, "objective" descriptions of "map space" offered by earlier geographers, they have accomplished what has become known as the "spatial turn" towards an exploration of the social construction of space and the modalities of its transformation, according to the distinction drawn by Tim Cresswell, into "place".[1] As David Harvey writes : "place, in whatever guise, is like space and time a social construct […] The only interesting question that can be asked is: by what social process(es) is place constructed?" [2] Informed often by marxism, feminism and post-structuralism they have brought a critical perspective to an examination of how power and social differentials are played out in the construction of urban space. They have explored the particular uses that social groups make of the city and the effects of the physical juxtaposition of so many distinct but over-lapping communities: their "synekism", to use the term coined by Edward Soja to describe the dynamics of urban agglomerations.

The construction and reconstruction of place is on-going: "Places are never finished but always the result of processes and practices".[3] More recent work has insisted on the "performance of place": seeking to go beyond the binary distinction between objective place and conceived space, theorists such as as Edward Soja have developed the notion of the third space,[4] the lived space, in order to insist on our embodiment in place, and on the half-conscious acts of everyday life by which we invest space

with meaning. I will return to a consideration of the material practices that "produce" the city in discussion of the work of Lefebvre, where I will argue, however, that ethnomethodological approaches tend to overlook the issue of power, for not every city-dweller has the same possibility to use the city, to recreate it, to turn it to their own ends. We "perform the city" within the limits imposed not only by the physical characteristics of the place, but also by the social meanings already assigned to it, and by our social standing within it.

This is not to suggest, of course, that all differences in the uses of the city, or even all limitations and segregations, are negative or impoverishing. On the contrary, the nooks and crannies of every city are inhabited by distinct groups, which nourish communities, customs, imaginations that give rise to particular experiences of the city and unique forms of expression. Perhaps greater liberty and self-expression can be found in places from which one sex is excluded: take, for example, Samer Akkach's account in this volume of the literary gatherings in seventeenth and eighteenth century Damascus where, in the absence of women, poets revealed their "languishing" side, in places that were oases within the urban space.

Nor should we overlook the eccentric use an individual can make of the city – cities are the places where freedom can be found in the breakdown of categories and distinctions. Transgressing the limits imposed by gender, class or ethnicity, talented and isolated individuals have very often used the city for their own ends, successfully finding in the anonymity of city life a freedom they would not have enjoyed within the confines of traditional roles. On the other side of this freedom, however, may lie alienation and loss of identity: Yasuko Claremont argues that this is brought out in the depiction of city life in the writings of Hiraide Takashi and Oe Kenzaburo, which evoke the isolation of the individual in modern cities and the encroachment of "non-places" (a term coined by Marc Augé)[5] into the consciousness of its citizens.

However it is also true that most people are marked by their sex, ethnicity, and class within the city. The city reflects and reinforces social realities as it is also the product of them. We should not see cities as neutral spaces on which social and sexual differences are imposed; the

built environment is itself a product of social difference and unequal power: "social relations are underpinned by power and there is an obvious correlation between power and space — what gets built, where, how and for whom. Cities are literally concrete manifestations of ideas on how society was, is and how it should be", writes Henri Lefebvre, perhaps the foremost twentieth-century thinker on the sociology of the city and one of the few theorists to have attempted an overarching understanding of the city in all its social, political, economic and cultural complexity. Inspired initially both by Marx and by the Situationists' critique of everyday life in capitalist and consumer society,[6] he sought to reconceptualise the city as a creation, a product of its inhabitants and users, and not simply as a pratico-inert material object. The city is the social relations that develop within it, it is above all a place of sociability – a sociability which is facilitated or frustrated by planning decisions, material constraints, transport lacunae. The "production of (the urban) space" (title of one of his most influential works)[7] is an *oeuvre*, writes Lefebvre, a work of art, produced by the interactions and multiple uses of its inhabitants: as the artist creates from a blank canvas, so the collective daily life patterns of urban dwellers create the structures, networks and meanings of the city. Lefebvre believed strongly that the city should not be considered as the work of art of the architect – not a Le Corbusier, criticised ferociously by Lefebvre for his "catastrophic urbanism",[8] for "a planning practice and an ideology, a functionalism which reduces urban society to the achievement of a few predictable and prescribed functions" laid out by the architect, who assumes for himself the role of God.[9] Indeed it is no doubt to counter the baleful influence, the overwheening ambition and dehumanising tendencies of modernist architectural theory and practice of urban design that Lefebvre insists on the creativity of the inhabitants and the significance of their purposes in defining city life.

Lefebvre draws attention to the many ways in which the citizen's right to participate in and thus create the city can be exercized – or denied. He offers a fresh definition of citizenship understood as the relationship of the individual to the city, rather than to the abstract institutions of the State He does not define belonging to the urban community using the

terminology of formal legal citizenship status but grounds it in a normative definition based on inhabitance. The "right to the city" (title of another of hs works)[10] is earned by living in the city and belongs to the urban dweller (the *citaden*), whether citizen or stranger: "citadenship", not "citizenship". The *citaden*'s right is the right to "urban life, to renewed centrality, to places of encounter and exchange, to life rhythms and time uses, enabling the full and complete usage of … moments and places." To be a citizen, he argues, is to enjoy fully the facilities of the city, to occupy without fear its public spaces, to have a voice in its design and governance: in short he offers a radical rethinking of the purpose, definition and content of belonging to the urban social and political community.

There are utopian elements in Lefebvre's work: he theorises a city where exchange and market values can be subordinated to use value; where art is the product of our everyday lives, humanising our surroundings and our relationships; where imagination has the power to invent new ways of living, even within the "totalitarian" framework of urban planning. But the strength of his approach lies in his recognition that the city is a "work", a product of continual creation and recreation in which all its inhabitants play a role, however minor. And it is a product of social, political and cultural forces whose inter-relationship gives rise to unique and particular forms of expression. It might be said that Lefebvre foreshadows the notion of "synekism" developed by Soja to refer to the dynamic effect of creation and innovation produced by the dense networks of interaction characteristic of massive urban agglomerations.[11]

Lefebvre pays little attention, however, to the differential power of the groups involved in the dynamics of city life and in particular, as Toni Fenster has argued, to the distinctive role played by women.[12] A number of the articles in this issue draw attention precisely to the role of women in creating the "work" that is the city. Yiyan Wang's article on Shanghai, for example, draws attention to women's domestic tasks and their uses of public spaces, which define the particularity of Shanghai, long considered the most "feminine" of Chinese cities. She shows how a double and reciprocal transformation takes place: Shanghai opens up new possibilities to women and conditions their lives, but they in turn

influence the city: "Their daily activities create the city's materiality and their image informs Shanghai's conditions of modernity".

Elise Tipton's article on the Ginza district of Tokyo describes how middle-class housewives and the new professional working-women in the 1920s and 1930s went out of the home by day as consumers and workers to the department stores of Ginza, and by night to the modern entertainment places, to cafés in particular, but also to tea rooms, bars and restaurants. Ginza provided a space outside the home, between the home and the workplace. It offered opportunities for women to imagine and even experience a life not defined by family and husband, helping to construct new social identities for women. As in Shanghai, Japanese women appear not merely as the constructed objects of the city, but as participants who, through their everyday lives, were defining new roles and identities for themselves and for other women.

We might see these as examples of what Michel de Certeau describes as the "tactics" of resistance to institutional and patriarchal control of city life.[13] It is clear however, from articles such as Nijmeh Hajjar's, that in certain traditional societies, individual women who defied the conventions had little chance of escaping with their reputation – or even their life – intact. The changes that have taken place in the participation of women in urban and political life around the world in the second half of the twentieth century have often been made possible through their collective mobilisation and occupation of public spaces long controlled by men. One of the papers given at the workshop (not printed here) addressed the campaign of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, Argentina, who for 30 years have gathered in this square to protest the disappearance of loved ones under the dictatorship (1976-83).[14] Despite a democratically elected president who called them "crazy women", "las locas", and despite the fact that some mothers were taken away by the military, the mothers of Plaza de Mayo have gained access to public spheres dominated by men, and have also won the right to march without much interference by the police force and the authorities.

Such movements draw attention to the question of the relationship between modernity and the emergence of women into the city spaces: the
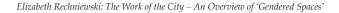
significance in the modernising process of overcoming the private / public divide that had for so long confined women to the sphere of the family in traditional Eastern and Western cultures. Traditional roles, conventional behaviours, 'normalised' by the threat and indeed the reality of violence, have long kept women confined to the private sphere; not that even in these private spaces were their life and thoughts their own, as Nijmeh Hajjar's article shows so clearly. But is the relationship between modernity and the emergence of women into the public and political spheres a necessary and inevitable one? Is modernity to be defined indeed by the public emancipation of women ? Can we see, for example, in Ahmad Shboul's account of the positive public and critical reception of Turki al-Hamad's trilogy, *Phantoms of Deserted Alleys*, an illustration of an inevitable movement towards the questioning of traditional gender divisions, even in such a highly traditional society as that of Saudi Arabia?

Unfortunately, readers of this journal who might optimistically assume an association between modernity and the liberation of women from the private sphere would not find much comfort from other articles published here. Hajjar's comparison of the Cairo novel trilogy by Najib Mahfuz with the later film adaptations of his work demonstrates that the emancipation of women in the late twentieth century is neither a progressive nor an inevitable process. On the contrary, she argues, the later film version reinforces cinematically their confinement and obliterates the tentative processes of emancipation that can be found in the novels.

In addition to Hajjar's article we might cite the example of an "advanced Western nation" such as France, where women living in the *cités* of the banlieues – particularly those of immigrant origin – have experienced increasing control, even violence in the past decade, limiting their uses of the city, their visibility, and their role in public life, as Fadela Amara has argued so powerfully in her book, *Ni putes ni soumises* and through her campaigning within the movement of the same name.[15] Michelle Royer's article juxtaposes two different cinematic representations of the gendered use of public space in the French capital in the present day. The women in Serreau's *Chaos*, both French and immigrant in origin, experience daily the brutality of men; the opening scene shows the shocking bashing of

a prostitute left to bleed on the city streets. But there is an interesting difference revealed in the two films in relation to the role of the state. For the young men in *La Haine*, the French state is the source of their immiseration and it is the violent action of the State's officials in bashing Abdul, that in turn evokes the violent responses from Said and Vinz. For Serreau's female characters, however, the French state, through its defence of the rights of the "abstract" citizen, provides a framework within which women can seek protection, even empowerment.

In the context of neo-liberalism, the State has played, however, over recent years, an increasingly less interventionist role in urban life, in France as in other countries. Lefebvre was already warning in his writings of the 1970s of the imminent problem of the suburbs in France, where a generation was growing up in the absence of any places of sociability (squares, cafes, community meeting-places), and living far removed from the centre, which was becoming, as Michelle Royer's article shows, "foreign territory" to the young men of the banlieues. He notes "the crisis of city centres": "centres of decision-making, wealth and power which reject towards peripheral spaces all those who do not participate in political privileges".[16] Lefebvre emphasised the importance of a genuine centre to city life, a centre to which all should have access, in which all would feel at home, whereas the tendency in many modern cities has been towards fragmentation, de-centralisation, dispersal and exclusion. The *cités* have created spatial divisions between classes of inhabitants, juxtaposing the well-to-do villa-owning suburbs favoured by the aspiring lower and middle classes, with the huge, densely-populated housing estates that are the product of modernist functional architecture and economic rationality – the descendants of Le Corbusier's dehumanisation of scale and architectural brutalism. The effects of these developments on the role of women in the city have been little examined, and yet they are victims of the lack of infrastructure, transport, insecurity to a perhaps greater extent, and certainly in different ways, to men. Marc Augé writes

"Bien des murs parcourent les mégapoles du monde actuel, qui séparent plus ou moins abruptement riches et pauvres, installés et immigrés, vieux et jeunes, bien-pensants et révoltés." ("Many walls cut

across the megapolises of the contemporary world, separating more or less abruptly rich and poor, settled and immigrant, old and young, the God-fearing and the rebels").[17] We would add that these real and figurative walls traverse the cities also in the minds and practices of women.

As Richard Sennett has powerfully argued, the wide-ranging changes taking place in the nature of the modern capitalist city are revolutionising the way we experience urban life: greater geographical mobility, the standardisation of the environment (chain shops and uniform office blocks: "non places" to use Augé's term), family life disrupted by unsocial work patterns, all lead, he argues, towards a "culture of indifference", the opposite of the engagement with the city that theorists cited earlier in this article have explored.[18] The fragmentation of neighbourhoods and mistrust of cultural difference, the suspicion of the other expressed through gated communities are so many indications that citadenship and the project of the democratic cultural creation of the city are under serious threat. These changes – the result of "flexible capitalism" – have weakened our sense of place and produced a turning-in towards the family, a grouping barely able, however, to sustain the weight now placed upon it by the quest for identity and security. Once again women – still largely responsible for the stability of family life and the articulation of the public and the private – are particularly affected, in ways which sociologists and urban theorists have yet to fully explore. The articles in this section offer a range of perspectives on the particular tensions that characterise the work of women in the city in the modern world.

Notes

1   Tim Cresswell, *Place, a Short Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004).
2   David Harvey, *Justice, Nature and the Geography of difference* (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), p. 261.
3   Cresswell, *Place*, p. 37.
4   Edward Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1996).
5   Marc Augé, *Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (Verso: London/NY, 1995).
6   "Henri Lefebvre on the Situationist International" Interview conducted and translated in 1983 by Kristin Ross at http://www.notbored.org/lefebvre-interview.html Accessed 5th June 2006.
7   Henri Lefebvre, *La Production de l'espace* (Paris: Anthropos, 1974).
8   Henri Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities*, trans and ed Eleonore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas (Oxford/

Cambridge.Mass: Blackwell, 1996), p. 207.

9   *Writings on Cities*, p. 98.

10   Henri Lefebvre, *Le Droit à la ville* (Paris: Anthropos, 1968).

11   Edward Soja, "Writing the City Spatially", in *City: analysis of urban trends, culture, theory, policy, action*, Vol 7, 3 (November 2003), pp. 269-281.

12   Toni Fenster, "The Right to the Gendered City: Different Formations of Belongng in Everyday Life" in the *Journal of Gender Studies*, vol 14, 3 (November 2005), pp. 217-231.

13   Michel de Certeau, *L'Invention du Quotidien. Vol. 1, Arts de Faire* (Paris: Union générale d'éditions. 1974).

14   The paper was given by María del Carmen Montesdeoca, Spanish Studies, University of Sydney.

15   Fadela Amara, *Ni putes ni soumises* (Paris: La Découverte, 2004).

16   *Writing on Cities*, p.195.

17   Marc Augé, "Un ethnologue sur les traces du mur de Berlin", *Le Monde Diplomatique* (August 2001), p. 4.

18 Richard Sennett, "New Capitalism, New Isolation: a Flexible City of Strangers", in *Le Monde Diplomatique* (February 2001).