

**From:**

# **Transforming Urban Waterfronts**

Fixity and Flow

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In his 1996 book *The Rise of the Network Society*, Castells discusses the ways that the development of information processing technologies has revolutionized our economies and in particular our life in cities. He suggests that the information technology revolution in the 1980s was 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’s 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 a 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 is picked up by a number of other authors. In 2005, Kim Dovey, together with Leonie Sandercock, Quentin Stevens, Ian Woodcock, and Stephen Wood, produced an important volume on the transformations of Melbourne's waterfront. Inspired by the ideas of Appadurai, Deleuze, and other post-modern social theorists, *Fluid City* conceptualizes urban change as a confluence of both global and local forces that are represented as flows. The theoretical foundation for the analyses of waterfront change is informed by 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, Dovey posits that changes to Melbourne's waterfront 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).

*Fluid City* 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’ (see Desfor in this volume) 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 how socio-nature has been produced through inseparable human and biophysical processes. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, industrial practices were institutionalized in port, canal, and railway infrastructure development as well as in landfill 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, 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). While value is often produced within fixed forms of capital (for example, within an office building or a manufacturing plant), more mobile capital tends to devalue fixed capital as part of a continual search for higher levels of profit. 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's 1996 book, *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference*, sets out his dialectical approach to understanding the politics and economics of space, place, and nature. His work 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, Harvey 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 writes that:

There is a deep ontological principle involved here, for dialecticians in effect hold that elements, things, structures, and systems do not exist outside of or prior to the processes, flows, and relations that create, sustain, or undermine them. For example, in our contemporary world, flows of capital (goods, and money) and of people give rise to, sustain, or undermine places such as factories, neighborhoods, and cities understood as things. . . . We typically investigate flows of goods, money, and people by examining relationships between existing entities like factories, neighborhoods, and cities. . . . Dialectical reasoning holds, however, that this epistemological condition should get reversed when it comes to formulating abstractions, concepts, and theories about the world. This transforms the self-evident world of things with which positivism and empiricism typically deals into a much more confusing world of relations and flows that are manifest as things. (49–50)

He goes on further to say, "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, for our purposes, an essential qualifier: that these constituting processes operate within bounded fields. Although Harvey does not elaborate on what constrains a field of operations, 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 our case studies of waterfront change. These 'things' or structures do not usually change in short- and medium-term periods

of analysis. For example, in most of the cases of waterfront property-led development analyzed in this book, 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, however, that we accept the conceptualization of Ash Amin, who notes the usefulness of “a relational reading of place that works with the ontology of flow, connectivity and multiple geographical expressions, to imagine the geography of cities and regions through their plural spatial connections” (2004, 34). Amin argues against a politics in which local actors can have effective control or management of a social and political space, because power flows across territorial boundaries. We argue instead for reordered 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.

Harvey’s elaboration and interpretation of a dialectical approach has had substantial influence on many urban disciplines and inspired many analysts throughout the Western world. Maria Kaika’s 2005 *City of Flows* is informed by Harvey’s approach and gives prominence to flows, modernity, and nature as the basis for understanding urban change. In Kaika’s analysis, the physical and social environments of the city are constituted through historical geographical processes of the urbanization of nature, and the urbanization of nature is fundamentally associated with modernization. Kaika develops the notion of a “Promethean project”, through which modernity “would defy the power of nature, reject divine order, and launch on a quest to free Man from his premodern fears, serve human needs and deliver social equity and material goods to everybody through progress, truth, reason, and rationality” (2005, 12). She posits that “excavating the flows that constitute the urban would produce a political-ecology of the urbanization of nature” (2005, 25). Her work is intended to unravel spatial expressions of the dualism of nature and society relations, and investigate how modern cities have been infused by particular visions and ideologies of nature. Kaika’s *City of Flows* contributes substantially to enriching our understanding of urban change, but our volume’s theme differs from it, not only in our concentration on changing waterfront spaces, but also by emphasizing the importance of the ‘fixities’ of everyday life that are apparent within a bounded field of space and time.

Finally, notions of ‘fixity and flow’ have been employed in recent urban political ecology literature to analyze a variety of issues. For example, Roger Keil and Harris Ali (2008) have found these notions useful in their analysis of a political pathology of emerging infectious disease within a dialectic framework of fixity and mobility. Their approach to understanding how SARS spread and emerged as

a major urban problem considered relationships between a fixed network of global cities and mobilities that emerged

through constant flows of people, information, and microbes along well-established communication and transport routes. Though the particularities of Keil and Ali's work is not directly related to our project of understanding waterfront change, it is interesting that notions of 'fixity and flow' have been found to be useful for analyzing a range of urban problems broader than those usually associated with the construction of built environments.

The 'fixity and flow' theme serves to unite the contributions in this volume, but it is not intended to be a theory of waterfront change. Rather it is a broad topic that resonates with a range of existing disciplinary approaches and that may be applied in different circumstances from a variety of perspectives, each adding a new layer of meaning to complex processes of waterfront transformation. Indeed, the editors have asked chapter authors to engage with the theme to generate new insights from their case studies of particular waterfront developments. In addition, the theme has helped put into perspective the complex array of inseparable social and biophysical processes that come together to transform urban waterfronts. Whether it is the development of sustainable mixed-use projects on devalued industrial and warehousing lands, the provision of high-priced waterfront housing, the restructuring 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 technonature infrastructural projects, all these changes are constituted through processes in which fixities and flows are centrally involved. By engaging with the fixities and flows embedded within particular urban settings, the authors in this book unravel both historical and contemporary cases of waterfront development to reveal new understandings of processes through which waterfronts have been transformed.