

The Right to Space: Countervisuality and Lived Space of the city Chandigarh

*Simrat Khurana

Research Scholar (Ph.D.), Department of English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University, Chandigarh

Abstract

The paper explores the spatial turn as it occurred in cultural studies and literary studies. Space is no longer considered just as an abstract category. In fact, the relationship between space, time, geography and body is being refigured. The present paper calls for the Right to space. The Right to Space combines the concept of Right to Look as proposed by Nicholas Mirzoeff with those of trialectics of space offered by Lefebvre. Right to Space argues for the right to lived space. Right to Space is not just about the city spaces but also the lived rural spaces as well as virtual spaces. Furthermore, Right to Space should not be understood only in visual terms. It extends from a geographical context to literary representations and other marginal spaces including race, gender, and class. Right to Space will be explored in this paper through the example of Chandigarh by offering a countervisuality to the social space of the city.

Keywords: Space, Visuality, Countervisuality, Urban, Rural, Chandigarh

Article Publication

Published Online: 17-Aug-2021

*Author's Correspondence

Simrat Khurana

Research Scholar (Ph.D.),
Department of English and Cultural
Studies, Panjab University,
Chandigarh.

simratkhurana11@gmail.com

doi [10.31305/rrjm.2021.v06.i08.024](https://doi.org/10.31305/rrjm.2021.v06.i08.024)

© 2021The Authors. Published by
RESEARCH REVIEW International
Journal of Multidisciplinary. This is an
open access article under the CC BY-

NC-ND license 

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>)

“The present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space... We are at a moment, I believe, when our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein.” (Foucault 22)

For long, human life has been viewed in its relation to history. But, the present epoch as Foucault says is that of space. Humans are now being seen in relation to the network¹ in which they exist, and it has been acknowledged that the network exists in space. However, it is not the first time that attention has been given to space. Philosophers like Kant, and Leibniz and mathematicians like Newton had also talked about space. The spatial turn as it occurred in the twentieth century is about the reconfiguration of the concept of space, and of human relations to time and space, stressing on the significance of geography and space.

I

There is no single clear definition available of space. But, space is no longer seen as a three dimensional infinite stretch devoid of any meaning or is talked about in abstract terms. There has been an evolution in the spatial thought over the time. Space was earlier paid attention to by mathematicians who talked about geometric space composed of lines, angles, shapes, and forms. Two different notions of space emerged in the seventeenth century proposed by Newton and Leibniz respectively. Newton gave the concept of absolute space and said that space exists on its own. His concept of space as absolute was indispensable to his concept of motion. Leibniz, on the

other hand, argued that space is composed of the objects it contains. For him, it was difficult to think of space as independent from objects and relationships shared by objects.

In the eighteenth century, Kant forwarded yet another proposition related to space. Kant, famous for his rejection of empiricism, talked about the 'a priori' conception of space. He talked about the existence of concept of space in the mind of the subject prior to any experience. The spatial thought was revolutionized in the twentieth century by thinkers like Henri Lefebvre and Michel Foucault. Now, the attention was shifted towards social space, the site of social practice and social relations. Lefebvre's *The Production of Space*, published originally in French in 1974, proved revolutionary in modifying the spatial thought.

II

Henri Lefebvre, one of the most prominent thinkers of twentieth century wrote extensively on cities and urban planning. He articulated the difference between the modern city and the ancient and medieval ones. According to him, cities had always existed and should not be seen as the product of industrialization. However, modern day cities had definitely been influenced by the process of industrialization which resulted in urbanization on an extensive scale. Witnessing urbanization and the construction of cities, he urged to reorient the theoretical thought towards cities as well. Throughout his works, he contested the right to city. He defined right to city as, "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 these moments and places" (179). For Lefebvre urban and city life was the place of existence of heterogeneity and he time and again insisted on the need to consider city as *oeuvre* (work).

It was only in his last book that he wrote about social space in general. Influenced by Marxist thought, Lefebvre defined social space as a social product. Social Space is the site of social relationships shared by humans. The social space, according to Lefebvre, is both a product as well as the means of production. Now, Lefebvre's *oeuvre* (city) also emerges as a product which also enables means of productions through flow of materials and exchange of information.

The most important contribution of *The Production of Space* has been the trialectics of space offered by Lefebvre. Lefebvre opposed the viewing of world in the terms of simple binaries. According to him, there is always a third element present. In the case of social space it was viewed in the binaries of the idea of social space and its material form. Lefebvre, however, proposed the concept of perceived, conceived, and lived space. These concepts were further elucidated by Edward Soja in terms of firstspace, secondspace, and thirdspace respectively.

The conceived space is the space of thinkers be it urban planners, architects, or writers, and poets. It allows for the conception of social space which is ideal. It includes the earlier conception about social space, for example the plan of a city formulated in the mind. Soja labeled it as the secondspace because perceived space according to him dominates our spatial thinking and therefore is the firstspace. The perceived space is the material space perceived through experience. Most of the times, space is viewed in its material form and is then perceived in terms of its physical features. The material space is often described in terms of forms, design, through the use of measurements. Lefebvre says, "Any space can be reduced to its formal elements: to curved and straight lines or such relations as internal-versus-external or volume-versus-area" (148).

To this ideal and real space, Lefebvre added lived space. Lived space is the space of actual lived experience, "space of 'inhabitants' and 'users' " (39). Edward Soja built the concept of thirdspace from the concept of the lived space. According to Soja, it is "the space of radical openness, the space of social struggle ... filled with politics and ideology, with real and the imagined intertwined, and with capitalism, racism, patriarchy, and other material spatial practices that concretize the social relations of production, reproduction, exploitation, domination, and subjection" (68). The conceived and perceived space had been dominating the lived space for a very long time. The spatial turn calls for shifting the attention towards the lived space, which is the actual space of contestation and has the potential of destabilizing the conceived as well as the perceived space.

III

Throughout spatial turn, right to city has been emphasized in the writings of various authors including Lefebvre, Don Mitchell and many more. Lefebvre's notion of right to city has already been described. Mitchell, however, doubts the guarantee of right to city which, according to him, is "right to the uses of city spaces, right to inhabit" (18). According to him, "it is never clear to whom the right to city belongs" (42). He agrees with Lefebvre over city being the site of differences but says that the space of city is exclusive of unprivileged and homeless people. He contends for the right of use of city space by all. Now, it is time to turn from right to city towards Right to Space in order to get a broader picture.

The Right to Space combines the concept of Right to Look as proposed by Nicholas Mirzoeff with those of trialectics of space offered by Lefebvre. Right to Space argues for the right to lived space. According to Mirzoeff, visibility counters the right to look at. Lefebvre also talked about the use of visibility in cities for achieving certain purposes. Right to Space demands for the right to look at lived space. It demands for acknowledging the existence of lived space. It is important to understand the politics that puts perceived and conceived space before lived space. Right to Space is not just about the city spaces but also the lived rural spaces as well as virtual spaces. Furthermore, Right to Space should not be understood only in visual terms. It extends from a geographical context to literary representations and other marginal spaces including race, gender, and class. In this sense, it is like Soja's Thirdspace which includes both real and imagined places. Right to Space asks for reorienting the focus of attention to Thirdspace, and lived spaces. Right to Space will be explored in this paper through the example of offering a countervisuality to the social space of the city Chandigarh.

IV

Chandigarh, the first planned city of India has been chosen to highlight the contestation between the conceived plan and the lived experience of the city. The city is credited to be the work of great Swiss-French architect Le Corbusier. A little attention has been paid to the fact that Corbusier was Lefebvre's contemporary. In fact, Lefebvre mentions Corbusier in his writings while talking about urban planning and philosophy of the city. For him,

"Corbusier, as a philosopher of the city describes the relationship between the urban dweller and dwelling with nature, air, sun, and trees, with cyclical time and the rhythms of cosmos. To this metaphysical vision, he adds an unquestionable knowledge of the real problems of modern city, a knowledge which gives rise to a planning practice and ideology, a functionalism which reduces urban society to the achievement of a few predictable and prescribed functions laid on the ground by architecture" (98).

Lefebvre associates urban planning with ideology and calls for a critique of philosophy and ideology related to city. Urban planning can be seen as a way of imposing order and discipline. Urban planning can easily serve as a cover and mask for the control of power over city. It therefore becomes important to ask questions related to people involved in the planning and the kind of designs used. However, critique is not the only way of challenging the politics and ideology of urban planning. Lived Space itself challenges the planned conceptions. Even if the conceptions and plans are ideal and visionary as that of Corbusier, lived space is never a material realization of those plans. Lived Space has its own dynamism which has the potential to challenge the conceived space of planning. The final plan of Chandigarh by Corbusier though created on ideal ground and his utopian vision of combining urban and rural, was not completely free of contradictions resulting from ideology and hierarchical politics.

The conceived space of Chandigarh is the space of Nehru's dream of modern city, Corbusier's vision of a garden city, planned space of different architects involved throughout the process of making the city and finally the imagined ideal space of writers. Nehru conceived of "a new city, unfettered by the traditions of the past, a symbol of nation's faith in future" (Prakash 10). Vikramaditya Prakash associates Nehru's view of modernity with newness. Nehru conceived of a modern city which would be unlike other Indian cities. Nehru's conception of

modern Indian city has been criticized because of its reliance on the western concept of modernity. Nehru's notion of modernity and progress has come under scrutiny in the postcolonial discourse.

The conceived space of Chandigarh is also composed of the plans of different architects, starting from Albert Mayer to Le Corbusier. The main plan, though modified subsequently, preserved the conception of a garden city. Chandigarh was planned to be surrounded by a greenbelt. The planning also dealt with the formation of sectors, residential complexes, and the Capitol. Corbusier conceived of an idyllic city, a combination of primitive and modern, surrounded by vast open spaces. This conceived space was, however, not ideal. The trope of planned city itself steeped with ideology which reveals the so called horizontal city to be actually vertical in its very nature.

The structuring of the city can be very well seen in terms of the complex of visuality proposed by Nicholas Mirzoeff. The complex of visuality is formed by categorization, segregation, and aestheticization (476). The residential area in the city was planned according to ranks in the service of government. Most of the houses built were for people in government jobs. These houses were built in various 'types' according to the rank of the individuals. The individuals were first classified according to their position in the society and then were segregated by building of different types of houses. The segregation of social space in primitive Indian society was primarily done on the basis of caste. Now, the notion of class came into picture. The social space was conceived in terms of segregation on the basis of class. The most significant component of the complex of visuality is aestheticization. The whole scheme was aesthetically justified. The aesthetics concealed the differences lying behind it. This was done by presentation of city as aesthetically beautiful and magnanimous. Aditya Prakash, one of the architects involved in the project, presented Chandigarh in one of his poems as possessing "some magnetism in its personality" (5).

The perceived space of Chandigarh is manifested in most of the descriptions about Chandigarh. These descriptions focus on the material form and structure. Most of the books written about Chandigarh are concerned with presenting demographic, architectural, and formal features of the city. These descriptions provide a selective perception of Chandigarh as 'the City Beautiful', again helping in the process of aestheticization. The perceived space of Chandigarh includes the selective space of famous buildings like the Capitol, Sukhna Lake, enchanting gardens like Rose Garden, and Rock Garden and the most significant symbol of the city, the Open Hand. The Open Hand signifies the open, inclusive and magnanimous character of the city. The extent of inclusive character of the city, however, comes out only when the lived space of Chandigarh is looked at.

The perceived space results in creation of a landscape of the city. Mitchell expresses his views saying, "landscape" implies a particular way of seeing the world, one in which order and control over surroundings takes precedence over the messy realities of everyday life" (186). The messy realities of the everyday are brought out through the lived experience of the city. The lived experience enables looking at the unplanned growth of residential areas of the poorer section of society in Chandigarh. Even when the original plan of the Chandigarh tried to construct housing for the lowest section including peasants and others, it left out the lowest of the lowest. The laborers involved in the building of Chandigarh simultaneously constructed houses on the margins of the city. The unplanned growth is no longer limited to the margins alone but is also visible inside the city, for example the so called slum area i.e. Gandhi Colony of sector 25.

These in between spaces in the city and on the periphery constitute the lived space or thirdspace. The periphery or the greenbelt of the city is evident of the haphazard growth of residential settlements. The loss of the original purpose of the greenbelt of the city has been lamented at. Manish Chakraborty is of the view that the unplanned development in the periphery violates the spirit of its original purpose, which was to serve as the greenbelt for the garden city of Chandigarh. Chakraborty in his article "Chandigarh: City and Periphery" presents Corbusier's contempt of such unorganized developments and reveals Corbusier's consideration of suburbs as "broken, dislocated limbs" (6) cropping up between the city and village. Throughout the article, Chakraborty bemoans the growth of suburbs and the inability of the Periphery Control Act to regulate such growth. What Chakraborty does not realize is that suburb is the thirdspace which others the binary of city-village. It is the space which provides actual lived reality. A look at

these spaces of Chandigarh enables one to see how these spaces others as well as challenge the conceived and perceived space. Also, it is with the help of the labor residing in these spaces that the whole city is being able to operate smoothly.

However, recently there has been a creation of an illusive lived space of the city enabled via the growing consumerism in the city. It has resulted in the creation of simulacra which gives the illusion of the real experience of the city. The space created by consumerism offers an aesthetic experience in the disguise of anesthetic^{iv} one which makes one believe in the simulacrum created. The space of shopping malls like Elante, high end pubs and cafes not only cater to consumerism but also provide an alternative experience which is taken to be the real experience of the city. Another example could be the protected, enclosed and bounded space provided by the campus of Panjab University. The students experience campus life in an enclosed environment and there are cab services available to provide a privileged experience of the city, food delivery services preventing them to pass through actual lived spaces. Rarely do they experience the radical change in space coming out of the campus from gate number one. Even there they have Night Food Street offering them a private space of their own. It is only when one crosses the road, sees the hustle and bustle of people, enters PGI, and watches long queues and witness people sleeping in the parks of the hospital at night that one experience the lived reality.

Ravi Kalia says, “Chandigarh today has acquired all the features of an Indian city, which are reflected in all aspects of daily life” (150). The city which was envisioned to be unlike any other Indian city ended up acquiring the characteristics that every other Indian city has. This is because of the difference between the conceived space and lived space. Lived space not only confronts but also bears the potential of changing the conceived space. The everyday lived experience of Chandigarh thus alters the conceived and perceived space of the city.

Endnotes:

- ⁱ Bruno Latour in his work *Reassembling the Social* proposed Actor Network theory, according to which an actor exists in relation to other actors in the network. ANT enables the viewing of human actors in relation to other human as well as non human actors, including objects, animals, and machines, along the horizontal axis.
- ⁱⁱ Mitchell talks about right in the terms of institutional rights. Institutionalization of rights according to him provides a set of instructions regarding the use of city space, and dictates who is allowed to use space. He also stresses on the need to understand the forces behind institutionalization i.e. who governs institutions and controls power. Throughout his book *Right to City* he contends for the right of use of public spaces by all, but he is equally aware of the responsibility that comes with those rights and therefore appeals for the fair use of these rights once acquired.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Mitchell has also talked about the representation of the city as a landscape catering to the needs of the privileged section of the society, excluding out the unprivileged section. It also creates the illusion that the landscape is the actual and natural view of the city.
- ^{iv} Susan Buck Mross’ essay “Aesthetics and Anaesthetics” provide useful insight into how our experience of the world has become an anesthetic one in which one’s senses get numb to an extent that one is able to witness his own destruction without pain.

Works Cited:

- Chalana, Manish. “Chandigarh: City and Periphery.” *Journal of Planning History*, February, 2014. *ResearchGate*, <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/273497025>.
- Foucault, Michel, and Jay Miskowiec. “Of Other Spaces.” *Diacritics*, vol. 16, no. 1, 1986, pp. 22–27. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/464648.

Kalia, Ravi. *Chandigarh: The Making of an Indian City*. Oxford UP, 1990.

Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space*. Translated by Donald Nicholson Smith, Blackwell, 1991.

---. *Writings on Cities*. Translated and edited by Eleonore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas, Blackwell, 2010.

Mitchell, Don. *The Right to the City: Social Justice and the Fight for Public Sphere*. Guildford, 2003.

Mirzoeff, Nicholas. "The Right to Look." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 37, no. 3, 2011, pp. 473–496. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/659354.

Prakash Vikramaditya. *Chandigarh's Le Corbusier: The Struggle for Modernity in Postcolonial India*. Mapin Publishing, 2002.

Prakash Aditya. Chandigarh: A Presentation in Free Verse. *Ekistics*, vol.45, no. 270, June 1978, pp. 221-224. JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43618999>

Soja, Edward W. *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*. Blackwell, 1996.