Book Review:
Urban Design Under Neoliberalism: Theorising from Santiago
Francisco Vergara-Perucich, 2019

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Abstract

In this book review, Karina Villacura introduces Urban design under neoliberalism: Theorising from Santiago by Francisco Vergara-Perucich. This book deepens in the practice of urban designers by exploring how it has been shaped and dominated by profit chasing. It proposes the study of urban design under neoliberalism based on a Marxist approach, allowing for reflection on the ethical, theoretical and practical elements involved in the urban design of neoliberal Santiago.

Keywords

Urban design, neoliberalism, segregation, Santiago de Chile

On 18 October 2019, high-school students in Santiago de Chile started a massive fare evasion in the subway system, chanting 'Evading, not paying, another way of fighting' (Garnham, 2019). These actions, that continued for several months until the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, are believed to be the spark that ignited nationwide protests that led to a referendum abolishing the constitution brought into being during Pinochet's dictatorship–the main tool implementing neoliberalism in Chile–and still governing the country since 1980. These protests illuminate Francisco Vergara-Perucich's central premise in *Urban design under neoliberalism: Theorising from Santiago*–the prevalence of neoliberalism in every domain of society as it hijacks institutions, ideologies and practices, in a profit-seeking race that produces and reproduces inequalities.

Urban design under neoliberalism: Theorising from Santiago by Francisco Vergara-Perucich deepens the practice of urban designers by exploring how it has been shaped and dominated by profit chasing. The book proposes the study of urban design under neoliberalism based on a Marxist approach, allowing for reflection on the ethical, theoretical and practical

elements involved in the urban design of neoliberal Santiago. This book is clearly of interest for urban planners, but may equally interest those concerned with the urban question in a broader sense and those interested in the dialectical path of the implementation of neoliberalism. The author covers topics such as housing, real estate, policy, and spatial justice. Thus, the book is relevant for urban planning as a discipline but is also pertinent in the broader category of critical urban theory.

The central thesis developed by Vergara-Perucich is that urban design in Santiago mainly serves the interest of the ruling class, identified by the author as a historical oligarchy, thereby changing the ethos of the discipline of designing cities which is to create good cities. Instead, urban design in Santiago has been used as a tool for capital accumulation for the few, generating spatialised inequalities. The quality, aesthetics, and services available in Santiago differ depending on which part of the city you are in, affecting the lives of Santiago's inhabitants. Vergara-Perucich notes the absence of an emancipatory vision beyond the urban planning of Santiago since the current neoliberal urban design focuses primarily on the immediate capital gains attached to each urban project. The latter is eloquently described in one of the interviews from the empirical material gathered in the book: 'We are trapped by an image of the city as an efficient machine for producing wealth' (Vergara Perucich, 2019, p. 112).

The methodology and theories applied by Vergara-Perucich, building on Henri Lefebvre's virtual object, shows concern for the future city. The author describes the virtual object as a 'provocative reflection of what reality may be in the future based on the development of certain social relations' (Vergara-Perucich, 2019, p. 2). The virtual object of urban design under neoliberalism dynamically corrects the phenomenon by first understanding the process as a political economy in which the assembly elements—especially power and capital—produce injustice. By reordering the elements included, adding those that were excluded, or by adjusting the forces exerted, the city may take a different path.

As previously mentioned, the book scrutinizes Santiago's history from a dialectical perspective, reinforced by the book's structure. Following the introduction, which presents the main topic and provides an analytical description of the virtual object as the methodology, the second chapter defines the dialogue structuring the book: the implications of neoliberal urban policies and the dilemmas of professionals applying those policies. Chapters 3 and 4 deepen the historical development of the urban conflict in Santiago, which grew around the concept of private property and defining the spaces in the city. Both chapters explicitly state that the current policies and outcomes of neoliberal urban design are rooted in a profound class conflict where the oligarchy, having control over public affairs, was historically opposed to building a city for everyone and the working class had no means to voice their needs and expectations. These two chapters also tell the history of violence that openly and subtly dominated society in Santiago, including Pinochet's dictatorship and the violent implementation of neoliberalism—in direct association with the Chicago School of Economics and Milton Friedman himself—by forced displacement and the neutralisation of opposition through murder and torture. Vergara-Perucich illustrates the spread of neoliberal urban design and its entanglements with the political powers that create profit-

suitable policy, twist the law, and disregard urban designers' proposals, prioritising the flow of capital over the environment, pedestrians, aesthetics, etc. He also gives an account of how resistance was expressed in Santiago, especially around housing, fighting a context of established financialisation and re-politicising the lack of adequate and affordable housing. Chapter 5 focuses on how profit-oriented urban design impacted the design of the city. Through interviews, the author gathers the experiences and dichotomies faced by urban designers between a praxis shaped by capitalist interest and the lack of tools for producing a critique. This chapter captures the essence of the neoliberal order, not only in developing urban design but also on an individual level, as part of the engine that creates inequalities. The sixth and final chapter of the book offers a theory that looks to the future. Here, the conflict between city designers and the history of the oligarchy in Santiago converge in both ethical issues and the spaces produced under neoliberalism. To finish, the author proposes a set of ideas to take Santiago beyond neoliberalism.

Arguably, it is impossible to read this book without relating the case of Santiago de Chile presented by Francisco Vergara-Perucich with neoliberalisation and its connection to the spatial distribution of other cities. For instance, the fixation on private property increases as neoliberalism advances, particularly in relation to housing. Homeownership unifies the expectations of the elite on private property as a value to defend, with the empty promise of freedom and improvement for the working class. This relates to Raquel Rolnik's (2019) understanding of ownership as an ideology that allows the working class to enter the housing market by acquiring an object that, actually, belongs to the mortgage lending-industry. Likewise, the design of residential areas based on consumers' purchasing power reinforces private property as the ideological device dominating the development of cities under neoliberalism and creates spatial segregation. Spatial segregation, in turn, works as a gatekeeper sustaining the social order, while maintaining the class-based spatial distribution in the city. Similar cases where urban planning exposes social order may be found in other cities where securitisation and surveillance have been implemented to maintain the social arrangement (Caldeira, 2000; Fassin, 2013). In the case of Santiago, the differences between housing and the quality of urban services are also upheld by policing and reinforced by security measures that criminalise and control the poor within and outside the neighbourhoods (Han, 2017).

Urban Design Under Neoliberalism: Theorising from Santiago captures the complexity of the phenomenon of urban design and its exploitation in neoliberal regimes. The most outstanding contribution of the book lies in the author's productive alternatives imaginaries, based on solidarity and collective thinking. This book will be of great interest to researchers, students and general readers interested in the penetration of neoliberalism in urban planning and design.

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