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# Neighborhood as Spatial Project: Making the Urban Order on the Downtown Brooklyn Waterfront

DAVID J. MADDEN

## Abstract

*This article argues for a reconceptualization of one of the most basic concepts in urban studies: the neighborhood. Traditionally neighborhoods have been understood as clearly bounded, quasi-Westphalian containers or as 'natural areas' of urban community. But this approach is widely acknowledged to be under-theorized. And it fails to account for the ways in which the production of neighborhood is inherently political and often conflictual. After reviewing the ways in which neighborhood has been used in urban sociology and urban planning, this article offers a critical conception of neighborhoods as 'spatial projects' on the submetropolitan scale. This approach captures the ways in which neighborhoods are not abstract spaces on a city map, but the uneven, unequal products of complex, ongoing struggles between various groups and institutions. This approach is developed through an ethnographic and historical case study of neighborhood formation in one part of Brooklyn, New York. The article concludes with a discussion of how the language of spatial projects refocuses urban research on the political and economic forces that produce neighborhood in the contemporary city.*

## Introduction

The concept of the neighborhood has long been central to urban sociology and city planning. For early twentieth-century sociologists, the neighborhood was a bounded totality that was thought to function as a sort of urban *Gemeinschaft*. Using theories from human ecology, scholars who analyzed these communities saw neighborhood through narratives of modernization, formalization and anomie, as a world of primary ties threatened by mass society. Numerous approaches in urban planning — especially

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Clarence Arthur Perry's 'neighborhood unit' scheme — echoed many of the anxieties and ambitions of the human ecologists. By mid-century, urban sociologists and planners conceptualized neighborhoods as targets for destruction via high modernist urban renewal or for protection via historic preservation. Today, once again, neighborhood is a central concept in urban planning and social science. For some scholars, the present period is characterized by a renewed emphasis on neighborhood and decentralization, in what has been referred to as the 'new localism' (Brenner and Theodore, 2002). This most recent resurgence of interest in the concept and practice of neighborhood emerged alongside new patterns of socio-spatial inequality and new spatial transformations associated with post-Fordism, neoliberalism and urban revanchism (Amin, 1994; Smith, 1996; Brenner and Theodore, 2002; Kohn, 2004; Hackworth, 2006).[1]

The meaning of neighborhood — both its analytical and normative senses — is central to numerous contemporary debates in urban studies. An influential body of sociological research charts the consequences of concentrated poverty understood as 'neighborhood effects'. And many issues in the massive literature on gentrification focus on projects for neighborhood 'revitalization' or 'regeneration'. For many, the production and maintenance of strong neighborhood remains a major goal of planning and politics, even as it figures in state- and market-led projects that perpetuate and strengthen the unequal urban order.

Neighborhood, then, has been and continues to be a keyword for urban planning, community politics and academic urban knowledge. But as I shall argue here, the concept of neighborhood itself remains under theorized. The dominant account reproduces some of the more questionable assumptions from early sociology and human ecology. As a result, it is inadequate to capture the dynamics of power and inequality in shaping urban space.

To contribute to 'the important task of developing greater clarity over what is meant by neighborhoods' (Small and Newman, 2001: 30), here I offer a critical conception of neighborhood. Neighborhoods are not the clearly bounded, abstract spaces on a city map implied by the mainstream sociological view. Rather, they are inherently political and often conflictual — the products of complex, long-term struggles between groups over land use, ownership, planning, identity and purpose.

To better capture the contingent, politicized nature of neighborhood, I use the concept of *spatial projects*, drawn from the critical urban studies literature, to understand neighborhood. I argue that neighborhoods are spatial projects on the submetropolitan scale. I develop this perspective through an ethnographic and historical case study of neighborhood formation in one corner of downtown Brooklyn, New York. As I shall explain, this case study illustrates the numerous, conflicting projects that produce neighborhood in this part of the city — and shows the inadequacy of the 'natural areas' or container approach to neighborhood.

Ultimately, I shall argue, this perspective can help formulate better sociological research on neighborhood in general, and I conclude with a discussion of the consequences of this argument for urban research and practice more generally. I argue that this critical approach to neighborhood can clarify some issues in the literatures on gentrification and on neighborhood effects. And I argue that the language of spatial projects can help sharpen the critical response to today's uneven and unequal urban development.

## Neighborhood in theory and practice

From the early twentieth century until the present day, the mainstream sociological discourse about neighborhood has undergone significant changes. But a close

1 This article focuses on sociology and planning in the USA, though I hope that this argument could be adopted to understand developments in the UK, Canada and global cities in other contexts.

look at the history of social scientific analyses of neighborhood, and the history of planning programs geared towards neighborhood improvement, reveals a number of continuities.[2]

What might be called the 'Westphalian neighborhood imaginary' portrays the city as fully divided among different neighborhoods, pictured as non-overlapping and of clear outline, almost as sovereign republics.[3] Just as the vision of the world chopped into sharply demarcated, bounded nation-state units reflects (and produces) a distorting, ideological image, so too does the vision of the city chopped into sharply demarcated, bounded neighborhood units. Like nation-states in miniature, neighborhoods have been imagined not only as administrative geographies but also expressions of a distinct way of being together — as moral territories that shape or even determine the normative life of their inhabitants.

The mainstream conception of neighborhood has gone through a number of changes, but some core tenets have persisted. Neighborhoods have usually been promoted as natural areas, or expressions of a naturalistic human need for community. Neighborhoods have almost always been seen as containers, as well defined, spatially integral zones. Clear neighborhood definition and demarcation have generally been considered desirable characteristics. They have often been posited as having a life independent of the forces, institutions and policies that shape them. And yet, for all of the importance that has been accorded them, neighborhoods have been viewed as fragile, always on the verge of disappearance.

## The classical paradigm

From its beginnings in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, urban sociology in America saw the neighborhood as one of the basic scalar building blocks of society.[4] American sociologists saw neighborhoods as the spontaneous manifestation within urban space of social order, which linked the city and the city dweller in totalistic, often primordial fashion. Charles Cooley, writing in 1911, held that: 'Of the neighborhood group it may be said, in general, that from the time men formed permanent settlements upon the land, down, at least, to the rise of modern industrial cities, it has played a main part in the primary, heart-to-heart-life of the people' (Cooley, 1911: 25). Cooley may be seen as the first major promoter of the idea and ideal of neighborhood in academic sociology and urban practice. His conception of neighborhood as a vaguely pre-modern *Gemeinschaft* — and as the natural social milieu for humans and a spatial expression of primary grouphood — greatly influenced other scholars and practitioners. In an article in the *American Journal of Sociology* in 1914, the sociologist and settlement house worker Robert Woods argued: 'The institution of the family existed before there was any human nature. It was not humanity which created the family, but in a real sense the family created humanity . . . *Now the neighborhood is a still more ancient and fundamentally causative institution than the family*' (Woods, 1914: 577, emphasis added). Woods continued:

2 On the history of neighborhood and urban planning in the USA, see Kuper (1951), Melvin (1985), Silver (1985), Kallus and Law-Yone (1997; 2000), Keating and Krumholz (2000), Rohe (2009).

3 Fraser (2010: 281–2) argues: 'The Westphalian understanding of the "who" went with a specific picture of political space, a Westphalian political imaginary. In this imaginary, political communities appeared as geographically bounded units, demarcated by sharply drawn borders'. Obviously, questions of sovereignty and democracy are very different at the scale of the nation from the scale of the neighborhood. By drawing the parallel, I am only suggesting that they are both mystifying ideological imaginaries.

4 I am not going to address here what is at stake between 'community' and 'neighborhood' as competing tropes. As should be clear, I treat that latter, in general, as a more spatialized term than the former.

> A neighborhood is a peculiarly spontaneous social group . . . The neighborhood is the most satisfactory and illuminating form of the social extension of personality, of the interlacing and comprehensive complex of the interplay of personalities; the social unit which can by its clear definition of outline, its inner organic completeness, its hair-trigger reactions, be fairly considered as functioning like a social mind (*ibid*.: 580).

For Woods, neighborhoods are characterized by their 'organic completeness' and 'clear definition of outline'. Functioning like a 'social mind', neighborhood here is imagined as a naturally solidaristic form of social and psychological life that inculcated moral ideals within its members.

The sociologists of the Chicago School made these themes even more explicit. They saw neighborhoods as 'natural areas' of the city (McKenzie, 1925: 77) that foster local traditions, habits and mindsets, or what Robert E. Park called 'normal neighborhood sentiment' (Park, 1915: 580). For Park, 'every section and quarter of the city takes on something of the character and qualities of its inhabitants. Each separate part of the city is inevitably stained with the peculiar sentiments of its population' (Park *et al*., 1925: 6). Far from being 'a mere geographical expression', a neighborhood is 'a locality with sentiments, traditions, and a history of its own' (*ibid.*). These sentiments and traditions were seen to be transmitters of valuable norms surrounding reciprocity, trust and solidarity. As R.D. McKenzie put it: 'Loyalty, self-sacrifice, and service are the natural products of the intimate personal neighborhood groups' (McKenzie, 1921: 349). Though various Chicago School writers recognized the diverse types of social formations included within neighborhood as a category, as a whole they tended to fit the empirical variation between neighborhoods into a universal narrative of group formation and decay.

The Chicago School's sociological perspective was deeply enmeshed within a normative project for the recovery of community life that was thought to be slipping away. Industrial Chicago appeared to be a machine for grinding down traditional ways of life. Burgess wanted to find a 'scientific basis' for neighborhood research and action precisely because 'the social forces of city life seem, from our studies, to be destroying the city neighborhood' (Burgess, 1925: 154). In line with a more general theme of the decline of authentic sociality with the rise of bureaucracy, ecologists lamented that '[n]eighborhood communities are steadily losing most of their collective functions to large administrative communities' (Snedden, 1926: 234). 'Almost without exception, students of community life have held that the neighborhood as a basis for association disappears as the degree of urbanization increases' (Key, 1965: 379). This connection is one of the most persistent legacies of Chicago School urbanism.

Far from remaining in the world of academic social science, this concept of neighborhood had concrete effects upon the city through social work, housing reform and urban planning. The sociologists, social workers and activists of the settlement house movement translated early sociological conceptions of neighborhood into a set of programs and projects for social reconstruction and renewal. Catherine Bauer, perhaps the most famous twentieth-century American housing reformer, noted that: 'The neighborhood is a powerful element and formative tool in our society: it can either strengthen or frustrate the democratic process' (Bauer, 1945: 108). Planners such as Clarence Stein and Henry Wright — partly drawing upon the ideas of another proponent of urban communitarianism, Ebenezer Howard — placed the notion of a bounded neighborhood at the center of their plans for communities such as Sunnyside Gardens in Queens and Radburn, New Jersey. Influential planner and developer Harland Bartholomew (1941) saw the neighborhood as the 'key to urban redemption'.

Most famously, Clarence Arthur Perry took the holistic ideal of neighborhood and turned it into the planning concept of the 'neighborhood unit' (see Dewey, 1950; Gillette, 1983; Perry, 1929; 1939; Johnson, 2002). Unlike the Chicago School, which saw neighborhoods as natural areas, Perry saw neighborhoods as artificial. 'Residential districts of that character do not grow wild. They have to be planned and cultivated'

(Perry, 1929: 98). But in formulating his concept of the neighborhood unit, Perry drew upon Chicago School understandings of community, as well as the work of Cooley, Woods and others (Gillette, 1983: 425). Perry advocated for intricately articulated, well defined and contained zones to house precisely enough families to provide children to populate one elementary school. These residential streets would surround schools, parks or community centers, with shops and businesses kept to the wider arterial streets on the community's edges.

Speaking about Perry's ideas, Mumford wrote: 'Neighborhood unit organization seems the only practical answer to the giantism and inefficiency of the over-centralised metropolis' (Mumford, 1954: 266). It was a plan based upon the village ideal — and in line with the village imaginary, Perry explicitly supported ethnically and socially homogenous neighborhood spaces. This vision was immensely influential. Keating and Krumholz (2000: 111) reported that, 'By the late 1940s, Perry's neighborhood unit had become one of the most widely discussed urban planning ideas'. According to Rohe (2009), a study conducted in 1969 determined that 80% of planners drew upon the neighborhood unit concept in their professional activities. 'It is safe to say that even today many planners and developers continue to rely, at least in part, on principles first codified by Perry in his neighborhood unit formula' (Rohe, 2009: 212). Perry's planning technique illustrates the interchange between urban sociological concepts and planning practices that remain relevant today.

## Challenges to neighborhood planning

The neighborhood consensus did not go unchallenged. Critics of the neighborhood unit concept argued that planners were constructing an administrative geography that did not correspond to lived reality. And they questioned the motives of the concept's promoters. One critic, Svend Reimer, explicitly connected the neighborhood concept to 'dogmatic assertions about the evils of city life' (Adams *et al*., 1949: 70) and argued: 'The sociologist's interest in the neighborhood has always been related to his interest in means of social control' (*ibid.*: 69). One of the most astute and insistent critics of neighborhood, the planner and urban theorist Reginald Isaacs, invoked Ruth Glass's assertion that: 'Self-contained neighborhoods do not exist. The boundaries of neighborhood life vary for different activities' (Glass cited in Adams *et al*., 1949: 75). For Isaacs and other critics, the notion of an integral, bounded neighborhood illustrated planners' 'morbid sentimentality' (Isaacs, 1948: 19). Gerald Breese, another critic, argued that 'no matter how much we have *wished for* neighborhood *realities*, the predominantly atomistic nature of urban life seems increasingly to have forced individuals into patterns of life which cancel out existing attempts to 'neighborhoodize' local relationships' (Adams *et al*., 1949: 82).

Furthermore, Isaacs and others saw in the glorification of the concept of neighborhood a 'smoke screen' that white homeowners used to hide blatantly racist motives. 'Even if it were a fact that perhaps a larger portion of these lines were the result of "natural" barriers, it is recognized that some of the boundaries are consciously emphasized to perpetuate the purposes of segregation' (*ibid*.: 76). In general, critics of neighborhood supported ideals such as the democratization of the city and the overcoming of anomie. But they did not see neighborhood planning as a viable route to those goals.

I would argue that these critics of the neighborhood unit idea made important arguments about the politics of planning and development. But their positions remained in the minority. The broad tradition from Cooley to the Chicago School to Perry set the basic contours of the concept of neighborhood in urban sociology and planning in the first half of the twentieth century — and as I shall argue presently, this tradition continues to be dominant today.

In the later half of the twentieth century, there was clearly a moment when a more political, contentious picture of neighborhood was formulated by activists as well as theorists. Numerous political actors reasserted what they saw as a political role for

neighborhood in response to the excesses of urban renewal (see Wilson, 1966; Bellush and Hausknecht, 1967; Zipp, 2010; Klemek, 2011).[5] Some local coalitions formed around the issues of historic preservation and pursued other forms of organizing that hinged upon defense of the neighborhood (see Reichl, 1997; Page and Mason, 2004; Zhang, 2011), though often from elite (and at times explicitly elitist) perspectives. A more popular political idiom was articulated by the 'neighborhood movements' and movements for 'community control' that emerged in cities throughout North America (Goering, 1979; Purcell, 1997; Angotti, 2008). Though these movements sometimes worked in the name of non-territorial 'communities', they also often argued for the necessity of territorialized decision-making power to be devolved to the neighborhood scale. Civil rights, black power and other social movements formulated a vision of urban politics focused on neighborhood empowerment (Wilson, 2000). Federal policies such as the Model Cities program encouraged the participation of these neighborhood-based movements in planning and policymaking — although commonly 'civic participation' functioned more than anything else as a bureaucratic ideology intended to blunt more radical approaches to urbanism (Krause, 1968; Marcuse, 1970).

In response to these developments, the 1970s and 1980s saw the development of new sociological approaches to neighborhood. Keller (1968), Suttles (1972), Warren (1977), Hunter (1979) and others pointed to the multiple dimensions in which neighborhoods exist — simultaneously as economic hubs, administrative units and political communities. Inspired by neighborhood-based social movements, Castells (1977; 1983), Katznelson (1982), Fisher (1984) and others pointed to neighborhoods as objects of political and social struggle.

But the sociological mainstream did not integrate any of these more critical approaches into its basic working understanding of neighborhood. The idea that neighborhood could provide a standpoint for radical critique receded, though the concept's positive ethical and political valuation remained. To some extent, this was due to transformations in urban space itself. 'Sociologists and other researchers . . . "discovered" working-class neighborhoods at the very time they were about to vanish' (Topalov, 2003: 230). Whatever the causes, the politicization of neighborhood diminished, and the concept once again became a vehicle for municipal administration well within the mainstream of urban policy. And as I explain below, the neo-ecological, container view of neighborhood persisted as sociological orthodoxy.

## Neighborhood and its effects

The most recent chapter in the history of neighborhood in urban sociology is the contemporary literature on 'neighborhood effects' (see e.g. Sampson, 2012). In many ways, the neighborhood effects discourse represents an update of the ecological conception inherited from the Chicago School. Still understanding neighborhoods as natural areas, the neighborhood effects literature dispenses with the Chicago School's ethnographic sensibility. It uses an intensely quantitative methodology and a positivist epistemology. But its conception of what a neighborhood is can be seen as an update of the classical view.

The basic idea behind neighborhood effects is that it is worse to be poor in neighborhoods with large numbers of other poor people ('concentrated poverty') compared with being poor in neighborhoods that are not predominantly the home of other working-class and poor urbanites (see *inter alia* Wilson, 1987; Mayer and Jencks, 1989; Briggs, 1997; Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Buck, 2001; Sampson *et al*.,

5 The most famous example here is the showdown between Jane Jacobs and Robert Moses (see Jacobs, 1961; Caro, 1975; Hock, 2007). This episode has taken on an almost mythical quality but it is doubtful whether these events can function as an accurate frame through which to view the politics of neighborhood.

2002; Lupton, 2003; Kling *et al*., 2007; Sampson, 2008; van Ham *et al*., 2012). Thus, researchers have attempted to show that individuals who grew up in or reside in predominantly poor or working-class neighborhoods experience a variety of negative outcomes, even after 'controlling' statistically for the effects of economic exclusion, racial inequality and other forms of marginality.

Despite the huge literature on this topic, however, there is actually very little consensus even on whether or not neighborhood effects can be said to exist. 'The ubiquitous use of the phrase 'neighborhood effects' is . . . quite problematic from a methodological standpoint' (Sampson *et al*., 2002: 465). The neighborhood effects literature has come in for a lot of criticism on the grounds of selectivity bias (see Clampet-Lundquist and Massey, 2008). As well, it has been criticized for failing to specify adequate mediators and pathways between neighborhood and individual. A recent book highlighting new directions in neighborhood effects research notes: 'Many studies simply search for correlations between neighbourhood characteristics and individual outcomes, control for a range of econometric problems (if at all) and, when some correlation remains, conclude that they have (most likely) found a neighbourhood effect' (van Ham *et al*., 2012: 7). Even among researchers convinced by arguments about the spatial clustering of social problems, there is no agreement about the possible mechanisms to account for these observations. Galster (2001) is only one of many authors who catalog the qualms and qualifiers that are often invoked by neighborhood effects researchers. 'Though often in these works the listings of potential mechanisms differ in labeling and categorizations, there is a broad consensus about how the underlying causal paths are thought to operate in theory. Unfortunately, there are few tentative conclusions, let alone any consensus, about which mechanisms demonstrate the strongest empirical support' (Galster, 2012: 23). Much of the academic literature seems to agree that '[d]espite the ways the current research moves the urban and educational literatures forward, it is limited with respect to how well neighborhood characteristics and theoretical mediators are measured' (Ainsworth, 2002: 145). It bears noting that scholars working in this body of literature have been admirably forthright about the field's limitations. Many of the best known critiques of neighborhood effects have come from scholars trying to refine, rather than reject, its major line of argument (e.g. Mayer and Jencks, 1989; Galster and Zobel, 1998).

As the dominant discourse about neighborhood today, the neighborhood effects literature is also the target of the present critique. But rather than focusing on selection bias or its reproduction of the culture of poverty argument, my target is its conception of neighborhood in general. There is a huge emphasis in this literature on 'effects', but little theoretical work has gone into formulating what is meant by 'neighborhood'. While this literature can tell us quite a bit about inequality and spatial unevenness, its central concept, the neighborhood, remains under theorized.

The neighborhood effects literature almost always understands neighborhoods as ahistorical, naturalistic containers, and almost always treats them only as independent variables. 'In quantitative analyses of poverty, for example, space (geographically bounded areas) forms a neutral "setting" employed by the researcher to detect, represent and explain "neighborhood effects" ' (Gotham, 2003: 728). Nearly all neighborhood effects studies follow a method similar to that of one recent article which 'define[s] neighborhood as census tracts, which are small geographic areas that resemble "natural" neighborhoods in their physical, economic, and sociodemographic characteristics' (Wu *et al*., 2011: 377–8). My argument is that conceptualizing neighborhood this way tells research much about the spatial distribution of sociodemographic characteristics, but misses the dynamics of *neighborhoods* themselves.

That neighborhood needs to be more fully conceptualized is in fact recognized by many of the leading voices in the field. 'Although predominant in the literature, the strategy of defining neighborhoods based on census geography and using tracts or higher geographical aggregations as proxies for neighborhoods is problematic from the standpoint of studying social processes' (Sampson *et al*., 2002: 470). Small and Newman

concur, noting that in quantitative studies of neighborhood effects: 'Most sociologists resort to the census tract, but, depending on how we think neighborhoods matter, census tracts may be woefully inadequate proxies' (Small and Newman, 2001: 38; see also Coulton *et al*., 2001; Sastry *et al*., 2002; Small and Feldman, 2011). Elsewhere Sampson notes correctly that:

> it might well be that the biggest critique of neighborhood effects research is the simple fact that neighborhoods are themselves penetrated by a host of external forces and contexts . . . What is needed is a truly systemic approach that seeks to theorize and study empirically the 'articulation' function of the local community vis-à-vis the larger social world (Sampson, 2011: 235).

Indeed, urban scholars need a theory of neighborhood that sees them as more than mere quantitative locations. Even some neighborhood effects researchers realize that they are contested, fluid and politically charged with histories and trajectories that are not reducible to individual locational data.

## The contemporary politics of neighborhood

The production, circulation and consumption of urban 'poverty knowledge' (O'Connor, 2001) does not occur in a vacuum. As with the earlier debate about the neighborhood unit, the sociological debate about neighborhood effects provides an intellectual and theoretical foundation for powerful programs that are remaking today's cities. The neighborhood effects idea is the prime academic support for what Imbroscio (2008a) calls the 'dispersal consensus' — exemplified in the USA by programs such as the Moving to Opportunity initiatives — which affirms the breaking up of 'concentrated poverty' through vouchers and other policies (see Goetz, 2000; Reed and Steinberg, 2006; Briggs, 2008; DeFilippis and Wyly, 2008; Imbroscio, 2008b; 2012; Ludwig *et al*., 2008; Quigley *et al*., 2008; Steinberg, 2010; Squires, 2012). Ventures such as HOPE VI, which finances the demolition of public housing and its replacement by mixed-income, often New Urbanist landscapes, also draw upon the logic of deconcentration supported by the neighborhood effects literature (see Hanlon, 2010; Oakley *et al*., 2011). Crump (2002), Newman and Ashton (2004), Hackworth (2006) and many other critical scholars see these programs as prime examples of the neoliberalization of housing policy in the USA. Gans (2010: 83) argues that 'concentrated poverty is an intellectually and empirically questionable concept that offers almost no constructive lessons for antipoverty policy'. Bauder (2002) notes this discourse's similarity to the familiar and troubling 'culture of poverty' argument that appears to explain structural position by reference to morals and behavior. As Slater (2013: 383) puts it in an incisive critique, neighborhood effects knowledge is part of a process of '*decision-based evidence making* by policy elites on the hunt for scientific legitimacy for agendas that trample over the rights of the poor'.

The neighborhood effects literature can thus be seen as part of a broader neoliberal politics of neighborhood in contemporary cities. The current era has been identified with a 'return to neighborhood' (Whitehead, 2003: 279; Forrest, 2008). Many planning initiatives take as their goal the development of 'healthy', 'vibrant', 'livable', 'socially diverse' neighborhoods (Chaskin, 1997; 1998; Keating and Krumholz, 2000; Madanipour, 2001; Kaal, 2011). But as critical urban scholars such as Davidson (2008) and others point out, these ideals are almost always pursued through state- or market-led gentrification and the overproduction of luxury, exclusive urban spaces. And they are more often than not hostile to older collective urban efforts such as public housing.

To a large extent, these questions hinge upon precisely what a neighborhood is. When policymakers and politicians utilize particular kinds of privileged urban knowledge as part of the developmental process, the question of how neighborhood is conceived is very clearly a politically significant question. The mainstream conception sees neighborhoods

as natural zones that can be said to be flourishing or flailing on their own. But a critical approach to neighborhood would ask who precisely is flourishing or flailing and whose conceptions of success are used for these determinations. It would connect these trajectories to broader structures of power and privilege and to the history of urban capitalism. And it should be able to account for the continued hegemony of the container view of neighborhood itself. In the next section, I outline such a critical conception of neighborhood.

## Towards a critical conception of neighborhood

There are four general, interconnected tendencies within mainstream sociological discourse of neighborhood that stand in the way of a more critical analysis. The first is the traditional tendency for the concept to be *naturalistic*. In the study of nationalism, scholars are used to seeing the nation as an imagined community; but even this basic trope is missing in mainstream urban sociology, which insists on seeing neighborhoods as primordial ecological niches.[6] Second, there is a tendency towards *depoliticizing* neighborhood: treating neighborhoods as disconnected from urban power, inequality and politics. Given the political significance of urban territory, this is always, in practice, crypto-political. Third, is a tendency towards *ahistorical* concepts — defining any given model of neighborhood as a transcendental geographical morphology, rather than tying it to contextually specific historical actors and conditions. This can add a certain degree of arbitrariness when defining the typical or ideal neighborhood. Finally, there is a tendency towards *functionalism*, which starts from the premise that neighborhoods fulfill particular functions. But how did neighborhoods acquire their characteristic functions, and whose interests do they serve? Even astute and theoretically creative conceptions of neighborhood such as that of Hunter (1979) or Kearns and Parkinson (2001) tend to differentiate separate functions of neighborhood — it operates as a place of intimacy, as a cognitive demarcation, as an administrative unit, etc. — that leave unanswered questions about the historical dynamics of neighborhood's formation and contestation.

One of the major gestures of critical theory is to refuse to disconnect process and product — and thus to understand how abstract concepts are rooted in the struggles of social, political and economic life. This diremption between concreteness and abstraction is precisely what most mainstream urban theories do with neighborhood space. In opposition to this, more critical scholars such as Whitehead (2003) and Martin (2003) point to something that the mainstream urban studies literature tends to miss: the *production* of neighborhood by various social, economic and political forces, and thus how it is contingent upon the contentious, competitive spatial process of today's global–urban capitalism. While Whitehead and Martin capture this element of neighborhood through the lens of 'the politics of scale' and the idea of performativity or 'enacting', respectively, here I approach the production and contestation of neighborhood from a somewhat different direction: neighborhoods, I argue, are specific kinds of spatial projects.

### Spatial projects

Various authors in the critical urban studies literature make use of the concept of a spatial project or something like it, but often without precisely defining it. In *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre at one point notes that 'the social relations of production have a social

6 To take the comparison one step further, imagine the absurdity of trying to understand international development by reference to quantitative 'nation effects' [not to be confused with Mitchell's (1999) 'state effects'], looking only at the locational distribution of data without mentioning nation states as political institutions.

existence to the extent that they have a spatial existence; they project themselves into a space, becoming inscribed there, and in the process producing that space itself' (Lefebvre, 1991 [1974]: 129). To say that social relations 'project themselves into a space, becoming inscribed there' is to say that in any situation, social life forms its spatial milieu in characteristic ways that are productive for it. The spatial project is this formative movement into space, this dialectic between social relations and space itself. *The Urban Revolution* (2003 [1970]) and 'Right to the city' (1996 [1967]) offer numerous similar formulations, where 'projects' describe ongoing efforts — cutting across epistemology and praxis — that shape urban space in accordance with specific goals and techniques.

Castells (1983) also refers to the idea of spatial projects. Discussing the rise of the 'informational mode of development', he notes: 'The spatial project of the new dominant class tends towards the disconnection between people and spatial form, and therefore between peoples' lives and urban meaning' (Castells, 1983: 313). Here the idea of a spatial project takes on a more agent-specific quality. Castells uses the phrase to refer not to a quality of 'social relations of production' in general but to the instrumental actions of a specific class of people, who intentionally and continuously shape space for particular purposes. Other analysts make use of similar concepts to capture the production of space by the state. Scott (1998) refers to 'state projects of legibility and simplification', where various parts of the state bureaucracy reshape space and spatial knowledge to render social life more easily accountable and traceable.

A somewhat different version of the idea of a spatial project is found in 'state/space' theory as developed by scholars such as Jessop (1990) and Brenner (2004; see also Brenner *et al*., 2003). For Jessop (1990: 338–69), it is only through 'state projects' that the (relative) unity of 'the state' is created. State projects:

> impose unity or coherence . . . As an institutional ensemble the state constitutes a terrain upon which different political forces attempt to impart a specific strategic direction to the individual or collective activities of its different branches. In so far as there is an effective global political project, there will be substantive unity (*ibid*: 268).

State projects for Jessop, then, are sources of what he sees as 'state effects', or the functionality of statehood that emerges from the multiplicity of agents that act in the state's name. Explicitly spatializing Jessop's usage, Brenner (2004: 69–171) analyzes 'state spatial projects' as 'initiatives to differentiate state territoriality into a partitioned, functionally coordinated, and organizationally coherent regulatory geography' (*ibid*.: 92) and establishes them as one dimension of the state spatial process. State spatial projects are oriented to state institutions themselves, producing an 'internal scalar division', but also producing particular kinds of territory. Under capitalism, state spatial projects tend to be oriented towards strategies that facilitate capital accumulation, but these strategies take many different forms in different eras and situations, and they have historical trajectories of their own.

I want to use the concept of spatial projects in a more general way, to signify coordinated, continuous, collective campaigns to produce and format space according to identifiable logics and strategic goals, pursued by specific actors utilizing particular techniques. Spatial projects are, as the phrase has it, spatial projections of social power; they produce space, in an ongoing, contingent, uneven manner. These projects are pursued by different collective actors in different places and times. They are non-mutually exclusive, productive of overlapping spatial formations that are experienced and shaped in a variety of unequal ways by unequally situated actors. They operate at varying temporal scales, shaping both the present and the future of space — and, by promoting particular ways of understanding a space's identity and purpose, and possibly by activating dormant spatial attributes, they can operate on the past as well. They are rooted in the political economic process, because the classes and productive techniques which are dominant in any social formation are as a rule better able to

spatialize their political and social interests than the excluded, dispossessed or marginal. But they are not, because of this, completely determined by wider political or economic developments; in unequal, conflictual societies, spatial projects are always contested. This conflict can be either explicit or submerged but still present. This general account of spatial projects can help develop a more critically incisive and empirically precise approach to understanding neighborhood as an urban phenomenon.

## The production of neighborhood

Neighborhood, I want to argue, is the name for spatial projects at the submetropolitan scale. This approach differs from the neo-ecological model in a number of ways. It considers neighborhood as an achievement, rather than a natural outgrowth of urban social life. It sees neighborhood boundaries as contingent and often overlapping. It traces communitarian aspirations and claims about neighborhood's proper function to political praxis rather than essential attributes. And it takes as a starting point that in today's unequal city, neighborhoods have a diversity of sources, goals and forms that have varying impacts on different groups.

The concept of a spatial project, then, shifts the question of neighborhood towards who produces them, using what techniques, in what contexts and towards what ends. Drawing on the critical literature, the starting point here is the Marxian concept of the commodity form and its ultimately irreducible antagonism between use value and exchange value. Landlords, speculators, brokers, corporate developers, investors, economic development corporations and a whole range of other groups participate in the project of commodifying neighborhood, of producing neighborhood as a special kind of commodity. The seminal text by Logan and Molotch (1987; see also Molotch, 1979) explores the process whereby the urban fabric is shaped by the pursuit of exchange value by spatial entrepreneurs. These developers tend to work on sub-neighborhood scales, but that is not always the case. Today, neighborhoods themselves are often produced by large, quasi-monopolitistic developers, or a series of smaller real estate developers working in concert with one another. More recently, Aalbers (2006), drawing on Lefebvre's distinction between 'abstract space' and 'social space', distinguishes between 'abstract space makers' and 'social space makers'. Abstract space makers follow the instrumental logics of exchange value when producing housing, whereas social space makers produce residential space for use. This same distinction can be applied to the scale of the neighborhood, which results from the struggles between these groups. These are some of the major actors who pursue spatial projects.

The dominant neighborhood project in capitalist cities is the real estate project, but I would argue that few neighborhoods are projects of real estate alone. Harvey (1989: 123) notes: 'Residential differentiation is produced, in its broad lineaments at least, by forces emanating from the capitalist production process, and it is not to be construed as the product of the autonomously and spontaneously arising preferences of people'. Any analyst that examines residential differentiation and development in a city like New York could scarcely dispute this. But as I have been arguing, neighborhood is not reducible to residential differentiation. And the forces that 'emanate[e] from the capitalist production process' can be seen taking a far wider array of forms than real estate capital alone. This is indeed one of the points of the whole 'growth machine' literature that follows from Logan and Molotch: that developers are only one part of the highly mediated process of capitalist urban development. The very process of commodification and of development itself also involves other powers and projects beyond real estate capital that are productive of urban space, especially in the form of neighborhoods.

Chief among them, of course, is the constellation of actors and organizations that make up the state itself. Brenner (2004) describes the successive development of 'spatial Keynesianism' and of 'new state spaces' and it is quite possible to see the production of these state spatial projects at smaller scales as well. Scholars such as Sites (2003) and Kohn (2004) also describe neighborhood as a particular kind of state space. State actors

at various scales — national, urban, suburban, among others — pursue neighborhood spatial projects, as in federally funded urban renewal schemes or city-financed development initiatives. Often working alongside real estate developers who have in nearly all contemporary cases penetrated state functions to a significant degree, the state often works to finance, coordinate, legitimize and regulate neighborhoods as state projects.

Indeed, given the legal power held by the state through zoning, land use regulation, construction permitting, and other mechanisms, it would be fair to say that all submetropolitan spatial projects today are to some extent state spatial projects, even when the state for various reasons does not use this power to assert even relatively autonomous logics. The important point, however, which state theory insists upon, is that the state is never fully autonomous from economic power, and often uses the power of law to facilitate the projects of commodification and accumulation, as with Sites's (2003) 'primitive globalization'. By the same token, however, different agencies will often pursue projects that push neighborhood space in different ways. Security services might pursue logics of surveillance and legibility, while economic development agencies might pursue other projects. Different branches of the state do not necessarily always coordinate different state spatial projects, although in practice they do often support one another.

Of course it is not only capital and the state that pursue neighborhood projects. Social movements, civil society organizations, ethnic associations, religious groups, media organizations of various sorts, cultural and social entrepreneurs, even political parties also produce neighborhoods as various kinds of spatial projects. Often these are quite explicitly pursued as class projects; in all circumstances we can say that they reflect structural positions and processes. That neighborhoods can be political projects is evident in the phenomenon of 'stronghold neighborhoods' that are closely associated with particular parties or social movements. Gould (1993) shows how the Paris Commune was partly organized along neighborhood lines. In ethnically divided cities such as Mostar or Belfast (see Calame and Charlesworth, 2009), neighborhoods can be produced as nationalist projects — or as explicitly cosmopolitan ones. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century urban European history offers copious examples of neighborhoods that were strongholds for socialists, communists, anarchists and many other movements of the left and right.

But it is not only in conditions of crisis and insurrection that neighborhood can be pursued as projects for specific political or communal goals. Mattson (1995) describes the emergence of an 'urban democratic public' in Harlem during the 1920s, a project that was pursued by a coalition of activists, intellectuals, artists, writers and others, including real estate developers, some of whom had close ties to local activists. Mattson is clear that these groups were not all pursuing the same project, though most of them fit into the broad umbrella of the movement for African-American civil rights during the interwar period. It was partly the dynamic energy that came from overlapping, non-identical political and aesthetic projects that gave 1920s Harlem its particular qualities. More recently, Marwell (2007) details how a wide variety of organizations, social movements and community groups shaped Williamsburg and Bushwick in Brooklyn. Many of these groups worked to promote projects for self help and community development along ethnic, religious and/or class lines — and they had complicated relationships with other sources of neighborhood production.

I want to be clear that neither 'neighborhood' nor 'community groups' should be seen as normatively privileged terms. Purcell's warnings about avoiding the 'local trap' are quite relevant here (see Purcell, 2006). I use the term 'community groups' only as shorthand to signify those groups that attempt to articulate and mobilize community, towards whatever ends. There is nothing inherently progressive or critical about community groups; while some might represent the interests of the poor, they can just as easily be composed, say, of small rentiers who are themselves pursuing the real estate project. To understand their role in shaping neighborhood, it is crucial to understand that

community groups or political parties are *not* somehow independent from social, political and economic contexts. They are not 'autonomous . . . preferences of the people', in Harvey's words, but instantiations of struggle, mobilization and creative habitation that can and do pursue any variety of local political goals. In general, the point is to understand how these various spatial projects interpenetrate one another. 'State', 'community' and 'capital' should not be seen as essentially distinct categories but as entry points through which to problematize neighborhood formation in any actually existing situation.

To adapt a well worn formulation, city dwellers produce their own neighborhoods but they do not make them as they please. They do so under circumstances given and transmitted from the past and in a field of contestation with other actors in the present. In the next section, I apply this framework to understand the spatial projects that produce neighborhood space in one corner of the borough of Brooklyn in New York City.

## Spatial projects in Brooklyn

The waterfront area in downtown Brooklyn provides an opportunity to understand neighborhood as spatial project.[7] The phrase 'downtown Brooklyn waterfront' is my term to refer to the area in New York City's borough of Brooklyn located between the Brooklyn Navy Yard, Brooklyn Heights, the East River and the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway. This district occupies some of the oldest residential and industrial spaces in the city. In the early twentieth century, this neighborhood was known as the Navy Yard District. In the 1960s and 1970s, planners were referring to the part of the neighborhood along the East River and below the bridges as Fulton Ferry, named after the old ferry landing, and some parts of the neighborhood continue to be identified that way.

Here I want to describe the spatial projects that shaped this area into a neighborhood called Dumbo, which is an acronym for 'Down Under the Manhattan Bridge Overpass'. Long a center of industrial production, the area is now increasingly dominated by art, design and media companies, as well as residential spaces that are among the most expensive in New York City. Some other parts of the area are known as Vinegar Hill, a name which tends to refer to the low-rise buildings to the north of the former factory lofts that are associated with Dumbo.[8]

Directly across York Street stands Farragut Houses, a 16.61-acre public housing development built by the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA). Farragut was completed on 7 May 1952, at a time when the area was a center of industrialism as well as the kinds of institutions — settlement houses, churches, housing reform movements — that sought to ameliorate industrialism's hard edges. Farragut is situated across the street from the old Brooklyn Navy Yard, and it abuts Ingersoll Houses and Whitman Houses, two other NYCHA developments. Taken together, Farragut, Ingersoll and Whitman were once one of the largest collections of public housing in the city. Taken as

7 These data were collected as part of a larger ethnographic and historical study of place and politics in the downtown Brooklyn waterfront. I collected archival information on housing, community groups, local history, architecture, real estate, political figures, activists, planners, religious leaders, journalists, art galleries, and many other relevant actors and topics, using archival and published sources, as indicated. Between 2007 and 2010, I conducted fieldwork in public places, including parks, streets, plazas, cafes, bars, as well as community centers, social movement organizations, community board meetings, protests, rallies, fundraisers and other events. I also conducted open-ended, unstructured interviews with more than three dozen activists, residents, workers and community participants. Here I present selections of my data, emphasizing the larger narrative of neighborhood formation and change.

8 Though there are important differences between Dumbo and Vinegar Hill, their recent development histories raise similar questions, and for the most part, I will discuss them here together.

a whole, the area — known at the time variously as the Navy Yard District, Fulton Ferry or as Brooklyn's 'Jungle' — was once a prime example of a Fordist–Keynesian neighborhood, with all of the contradictions and political ambivalences of that era.

My argument here is that Dumbo has been an elite project, pursued variously by real estate capital, the state and community groups. It has been and continues to be contested and contentious. But the overarching Dumbo project has been oriented towards the production of a neighborhood marked by exclusivity, luxury and distinction. I will not go into detail regarding the history of Farragut, but public housing and working class urban space — which long predates the area's gentrification — is crucial to this story. I argue that, by orienting the area towards elite goals and uses that do not serve the area's working-class and poor residents, the Dumbo project is a prime example of the production of an unequal neighborhood in contemporary Brooklyn.

No urban neighborhood can be considered to be somehow 'typical' and this area's particular development pattern has of course not been repeated everywhere. But in many ways, Dumbo's recent history features many phenomena that typify contemporary urbanism, such as deindustrialization, gentrification, landmark district designation, business improvement district (BID) formation and much else. Hackworth (2006: 144–8) sees the area as a prime example of 'neoliberal gentrification'. But I do not offer this case study as a prototype. Rather, it illustrates the connection between the production of contemporary neighborhood space and the spatialization of inequality in today's cities. Part of my argument is that the ideology and idolization of neighborhood often helps to legitimize an unequal urban order. It should be said that Dumbo is perhaps an extreme case; to an usual degree it has been built by a single developer intent on creating an exclusive enclave. It is likely the case that the spatial organization of neighborhood is everywhere implicated in the formatting of inequality, but this is particularly obvious when looking at the history of Dumbo and Farragut.

## Reworking the waterfront

Dumbo has essentially been a project pursued by two major collective actors: real estate developers, whose accumulation strategy is based partly on the legitimation provided by cultural prestige, and community groups who strongly invested in the identity of the cultural producer and the distinctive consumer. Both of these groups, it should be said, are for the most part staunch neighborhood boosters and supporters, although this support has not always meant the same thing. There have been numerous instances where these two groups have been at odds with one another, often quite contentiously so. But their projects are to a large extent overlapping and mutually reinforcing. Various state agencies have also participated in this project, but they have for the most part merely codified existing spatial order and not intervened to radically change it.

Many Dumbo residents and visitors see the neighborhood's history as the story of redemption from an industrial abandonment. One resident of nearby Brooklyn Heights, who had long been spending time in Dumbo, explained it to me this way: 'It's amazing what's happened in Dumbo. The Dumbo story is incredible. One man transformed an area that no one would go to, no one would step foot in, he transformed it into something beautiful that can be used for everybody. A complete transformation, a complete vision'. Others spoke about the 'pioneering artists' who moved to the area before 'the developers' came along. Although a great many of the Dumbo residents and visitors with whom I spoke tended to circulate this kind of 'pioneer narrative' (see Smith, 1996: 12–18) of the neighborhood's rebirth from postindustrial decrepitude, an analysis of historical planning documents reveals a different story. While some planners had questions about the continuing presence of industry along the downtown Brooklyn waterfront as early as the 1930s, well past mid-century the area remained a strong manufacturing zone. For most of the twentieth century, this area was a project pursued by industrial capital, along with numerous agencies of the ameliorist–liberal state and other groups including housing reformers and unions. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s and well into the 1980s,

planners still understood the downtown Brooklyn waterfront as an industrial space and saw the maintenance of industrial work as the chief problem facing the area.

As is well known, New York City as a whole underwent vast political-economic transformation during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. Between 1950 and 1980, the city lost more than half a million industrial positions (Neches and Aarons, 1980). But this has not happened everywhere evenly. The downtown Brooklyn waterfront persisted as a zone for industry far longer than many today realize. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, to many of the city's planners, the neighborhood was 'a vital and growing industrial area providing over 8,600 jobs' (Department of City Planning, 1972: 3). A 1972 planning study of Fulton Ferry noted: 'Quietly and uncharacteristically the predominantly industrial uses have been on the upsurge' (Department of City Planning, 1972: 1). A 1973 planning document also noted the large concentration of industrial jobs located in this 'thriving area' (New York City Planning Commission, 1973: 90). Even as other parts of the city were subjected to residential conversion, the downtown Brooklyn waterfront area remained an industrial hub. 'As the 1980s began, Fulton Ferry was considered a relatively healthy manufacturing district' (Department of City Planning, 1985: 29). Between 1972 and 1981, manufacturing employment in Fulton Ferry only declined by 8% compared with 44% in the rest of Brooklyn and 34% citywide. The area, according to the city's planners, was 'an important source of income for working-class minority families in central Brooklyn' (Department of City Planning, 1985: 30). A 1983 study of the area's industrial sector noted that: 'Eighty percent of the jobs are filled by Brooklyn's minority population; local people from the surrounding neighborhoods hold 45 percent of the jobs' (New York City Planning Commission, 1983: 4).

Even into the 1990s, at least some sectors of the city's planning apparatus maintained the image of Fulton Ferry as a thriving industrial area, rather than a languishing pre-gentrification wasteland. A 1993 City Planning Department report on citywide industry affirmed the continuing industrial presence along the Brooklyn waterfront, with an average of 17 industrial jobs per acre in an area not including the former Navy Yard (New York City Department of City Planning, 1993: 52). Granted, since the 1960s, some industrial lofts were being converted into residential quarters or art studios, and eventually the city's Artist-In-Residence program supported this practice. The New York State-run Urban Development Corporation looked into transforming what was dubbed the 'Fulton Ferry Urban Renewal Area' into housing and attractions. But these plans were not completed, and for the most part, planners, workers and residents in the area appear to have continued to conceive of it primarily as a working-class and industrial project.

## Making an enclave

The broader political economic transformation of New York militated against the persistence of Fordist industrial production in the downtown Brooklyn waterfront area. But we can trace the process whereby its particular post-Fordist, neoliberal form was established. From the 1980s onward, real estate capital pursued the project of building a luxury neighborhood on the waterfront. Real estate development in this part of Brooklyn is nearly synonymous with Two Trees Management Company, the firm led by the Walentas family. To this day, Two Trees is the major real estate company in the area. David Walentas is often referred to as the area's 'king', 'mayor' or 'owner', although other developers also own properties there and coexist uneasily with the company.

Two Trees first purchased property in the neighborhood in 1981, buying from Harry Helmsley the early twentieth-century factory complex built by Robert Gair (New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, 2007: 18). The company had been involved with real estate in Soho in the 1970s. Drawing on this experience, the company was quite explicit about their strategy of claiming a rent gap along the downtown Brooklyn waterfront. By 1982, Two Trees owned nearly 90% of the waterfront area (Fried, 1982).

As originally conceived, the company's vision for a residential and commercial neighborhood under the bridges was stymied. In response to a request for proposals sent out by the state's Urban Development Corporation for a 15-acre site on the river, Two Trees promoted the transformation of the downtown Brooklyn waterfront under the name of 'Fulton Landing'. Modeled loosely on Manhattan's South Street Seaport, this was to be a shopping and business district, including 'a mix of retail, entertainment and cultural activities with parking for visitors' (New York City Planning Commission, 1983: 4), partially on publicly owned land. At this point, more than 145 companies, representing 5,000 industrial workers, still operated in the proposed renewal area (Stern *et al*., 2006: 1145–6). A number of groups came together to oppose the plan, including loft dwellers, planners, artists and unions, such as Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers. Along with some local elected officials, these groups formed a coalition under the banner of 'Save Our Jobs'.

The coalition held protests and rallies in the area, and used the local community board to contest the area's development. The Fulton Landing development, as it was then proposed, was not to be. City officials ultimately ruled that Two Trees lacked the requisite capital to complete the project and removed Two Trees as the developer of the Fulton Landing site. But a 1984 compromise allowed some manufacturers to stay with 10-year leases, and more than 1,000 New York state jobs were moved into the Two Trees-owned Clock Tower Building, with a 10-year lease. Over the next decade, the company continued to renovate and convert buildings in the neighborhood, creating a growing collection of luxury apartment buildings, such as the Clock Tower, now redesigned by the architecture firm Beyer Blinder Belle and which opened in 1999.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, tenants living — often in violation of zoning code — in the downtown waterfront's lofts pursued their own project for the neighborhood. Organizations such as the Old Brooklyn Waterfront Alliance and the Fulton Ferry Local Development Corporation mobilized around the identities of loft tenants and artists to oppose large-scale development. Today this project is continued by the Dumbo Neighborhood Alliance (DNA), the Fulton Ferry Landing Association and the Vinegar Hill Neighborhood Association, as well as numerous galleries and arts organizations. Especially where issues surrounding the pace and manner of residential conversions are concerned, Dumbo community groups and their predecessors have come into serious conflict with local landlords, which have led to protests and legal action. Some Dumbo residents put in years worth of sweat equity, working hard to renovate their apartments, and then fought tenaciously against landlords intent on evicting them. In the midst of one such controversy, one landlord, speaking about loft tenants with a reporter, said 'I feel like they are animals and they ought to be put in cages. We're trying to get rid of them. They are in our way' (Richardson, 1995).

Many community group participants see themselves as promoters and protectors of the neighborhood in Dumbo. They identify quite closely with the ongoing Dumbo project. One community participant told me, 'New York is a city of neighborhoods, you really identify with your neighborhood. It's like an extension of your home, it's the only thing. I don't care about what's going on in Queens. Tell me what's going on here'. Another longtime Dumbo resident, active in such community groups, told me: 'I came here in the early 1980s, and I wasn't even first generation . . . Every building, every tree, nothing had been scarred yet . . . It was a group of artists — I think back how dumb we were, like people who would want to come to a place named Dumbo'. The very name 'Dumbo' was originally intended as a manifestation of this sentiment. The name was coined by participants in these organizations as a gesture of resistance against the corporate development of the area. A former resident and organizer wrote: 'In 1978, as the inevitability of development became apparent, the community decided that, if we were to die, at least we should be buried under a name of our choosing' (Davis, 2007). The thought was that 'Dumbo' was sufficiently silly, even stupid sounding, that it might deter corporate-led redevelopment or at least shape it.

Working through the local community board, members of some of these groups put together a 197-a proposal — an official mechanism for community-based planning. Calling the area 'Old Brooklyn', the plan offered a number of 'Old Brooklyn District Planning Principles', such as, 'Development and planning initiatives should act to draw the District's various neighborhoods together, and ensure that all the District's residents and stakeholders — including youth, lower income, and elderly residents — benefit' (Executive Committee, Community Board 2, 1999). The 197-a plan recommended various actions that would have tied together the various parts of the area into a larger neighborhood called Old Brooklyn, including the construction of affordable housing, a local history center focused on manufacturing and public housing, and a continuing role for industrial employers. But the proposal was never submitted.

Certainly, many local activists see development in the area in a broader political frame. One DNA member told me, 'A lot of these things are social justice issues' and decried the area's takeover by 'yuppie communities and tourism, you know, the glamour thing'. But these groups also see neighborhood amenities as desirable goals. They offer a 'strong' neighborhood of middle-class amenities as a public good. This same activist told me:'Looking from a neighborhood perspective, I want my streets to be lively, I want trees on my block, I want the baby carriages, I want to know people, I want the shops, you know, they want it to be a community'. A Dumbo gallerist told me:

> I'm very left wing, you know, I certainly recognize how gentrification has real effects on real people. But for example, if we look at what happened with the Williamsburg rezoning, that's not people friendly, not artist friendly. What's happened over there isn't very great for many people, except the very wealthy. But what's happened here has benefited some people who are not wealthy . . . I mean because there are organizations which are subsidized, the fact that there are organizations in subsidized spaces means they can run a program for local at-risk high school students, which some organizations do. It means they can offer a studio space for real artists. It's real benefits for working artists.

Proponents of Dumbo as a social and spatial project argue that there are consequences to neighborhood development, but they offer artists, 'small businesses' and 'creative people' as the imagined public and subjects for neighborhood development itself.

The Dumbo project, then, originated as a community project that at times articulated alternative models of the neighborhood. But this was also a class project from the beginning — a project pursued sometimes by what Bourdieu saw as the 'dominated fraction of the dominant class' (Bourdieu, 1987), and sometimes by what is clearly simply the dominant fraction of the dominant class. Through the 1970s and 1980s, the industrial lofts were being populated by 'not just painters and sculptors, but with dancers and writers and even a handful of bankers, lawyers, teachers and salespeople' (Davis, 2007). Loft dwellers themselves can be considered small-scale real estate capitalists (see Zukin, 1989). As one longtime community participant told me, reflecting on community opposition to Two Trees-led development, 'the joke is that we were just trying to protect the value of our condos'. And even the self-identifying artists who did not come to own real estate should still be seen as 'cultural capitalists' pursuing a vision of community that can be located within the city's larger cultural and economic hierarchy. Dumbo community groups like the DNA continue to mobilize in support of 'small businesses' and 'artists', working to oppose increased zoning heights, to maintain historic preservation and generally to maintain the area's antique atmosphere.

This is not to say that conflict between these groups and developers is not serious or real. At times, the conflicts between these two branches of the Dumbo project have become very seriously contentious. But cultural consumption is inseparable from the ideology of contemporary neighborhood development projects. As the research on gentrification and culture industries demonstrates (Deutsche, 1996; Smith, 1996; Ley, 2003; Cameron and Coafee, 2005; Strom, 2010), in today's city, there is a clear harmony between real estate and art, despite the occasional outward appearance of hostility. No

matter the periodic conflicts that arise, the project of producing neighborhood as a sellable commodity dovetails with the project of producing neighborhood as a distinctive community.

Thus the original Dumbo project of an arts-oriented, historically preserved enclave was easily integrated into the corporate project for the neighborhood pursued by Two Trees and other real estate companies. As David Walentas put it, 'enriching the mix downstairs' with some sort of conspicuously consumable art can 'increas[e] the value of what's upstairs' (Hellman, 2002). The scale of Two Trees's holdings in the area enabled possibilities not available to smaller developers. In essence, the company controls the neighborhood itself as a giant commodity, which makes a distinctive strategy possible. Two Trees offers subsidized rents to artists, galleries and organizations that promote the performing and visual arts, and as a cultural affairs director on staff. Because the company owned so much property in the area, cultural cross-subsidies emerged as a viable economic strategy: with some spaces acting as a loss leader, other properties could be priced much higher. Rent subsidies for artists and art galleries are, in effect, an investment in the form of prestige. The company's strategy is quite clear. 'We have millions of square feet and have given several hundred thousand to artists because we like to have art . . . It adds value to the whole area' (Saulny, 2000). The neighborhood itself — not just specific storefronts or buildings — functions as a commodity.

Dumbo is also, in some important ways, a state spatial project. While various agencies of the New York City and State governments have at times opposed specific plans for the neighborhood, on the whole they have supported the project of making Dumbo a luxury enclave. Joseph B. Rose, Chairman of the City Planning Commission, said of proposed zoning changes to allow for residential conversions: 'We're definitely sympathetic to the goal . . . it allows for the emergence of new SoHos and TriBeCas' (Dunlap, 1998). The state has more or less abandoned its older emphasis on industrial retention and supports the Dumbo neighborhood project by facilitating the transformation of the waterfront area into a space for commerce, housing and cultural events.

Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, the City Planning Commission approved a series of amendments to the city's zoning map, allowing the area to be transformed from a manufacturing to a mixed-use district, which enabled large-scale development. The city established Vinegar Hill, Fulton Ferry Landing and Dumbo historic districts to maintain historic building facades. While an in-depth analysis of the area's public space is beyond the scope of this article, it is clear that the construction of parks along the waterfront itself are examples of neoliberal public space consonant with the Dumbo project (see Madden, 2010).

The Dumbo BID, as a semi-public, largely privatized organization that works to bolster, brand and promote the Dumbo identity, typifies the neoliberalizing state's participation in the process of neighborhood formation. With the backing of local landlords, construction companies and non-profit organizations, the Dumbo BID was authorized in 2005. The organization sees its goals as 'enhancing DUMBO's public spaces and promoting our neighborhood as a world class destination' (Dumbo BID, 2009: 3). In cooperation with Two Trees and other private companies, the BID has pursued numerous initiatives for neighborhood development, like free wireless internet access and a 'business incubator' for technology companies. The BID's participation in the project of building an elite enclave has been a source of contention among some neighborhood participants. One long-time participant in neighborhood groups told me, 'it's a little disturbing, they're founded by developers and commercial interests in the neighborhood, and that's what their focus should be, but they're taking over some of the advocacy stuff too, which makes me nervous because of the underlying issues'. Another community participant described the BID straightforwardly as 'Walentas's organization'. But the organization's goals for the neighborhood are barely distinguishable from that of the community groups. An employee of the BID told me:

> Our board is made of property owners, so a lot of people in the neighborhood see us as the enemy . . . But there are many things that community groups are one hundred percent behind. Having art out on the street, I mean, we have this wonderful indigenous artistic community, there should be public art all over.

Despite some differences, these various groups have together pursued Dumbo as a spatial project in the waterfront area.

## Neighborhood's effects

Transforming the downtown waterfront area into Dumbo, then, has been a decades-long process pursued both by developers and by community groups, with the participation of the state. And this process continues today. There have been conflicts between these groups, but their overall projects for the neighborhood are in many ways quite similar: creating an enclave that is, in the words of an advertisement that blazons a Two Trees building, 'NYC's creative capital'. What are some of the effects of this approach to neighborhood formation?

The clearest effect of neighborhood production here is the creation of a distinctly unequal urban order. This district constitutes one of the starkest juxtapositions between rich and poor in all of New York. North of York Street, Dumbo and Vinegar Hill have a median yearly household income of US $163,147. On the other side of York Street, Farragut Houses, sitting just across from a number of new condominiums, has a median income of US $18,702. In 1970 these figures were less than US $2,000 apart. Between 1980 and 1990 the median home value in Dumbo rose more than 500% (Hackworth, 2006: 146); the average private apartment in Dumbo in 2005 sold for more than US $1 million (New York ACORN, 2006: 2). According to US census figures, nearly a quarter of Farragut residents are unemployed compared with only 2% of Dumbo residents. Nearly half of Farragut families live below the poverty line compared with a negligible figure for Dumbo. Dumbo has also been a racialized project. Dumbo above York Street in 2000 was only 15% African American and more than 60% white, while more than 57% of Farragut tenants were black. Many Farragut tenants told me that they see Dumbo as explicitly racialized and a number of black residents told me that they feel uncomfortable in Dumbo for that reason.

I am not arguing that neighborhood projects on their own create urban inequality. That claim would ignore the political economic basis of social class. But I am arguing that neighborhood projects format and express urban spatial inequality in significant ways. As social spaces, neighborhoods can take more or less egalitarian forms. They can be spaces of shared struggle or collective consumption; or they can be elitist, exclusionary enclaves. Neighborhood does not determine class position in any case. But neighborhoods can serve more or less broadly as collective resources.

Dumbo as a neighborhood is not a resource for the area's working-class and poor population, who appear to have been left out of the plans for the neighborhood. The groups that shaped Dumbo have produced, and continue to pursue, the neighborhood as an elite enclave. In a very real way, the development of Dumbo has displaced Farragut — not in the sense of facilitating its removal (although rumors about imminent redevelopment abound constantly), but in the sense of remaking Farragut's surrounding into a new kind of place that is oriented towards other developmental needs, goals and logics. The Dumbo project supplied a new collective developmental subject — owners of luxury housing, participants in cultural production and consumption, participants in hi-tech industries — that replaced the older developmental subject of working-class and poor Brooklynites. The area's dominant spatial projects were once oriented towards the industrial middle-class and working-class 'public' of public housing. Now, in the form of Dumbo, the area is oriented towards an elite and elitist version of the public and its interests.

There is a widespread acknowledgment among Farragut tenants that these new developmental goals and spaces do not help the area's poor and working-class residents. Many public housing tenants would agree with the words of one Farragut tenant who, talking about 'all these condos', told me: 'It's not our world. It ain't for us'. Few of the area's wealthy residents send their children to public schools or socialize with Farragut families. One Farragut resident told me, speaking of residents of 'all those condos': 'They're wealthy folks. They got private play circles in their buildings, they don't need to use city parks. They got their own thing going on there. What they've done over there is disgusting'. It is also clear to many who live in Farragut that the development of Dumbo has not brought any opportunities for well-paid work. One Farragut resident in his mid twenties told me:

> We can't even get a job out of it. I go over there, I say I live in the area and I need a job, and they're like, 'no'. It's wrong. Y'all come to our turf, and you can't just give us a job? We just want to work. There ain't no jobs for us. There's the bakery, but that's about it . . . I mean, don't get me wrong, it might be good in some ways, but it's not for us.

It is precisely the neighborhood itself, Dumbo, that is experienced as not being 'for' Farragut tenants and instead being for others. I did speak to some Farragut tenants who had found temporary work in luxury apartment buildings. But many longtime Farragut residents remember when the neighborhood was an industrial center and see the few precarious jobs on offer throughout Dumbo and the rest of gentrified Brooklyn as cold comfort. As a president of the Farragut Tenants Association told a reporter: 'If we went down there, for restaurants and basic activities, it would be too expensive for most of us . . . It's not designed around the needs that we have' (Sengupta, 1999).[9]

In general, producing new kinds of neighborhood in downtown Brooklyn has meant the marginalizing of less affluent spaces, identities and goals. Recent neighborhood development in the downtown Brooklyn waterfront has been a kind of regime change, as various post-industrial, neoliberal projects replaced older industrial, Fordist–Keynesian neighborhood projects. That public housing does not figure centrally in the political, social and spatial goals of recent development is glaringly obvious to public housing tenants, most of whom would like to see alternative neighborhood projects. Discussing the ways in which downtown Brooklyn was changing, a housing activist with the group FUREE (Families United for Racial and Economic Equality) told me: 'These are strong communities. We have to protect them. Fort Greene, Farragut, Ingersoll, Whitman, these are stronghold communities, they are political strongholds. They need to be valued for that. We need to protect our stronghold communities'.

The Dumbo project, it is clear, has not entailed the protection of Farragut and other public housing developments. The production of new neighborhood space in the downtown Brooklyn waterfront area has instead established a developmental agenda that has no place for them. It is this form of displacement that should be seen as the major effect of neighborhood formation in this area.

## Discussion and conclusion

Shaping the waterfront area into Dumbo has been an ongoing spatial project that has given the neighborhood a form and trajectory that bear the stamp of the various actors that produced it. This neighborhood, it should be clear, cannot be usefully apprehended as a natural area or as a collection of locational quanta. Beyond this specific case, I hope

9 Some Farragut tenants do support a recent Two Trees plan to build a middle school in a controversial proposed condominium beneath the Brooklyn Bridge. But support here – one Farragut tenant told me that it would 'maybe make a place for us in Dumbo' – only underscores the extent to which the larger Dumbo project excludes the area's public housing tenants.

this conceptual framing of neighborhood as spatial project can contribute to the analysis of contemporary cities more generally.

As I have noted, I do not claim that this case is an example of development in a 'typical neighborhood' and I would question the value of any such concept. Being largely the recent creation of one monopolistic company, Dumbo is in some ways a special variety of neighborhood. But I would argue that the conceptual scheme developed here is indeed applicable more broadly. It is not the case that some neighborhoods are synthetic projects while others are somehow more organic or natural. Rather, neighborhood formation is always a contested, contingent process — but some neighborhoods are more clearly legible as such, while in others, the collection of relevant actors, strategies and goals may be more complex and difficult to discern.

Conceptualizing neighborhood as spatial project can help shed new light on a number of contemporary issues in urban studies and urban development. One of them is the question of how to understand the connections between gentrification and displacement, debated by Marcuse (1985), Freeman (2006), Slater (2006; 2009) and many others. If neighborhoods are spatial projects, then new forms of displacement come into focus. As has been the case with Dumbo, even when only small amounts of direct displacement have occurred, we can still speak of a kind of displacement when new spatial projects reorient a neighborhood towards new goals and uses. It is possible for a community to remain in place of residence, yet still to be in an important sense displaced as the subject of neighborhood development. Merely staying put, which is itself becoming increasingly difficult for some city dwellers (see Newman and Wyly, 2006), is no victory for working-class and poor communities when the neighborhoods in which they live are being reoriented towards new goals and new uses that generally exclude them. By seeing neighborhoods as spatial projects, critical scholars can refocus the discussion around the political questions at the heart of the gentrification debate: *whose* spatial projects tend to prevail in the contemporary city?

Seeing neighborhoods as spatial projects can help demystify the contemporary politics of local urban space. Many commentators and politicians promote the notion of 'strong neighborhoods' as generic urban public goods. But as this case study suggests, it is quite possible for the project of building a 'vibrant', aesthetically and culturally distinctive neighborhood to facilitate the further marginalization of working-class and poor urbanites. Neighborhood in the abstract is thus misleading as a political value, because neighborhoods in practice always promote specific urban groups, goals and logics.

The perspective that I develop here suggests that many of the concepts that underlie the neighborhood effects literature need to be revised. Much of this research relies on a conception of neighborhood that is traceable to early twentieth-century sociology and that sees neighborhoods as clearly bounded, non-overlapping containers disconnected from larger political and economic developments. Not only, then, does the neighborhood effects literature rely on a highly questionable account of social class, as Slater (2013) and others have pointed out; it also relies on an insufficient and under-theorized notion of neighborhood. This inert concept of neighborhood, I have argued here, is not able to capture the dynamics of actual neighborhood formation as political, overlapping and uneven processes.

Seeing neighborhoods as spatial projects suggests that neighborhood effects might be better understood as the social and political consequences of neighborhood formation itself. Political and social exclusion are possible neighborhood effects, as are the monopolization of local resources or the capturing of local planning agendas. Some neighborhood formations, one could imagine, might have the effect of strengthening urban citizenship or bolstering particular kinds of political movements, while others might have the effect of dispossession. But these would be collective effects caused by neighborhoods understood as collective phenomena — a fundamentally different way of thinking about the social consequences of spatial formations than that found in the neighborhood effects literature.

My argument implies that neighborhoods need to be understood in their historical, political and economic contexts. This undoubtedly includes drawing methodologically on qualitative and ethnographic data, as some neighborhood effects researchers have suggested (Small and Newman, 2001). But it is not to argue that the quantitative study of neighborhoods is somehow futile. The neighborhood effects literature could provide a crucial collection of quantitative data about the urban geographies of inequality. But doing so requires a thorough reconstruction of its conceptual tools and theoretical assumptions.

Seen from this perspective, the programs for the 'deconcentration' of poverty via the dismantling of public housing that neighborhood effects researchers promote appears in a different light. Rather than neutral urban policy recommendations based on evidence provided by disinterested experts, this brand of urban knowledge can itself be seen as part of the broader set of spatial projects that produce neighborhood in the neoliberal city. It would be worthwhile to imagine alternative urban knowledges that might contribute to projects for more democratic, egalitarian neighborhoods instead.

We should finally dispense with the notion of neighborhoods as natural community areas, and we should resist the romantic affirmation of neighborhood as an urban public good in itself. Instead, urban scholars and participants should inquire into the ways in which neighborhood projects can be mobilized towards many different ends. Neighborhoods are political all the way down, which is to say that the politics of neighborhood will always ultimately remain an open question. Some neighborhood projects might in some instances conceivably be vehicles for resistance to an unequal urban order. But they can just as easily be deployed by political actors who seek to maintain and profit from urban inequality. We should not affirm an ethic of neighborhood placemaking *per se*, but rather pursue a sharper analysis of neighborhood itself as a politics of place.

**David J. Madden** (d.j.madden@lse.ac.uk), Department of Sociology, London School of Economics and Political Science, Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE, UK.

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