

CONSUMING SPACE

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Consuming Space

Placing Consumption in Perspective

Edited by

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Preface

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8 Exploring and understanding the relational ties between and within space, place 8
9 and consumption provides important insights into some of the most powerful 9
10 forces and processes constructing the social and material worlds of contemporary 10
11 societies. We ‘produce’ and ‘consume’ space just as we ‘produce’ and ‘consume’ 11
12 nature in the development of economic relations. Space and place are made and 12
13 remade, produced and re-produced through the iterative processes, iconographies, 13
14 and materialities of consumption. According to these perspectives, ‘space’ has 14
15 historically represented a challenge for capitalism and capitalism eventually filled 15
16 it with the desiderata of late modernity’s ‘fetish’ for fetishes: commercial imagery, 16
17 brands and logos. Space has subsequently become occupied with images that we 17
18 construct, or are constructed for us, to encourage the growth of the commodity 18
19 form and commodity cultures. Yet, space is never a passive location—as the site 19
20 for social activity—but, in the form of *social space*, it is the means through which 20
21 economic and political systems establish hegemony and gain legitimacy. 21

22 In effect, the ‘making’ of space is part of the process through which societies 22
23 transform nature and allocate consumption. This implies contradictions, which 23
24 the market cannot easily solve, as social space is a unitary yet contingent concept 24
25 embodying the *physical, the mental and the social*. In other words, space draws 25
26 together different facets of the material and the cultural. Yet, simultaneously, the 26
27 concepts of space exist within our heads as a function of mental processes. Thus, 27
28 the *space of social practice* is occupied by sensory phenomena, including products 28
29 of the imagination, such as projects and projections, symbols and utopias, which 29
30 describe and contain consumption cultures. 30

31 On this reading, space is a highly complex concept that embodies and is 31
32 embodied by cultural as well as physical properties and cannot be understood 32
33 unless these interrelationships are recognized and disentangled. In addition, 33
34 since the construction of space is an active, contested and transitive process, 34
35 involving cultural meanings as well as territorial dimensions, it is best seen as 35
36 a process linked to the development of societies themselves and as a thoroughly 36
37 negotiated topographical project and outcome. Overall, then, the redrawing of 37
38 space in physical terms and the construction of social space have given ‘rise to 38
39 a very specific dialectic’ as Lefebvre would have it, especially with respect to 39
40 consumption and its varied and entangled processes. 40

41 One of the central ideas in thinking about space and consumption together 41
42 is that they often appear to have taken on a reality of their own within capitalist 42
43 society. Space is regularly divested of its social nature and consumption can 43
44 fall along a shifting spectrum, from spaces of intended political meaning, to 44

1 ambivalence, to pure and essentialized spaces of pleasure. The relationships among 1
2 consumption, space and place can indeed be a mystification since attention is often 2
3 paid to *appearances*, rather than materiality, and both historical and contemporary 3
4 analysis fails to capture the social forces that actually produce space. Thinking 4
5 about consumption and space sometimes suffers from the *illusion of transparency*, 5
6 which places the design of space in the foreground, and serves to hide the shadows 6
7 behind the light, representing space as an ‘innocent’ domain. Hence ideas like 7
8 those of ‘discovery’, ‘settlement’, and ‘ethical consumption’ can be reinterpreted, 8
9 from this perspective, as ways of concealing as much as they reveal. 9

10 Space and place thus are contingent material and cultural categories, socially 10
11 constructed and emergent, evolving with the dynamic interactions of production 11
12 and consumption and their changing scalar dimensions. This constructed, emergent 12
13 nature draws theoretical attention to the ‘making’ and ‘remaking’ of space and 13
14 place as the social relations of production and consumption unfold. The analytical 14
15 challenge is to understand both the social forces and power relations at the 15
16 moment of ‘making’, as represented by the emergence of a coherent, contingently 16
17 stable ordering of spatial and place-based structures and social practices, and the 17
18 dynamic, contested processes of transition and reconfiguration. An understanding 18
19 that the production and consumption of space and place over time have been 19
20 geographically embedded in changing power relations and social struggle reveals 20
21 what John Agnew describes as the ‘historicity of spatiality’. Such historical 21
22 embeddedness, and the corollary that space and place are active social processes 22
23 always in formation, not preordained, ‘purified’ entities, is a prominent theme of a 23
24 number of contributions to this volume. 24

25 Yet, one of the central questions the volume seeks to address is the following: 25
26 how do cultures of consumption discover and rediscover *space*, and how do 26
27 they construct and reconstruct *place* at different periods and in different ways? 27
28 This question and the preceding set of ideas were put to the authors, either as 28
29 participants of a seminar series in the Department of Geography, King’s College 29
30 London in 2006 or as subsequently invited contributors, as a challenge rather 30
31 than a set of axioms to give maximum intellectual space in which to grapple with 31
32 these ideas. The overarching project of the volume is to tease out the implications 32
33 of conceptualizing consumption as a spatial, increasingly globally-scaled, yet 33
34 intensely localized activity. Similarly, one of the aims here is the development 34
35 of integrative approaches that articulate the relational and iterative processes 35
36 involved in the production of space and place and their consumption. Thus, 36
37 this volume brings together a varied, engaging and novel array of chapters to 37
38 explore the spatiality and placed nature of consumption and its role in structuring 38
39 contemporary capitalist political economies. 39
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17 perseverance and fortitude in seeing this project through to its end, especially 17
18 since the production of the volume occurred in the midst of the birth of his second 18
19 child, Wyatt, to whom we dedicate this volume. 19
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