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# Cube Living 221A: The Parallax of Spatial Commodities

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## The staging and production of Cube Living 221A

The Cube Living project exists in several forms:

- i. a micro-real-estate sales presentation;
- ii. a promotional website <http://cubeliving.ca/> ;
- iii. an interactive Cube Living 221A sales showroom installation including a manufacturing workshop, a point of purchase, and a property-maintenance service;
- iv. a presentation about the political economy of Vancouver's urban spatial history.

The project's sales showroom was constructed in partnership with 221A Artist Run Centre, located at 221 East Georgia Street in Vancouver Canada's chinatown, a neighbourhood that is currently undergoing significant real estate speculation and property redevelopment. The Cube Living 221A showroom was designed in the style of the common condominium pre-sales showrooms where real estate investors are wooed with renderings of yet-to-be-built condo properties in order to convince them to contribute the funds necessary to finance their development.

Responding to Vancouver's official development policy of 'urban densification', whereby property lots are divide into ever more and smaller units, Cube Living 221A anticipates a near future of hyper-densified real estate offering incredibly tiny property units measuring one cubic foot in size.

Upon entering the showroom, visitors are greeted by salespeople (a role performed by myself and 221A gallery staff). The salespeople proceed to explain the Cube Living 221A product and

engage the visitors in discussions about the history, politics and economics of real estate development while trying to close a sale. With production limited to 250 units, the unit price starts low but is set to increase with every unit sold, so that visitors have an incentive to buy quickly in order to minimize their cost while maximizing the potential for value appreciation of their units. (Some indecisive visitors delayed their purchase and then found that the price had more than doubled when they returned the following day. Others who were quicker to sign purchased their units at a bargain price and subsequently realized enormous equity gains.) Although modeled on the high-pressure, high-stakes format of the condo showroom, the Cube Living 221A environment is actually quite relaxed and conversational.

When visitors are ready to buy they are brought into the significantly larger back room which serves as the point-of-purchase and manufacturing facility. This room is empty except for a sales desk, a work table, and a stack of printed cardboard.

Buyers are required to sign a sales contract in order to initiate the production of their units. The contract specifies the ID numbers of units to be built and the price, as well as some detailed terms and conditions defining the nature of the product and the responsibilities of the owner and the manufacturer.

With the agreement signed, construction can begin. A sheet of printed cardboard is folded to form a container enclosing a volume of 1 cubic foot. It is sealed and marked with the unit number. The terms of the contract also appear on the surface of the container, stipulating conditions that ensure the integrity and isolation of the spatial unit is maintained.

The sales contract conveys to the buyer ownership of the space within the container, but not the container itself. The container is loaned to the buyer free of charge and in perpetuity, but the manufacturer retains ownership of it. This is to ensure a meaningful and specific separation between the ownership of the physical container (which is retained by the manufacturer) and the ownership of the space enclosed by the container (which is transferred to the buyer), establishing the space itself as the object of the transaction.

The buyer is required to maintain the integrity of the container at all times: at least five sides must remain intact and joined at 90-degree angles such that the volume they collectively contain measures 1 cubic foot (within a 5% margin of error). In this way the spatial object remains stable and coherent.

After the sales and construction processes are complete the buyer can either take possession of their Cube Living 221A units or contract the manufacturer to provide property management and maintenance services.

The buyer is also provided with an ownership transfer form, so that they can transfer ownership of the Cube Living unit to a third party at any time. The price can be set arbitrarily by the seller, but the buyer is required to accept all the terms and conditions of Cube Living ownership.

The Cube Living 221A showroom was open 18–23 February 2013. As of January 7 2015, 243 units have been sold. Current sales information is available at [cubeliving.ca](http://cubeliving.ca).

## Cube Living as architectural parallax

As the processes of financialization restructure our cities, citizens are increasingly driven to relate to the urban environment as an investment vehicle rather than a space for living, and they become participants in an urban resource extraction industry. Real estate developers, planners, and architects work to rezone land parcels and package the resulting space into easily tradeable units that can function as financial assets within a global marketplace. As the creation and exchange of space itself becomes a primary product and driver of the urban economy (Harris 2011: 713–715), the traditional poles of work and leisure are inverted. Residential highrise towers become the new work sites of a dematerialized labour in which the resident's productive economic purpose is to support the residential mortgage, the financial basis that enables a steady flow of capital through the real estate industry and the financial industry.

In this way the real estate property must function simultaneously as a financial asset (a fungible commodity traded on a global market) and also as a residence (a personal dwelling within a civic community). Similarly, the property owner must play simultaneous but irreconcilable roles as both investor (qua speculative owner or debtor beholden to market dictates) and citizen (qua home-maker, resident, and local community member). These dual roles of house and resident exhibit what Žižek calls an “architectural parallax”.

The common definition of parallax is: the apparent displacement of an object (the shift of its position against a background), caused by a change in observational position that provides a new line of sight. The philosophical twist to be added, of course, is that the observed difference is not simply “subjective,” due to the fact that the same object which exists “out there” is seen from two different stations, or points of view. It is rather that, as Hegel would have put it, subject and object are inherently “mediated,” so that an “epistemological” shift in the subject's point of view always reflects an “ontological” shift in the object itself. When confronted with such a parallax gap, one should renounce all attempts to reduce one aspect to the other (or, even more, to enact a kind of “dialectical synthesis” of the opposites); the task is, on the contrary, to conceive all possible positions as responses to a certain underlying deadlock or antagonism, as so many attempts to resolve this deadlock... and this already brings us to so-called postmodern architecture which, sometimes, seems to enact the notion of parallax in a directly-palpable way. Think about Liebeskind or Gehry: their work often appears as a desperate (or joyous) attempt to combine two incompatible structuring principles within the same building [...] as if two principles are locked in a struggle for hegemony. [Žižek 2009: unpaginated]

Žižek goes on to explain how this collision of two incompatible structuring principles within the built form results in gaps or interstitial spaces: The building must embody two divergent architectural forms and functions, resulting in left-over spaces where the forms don't coincide. Citing Frederic Jameson, Žižek describes how Gehry “took a modest bungalow on a corner lot, wrapped it in layers of corrugated metal and chain-link, and poked glass structures through its exterior”. “This interaction between the preserved old house space and the interstitial space created by the wrapping generates a new space, a space which ‘poses a question fundamental

to thinking about contemporary American capitalism: that between advanced technological and scientific achievement and poverty and waste.” [Žižek 2009: unpaginated]

Zizek refers to these leftover spaces as “spandrels”.

Gould and Lewontin borrowed the architectural term “spandrel” (using the pendentives of San Marco in Venice as an example) to designate the class of forms and spaces that arise as necessary byproducts of another decision in design, and not as adaptations for direct utility in themselves. In architecture, the prototypical spandrel is the triangular space “left over” on top, when a rectangular wall is pierced by a passageway capped with a rounded arch. By extension, a spandrel is any geometric configuration of space inevitably left over as a consequence of other architectural decisions.

[Žižek 2009: unpaginated]

The conflict between the structuring principles of space as residence and space as commodity yields similar spandrels within in the form of Vancouver’s condominiums. A ubiquitous feature of the Vancouver condo floorplan is the “den” or “flex space”: a tiny windowless room measuring 40 square feet. These rooms exist as a result of an obscure by-law provision in the building code that allow developers to increase the floorspace of condos by 40 square feet provided this additional space has no windows and is fully enclosed. (Director of Planning, City of Vancouver 2012: 1) These spaces increase the physical size of a condo unit and push it into a higher price bracket, but they are virtually useless for residents and often cause disruptions to the design of the unit as a whole.

This reveals a parallax in the production of residential space. On the one hand the house should function as a home and residence, on the other it must exist as a financial asset. The useless space creates a gap within the residence, but it is necessary to maximize the exchange value of the property.

In many cases the entire condo unit can actually been seen as a spandrel. Condos are often bought and sold sight unseen to offshore investors on the basis of plans and promotional materials, and traded on a secondary market years prior to the start of construction. (Harris 2011: 714) In some Vancouver neighbourhoods 20 to 23.7% of residential units are investment properties that remain vacant all year. (Yan, Andrew 2013: 25)

In such circumstances the architectural object exists as a secondary artifact of financial processes that shape the real estate industry and the global economy as a whole. The primary object is the residential land title, which functions as a speculative asset for investors and a mortgage security that can be leveraged for credit (and that loan can in turn be securitized to produce further assets). Within urban areas new land titles are produced by subdividing larger properties and the most effective way developers can do this is by building condos. (Harris 2011: 713–715) The condo unit exists as an artifact that arises during the production and subdivision of land titles.

These spandrels also occur at a larger urban scale. Many urban sites are deliberately kept vacant by their owners in order to support the property values of the surrounding real estate. Releasing the vacant property into the market would result in an abundance of supply and drive

down the market, so the empty acreage functions as a spandrel that bolsters the value of the owner's other real estate holdings.

The Cube Living unit can be regarded as a pure spandrel space. Cube Living foregrounds the parallax nature of urban spatial property by maximizing the friction between the structuring principles of space as residence and space as commodity. It creates a granular and completely homogenous spatial object that maximizes efficiency of production and ownership transfer, rendering it very useful as a commodity for exchange, but it is almost completely useless for any material purpose. However, to come into being as a financial asset each unit must be manifested materially within the owner's tangible environment and the owner is contractually obligated to maintain its material existence. As a result the unit emerges as a void within the owner's environment, a subtraction, a negative space or gap that is perceptible by virtue of the volume it displaces and the interruption it creates.

As a unit of spatial ownership, Cube Living's one-cubic-foot units are the minimum size to register at an architectural scale, based on the standard 12-inch unit of measurement for residential real estate property in north America. Large enough to be visible on a floor plan, but too small to serve any functional purpose, the Cube Living space exists purely as an index of the agreement between buyer and seller.

The production of this apparently useless space exhibits the social, financial, and legal processes by which space is created. It proposes that the significance and motivation of architecture may lie in those processes rather than in the material properties of the edifice which is produced. Maybe the most important and consequential part of a building is the social forces that create and maintain it. Optimistically, in materializing a network of contractual relationships within a group of manufacturer and buyers, Cube Living may open possibilities for innovative non-contiguous geographies, communities, and distributed institutions that transect conventional boundaries.