



The cultural politics of local economic development: meaning-making, place-making, and the urban policy process

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Abstract

A major concern of work in urban and political geography in recent decades has been to analyze how and in whose interests local space economies are produced and reproduced. A common focus is on the role local elites play in gathering support for their development agendas. Drawing from these literatures, this paper focuses on how various visions of the future of localities are contested in the local policy process. It argues that this struggle can be usefully understood as a cultural politics in which meanings are defined and struggled over, where social values are naturalized, and by which ‘common sense’ is constructed and contested. The use of the term ‘cultural politics of local economic development’ is, then, intended to indicate that meaning-making and place-making occur simultaneously in struggles over the future of space economies. It is also an attempt to overcome the problematic distinction between ‘culture’ and ‘economy’ that continues to haunt a great deal of work on urban politics. Through a case study of urban politics in Lexington, Kentucky in which discursive strategies are highlighted, it is argued that this approach is useful in that it provides insight into non-elite perspectives on local economic development and that it underscores the role played by everyday life in constituting political action. The paper concludes by suggesting that any problematization of the conceptual distinction between ‘culture’ and ‘economy’ must be carried out in and through detailed analyses of how groups involved in social struggle frequently construct rhetorical strategies in reference to it. © 2002 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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Clearly, one cannot divorce the ‘cultural’ aspects of reinvestment or preservation from the apparently ‘political’ or ‘economic’ dimensions that produce these changes, but neither can the political economy of urban and regional change be understood without a more fully developed understanding of its cultural politics Jackson (1991, p. 225).

[P]olitical agendas always become activated through constellations of representations about people, places, and processes that circulate through daily life. People come to understand the world of [local economic] growth – its prospects, possibilities, who gains, who loses – through significations rather than by interacting with a ‘brute reality’, debunking the notion of an always revealing preinterpreted reality Jonas and Wilson (1999, p. 8).

1. Introduction

Accompanied by over two hundred members of his congregation wearing lapel buttons proclaiming, “Catch Our Vision: Vote Yes”, the pastor of Lexington, Kentucky’s Ashland Avenue Baptist Church, testified to a public meeting of the city council on March 4th, 1997. He made an impassioned, wide-ranging, and flamboyant appeal for a zoning change allowing the construction of what the city’s planning staff referred to as a “mega-church” (Field Notes, 1997a). He asked the council to provide the necessary zoning to allow his church to move from its original location near downtown to a large area of former industrial land surrounded by middle class residential subdivisions and straddling a suburban thoroughfare called Reynolds Road (Fig. 1). His appeal for a zoning change was one part of a larger lobbying effort coordinated by the city’s developers coalition, which included a number of construction companies, developers, and representatives of affiliated interests, and supported by its wider business community. This effort aimed to rezone the Reynolds Road

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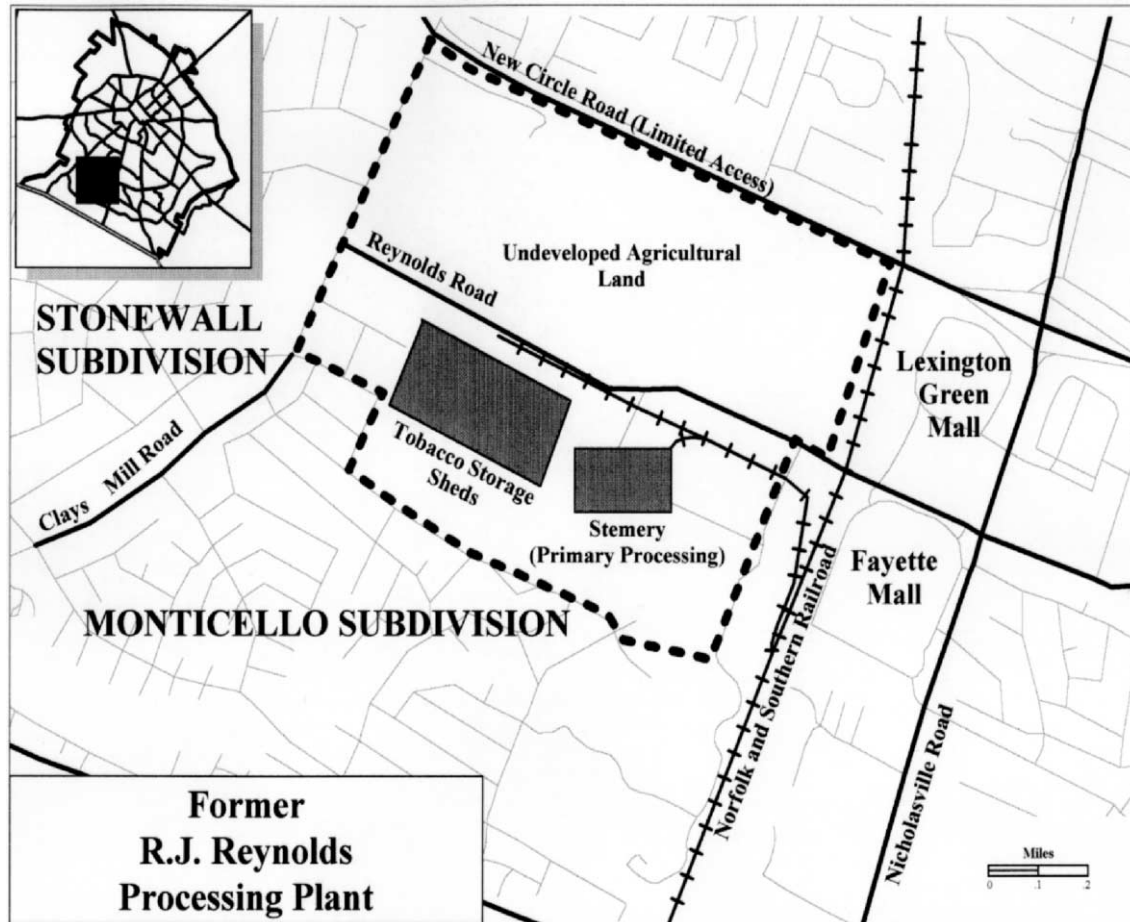


Fig. 1. The location of the Reynolds Road site in suburban Lexington, Kentucky.

site – which, despite its industrial designation, was largely being used by local farmers to graze cattle in the mid-1990s – so it could be developed as a mix of retail, commercial, light industrial, and residential uses (while also including two churches and a Christian school).

The future of this single property was no small issue because, at 450 acres, it was the largest single tract of undeveloped land in Lexington. Furthermore, its proposed redevelopment represented a significant shift in the local economy, from a relatively stable branch plant economic model that lasted from the mid-1950s until the early 1990s, to a period of uncertainty in which local elites hoped to plant the seeds of a new service and light manufacturing economy. The R.J. Reynolds tobacco company, one of the first national corporations to be attracted to the city in the 1950s, had owned the site. It had been used to conduct primary processing on burley tobacco purchased from farmers in the surrounding agricultural region. While Reynolds initially bought a large enough site – then described as being located three miles from Lexington – to build a full scale cigarette manufacturing plant (Lexington Herald, 1956a,b, 1956c), the facility never grew beyond a relatively small

processing and storage operation. As such, it always symbolized the city's long-term role as a location of corporate branch plants, rather than as a corporate center in its own right. The departure of Reynolds in 1991 – a decision made because the company was said to be 'streamlining its operations' and the Lexington facility was seen to be inefficient (Lexington Herald-Leader, 1986) – meant that the site also came to symbolize the city's uncertain economic future. The opportunity for redevelopment also arose at a time of bitter political disputes over the future character of economic development in the city. While the activities of the business leaders to attract branch plants in the 1950s were conducted without criticism, the politics of the 1990s was characterized by environmentalists' claims that urban development was destroying those aspects of the city – such as open space – that made it a good place to live. This was accompanied by arguments from representatives of the African-American population that the fruits of economic development were not being shared equitably, and by developers' contention that planning restrictions on the types of land they could develop were making the city increasingly less competitive for in-

vestment (for a more detailed discussion, see McCann, 1997).

It was in this context that the pastor acted as the first of a number of speakers, including experts on traffic flows, environmental, and economic impacts, assembled by the current owners of the site and by local developers.¹ They hoped to convince Lexington's politicians that the relatively dense development of the land was crucial to the city's future economic growth and to its social and spiritual well-being. "It is our religious conviction that we are to grow", the pastor said.

It is called the great commission. We're serious about following Jesus Christ and he told us to take the gospel to every preacher and we're doing that; we're discipling people, we're helping... Because we are doing that in obedience to the Lord, we're growing. Churches that do that tend to grow and we certainly make no apology for that... On the Reynolds Road plan, we have a place... that will allow us to expand... we believe that that is what God wants us to do... The truth is... we're out there to be a blessing... you must give us a place to carry that social burden... and we believe that Reynolds Road is it for us (Field Notes, 1997a).

What might the deployment of religious imagery, related appeals to a certain understanding of social values and responsibility, and complementary representations of place in the policy process tell us about the contemporary politics of local economic development in the United States? Moreover, what might it allow us to say about contemporary theorizations of urban politics?² Contemporary approaches to what Cochrane (1999, p. 111) calls "the local politics of business" – the focus of the growth machine thesis (Logan and Molotch, 1987), the urban regime approach (Stone, 1989), and the local dependency argument (Cox and Mair, 1988) – provide a useful context in which to begin answering these questions. The politics of local economic development, as Cox and Mair (1988) have argued, revolves around attempts by local business coalitions to dampen conflict over their agenda within localities and to orient attention outwards through a discourse of inter-local competition. This entails developing a broad

consensus through the discursive creation of connection and commonality or what Cox and Mair (p. 318) describe as a "pseudo-community of locality". This putative commonality is based on the definition of "the local community as a *worthy* community... as an exemplar of widely held values... The local community is presented as a caring community" (p. 317, their emphasis).

This influential argument resonates with that of the pastor since it emphasizes the ability of growth coalitions' carefully constructed representations of place and social process to shape policy (Jonas and Wilson, 1999). Indeed, Cochrane (1999, p. 112) suggests that the "local politics of business" approach understands urban politics as a process in which elites are seen to drive growth oriented policies with near impunity, where the power of their pro-growth discourses frequently seems to be taken for granted, and where alternative forms of urban politics are in danger of being ignored (Cochrane, 1999, pp. 122–123; see Brown, 1999 for a similar critique directed specifically at the urban regime approach). It would be wrong, however, to assume that the power to discursively construct commonality, whether around notions of community or locality, for political and economic ends, is entirely in the hands of business coalitions. Hegemonic ideologies are never complete and elements of the discourses that underpin them are often appropriated and reassembled in combination with other elements by opposing forces in order to present an alternative vision of the future of a place. This struggle can be conceived as a *cultural politics*, a set of discursive and material practices in and through which meanings are defined and struggled over, where social norms and values are naturalized, and by which 'common sense' is constructed and contested (Alvarez et al., 1998, Chapter 1; Jackson, 1989, 1991; Jordan and Weedon, 1995, Chapter 1; Mitchell, 2000, Chapter 6).

In this paper, I argue that the meaning-making discourses³ that are the major concern of cultural politics are fundamentally intertwined with the place-making politics of local economic development. This interconnection is not only in terms of the image-making strategies of entrepreneurial elites, intent on attracting inward investment as part of an inter-local competition (e.g., see Harvey, 1989a and the essays in Hall and Hubbard, 1998; Kearns and Philo, 1993). It is also a central characteristic of the *intra-local* politics through which various interest groups – from neighborhood activists, environmentalists, and social activists to business coalitions – struggle over how and in whose interests local space economies are developed. Here I am interested in this latter aspect of the politics and through a

¹ The organization that owned the site was a New York-based non-profit. Since its intention to develop the land and to funnel the profits into its other activities was supported wholeheartedly by local developers, I refer to both the landowner and its local allies as 'the developers' throughout this paper.

² I define politics as not merely formal politics, conducted by political parties and through elections, but also 'cultural politics', 'identity politics', 'community politics', and the 'politics of landscape' where, in each case, interest groups negotiate social relationships and interactions with the environment through discussions and direct actions taken within and without the institutions of the state.

³ Here I conceive of discourse as social practice, embedded in and constitutive of social institutions. Rhetoric, a term I use later in the paper is, in this context, one aspect of discourse.

case study, I will make two related points. First, I suggest that the politics of local economic development is very often not conducted explicitly in terms of exchange values and use values, although they are always significant objects of struggle (Logan and Molotch, 1987). Rather, this politics frequently plays out most explicitly around rhetorical attempts to naturalize certain sets of social values and to define the social processes that produce place as good or bad, moral or immoral, appropriate or inappropriate, worthy or unworthy, and so on (Jonas and Wilson, 1999). As a result, the study of this cultural politics of local economic development provides the opportunity to apprehend, through concrete research, the ways in which ‘culture’ and ‘economy’ are mutually constituted (Jackson, 1991). Furthermore, this approach not only provides the opportunity to make important connections between work in urban political economy with contemporary cultural geography. It also provides the opportunity to build upon the growing literatures on urban politics that emphasize alternative visions of economic development (e.g., Clavel, 1986; Jonas, 1995) and related discussions of participatory planning (Friedmann and Douglass, 1998; Woodmansee, 1994) by emphasizing the discursive power held by non-elites in challenging traditional growth models (Cochrane, 1999) while also emphasizing the way that experience of everyday life is more than merely a backdrop to the politics of local economic development (Gilbert, 1999).

The second point is that it is useful to understand ‘culture’ and ‘economy’ as intertwined, socially constructed processes, rather than naturally separate spheres. It is also crucial, however, to investigate the ways in which politically motivated rhetorical strategies gain power from their ability to resonate with popular perceptions of the world that *do see* certain aspects of life to be qualitatively different – located in different spheres such as ‘the cultural’ and ‘the economic’ – from others. For example, religious belief might conventionally be understood to be an element of ‘culture’ while the desire to increase land rent through intensive development might be commonly assigned to the realm of the ‘economic’. Furthermore, Christian religion, at least in the US context, is generally regarded to promote ‘good’ in society. On the other hand, the economic interests of those intent on developing land are much more likely, even in the US, to be called into question in terms of the relative good that their actions will do for the community. So, how might we understand the role of the Baptist pastor in the politics of local economic development? Given his testimony, he cannot easily be assigned to either of these analytical categories. This does not mean that his words do not have power in relation to the ‘culture’–‘economy’ distinction. Rather, the power of his rhetorical strategy lies in its attempt to code ‘economic’ interests (to in-

tensively develop land for profit) with a set of cultural values (Christianity) that, in this particular context, are generally seen to be largely above reproach. Therefore, I suggest that any problematization of the conceptual distinction between ‘culture’ and ‘economy’ must be carried out in and through detailed analyses of how all groups involved in social struggle gain political power through rhetorical strategies that exploit the popular acceptance of this dualism.

In the next section, I will discuss cultural politics in more detail and with specific reference to the social construction of place. Then I will illustrate the cultural politics of local economic development through a detailed case study of the struggle over the future of the Reynolds Road site, focusing on conflicts over interpretations of growth and meanings of quality of life and well-being, and on the motivations and tactics of activists involved in this politics. The following section of the paper will discuss the ways in which an attention to cultural politics might overcome certain omissions in contemporary approaches to the “local politics of business”. Finally, it will consider the implications of this approach for our understanding of the conventional distinction between the ‘cultural’ and the ‘economic’ that underlies both the practice and analysis of the politics of local economic development.

2. Cultural politics: meaning-making/place-making

An approach to local economic development that explicitly deals with issues of culture is set within a broader shift toward understanding urban processes in ways that transcend traditional analytical categories. For instance, in urban studies, authors have deployed concepts such as Bourdieu’s cultural capital (Zukin, 1995) or coined terms like cultural political economy (Jacobs and Fincher, 1998) in order to understand the restructuring of urban spaces and identities. Many others have chosen to study relatively new spaces of consumption in cities as a way of comprehending the effects of wider restructurings (e.g., Harvey, 1989b, Chapter 4). In policy-oriented literatures, there has been an increased interest in the power of discourse and representation in urban planning practice (Allen, 1996; Fischler, 1994; Forester, 1996; Healey, 1996; Hillier, 1993, 1996; Laws, 1994; Peace, 1993; Tett and Wolfe, 1991). In geography more generally there has seen the recent emergence of a ‘new economic geography’ which attempts to “contextualize... the economic by locating it within the cultural, social, and political relations through which it takes on meaning and direction” (Lee and Wills, 1997, p. xvii; National Science Foundation, 1997).

The point of using the term ‘cultural politics of local economic development’ is not to indicate an incurable shortfall in contemporary conceptualizations of urban

politics, however. The term is intended to highlight a need to maintain a focus on the political power of meaning, identity, and rhetoric in this politics. Still relevant in this regard is the decade-old critique of locality studies by Jackson (1991, p. 227). He argues for “the transcendence of... conventional distinctions between the ‘economic’ and the ‘cultural’, and an acknowledgment of the complex ways in which ‘economic’ processes are culturally encoded, while ‘cultural’ processes are inseparable from the material conditions in which they take place” (p. 226). It is in this context that ‘cultural politics’ can be a rubric under which we advance our understanding of urban political economy. For Alvarez et al. (1998, p. 7), cultural politics is

the process enacted when sets of social actors shaped by, and embodying, different cultural meanings and practices come into conflict with each other. This definition of cultural politics assumes that meanings and practices... can be the source of processes that must be accepted as political.

It entails a struggle to define meanings in the interests of certain groups (Jackson, 1991, p. 219, Footnote 6; Jordan and Weedon, 1995, p. 543). Of course, it is important to emphasize the spatiality of these social groups, their politics, and interests (Soja, 1980, Soja, 1985). Social actors engaged in politics mobilize representations and understandings of their place in the world, the meaning of their environment, and their relationships to place as they articulate competing visions for the future of their locality. Jackson (1991, p. 227) is clear about this when he argues that

‘economic’ resources are culturally encoded, their significance depending on such subjective appraisals as much as on any intrinsic material value... [and therefore, politics is about]... the appropriation and transformation of meaning whereby the ‘raw materials’ of the natural and built environment are invested with symbolic as well as material value.

Mitchell (2000, p. 161), for his part, underscores the situated nature of this politics when he notes that “cultural politics is all about... strategizing in the realm of practice and meaning to create new worlds, new histories, new ways to live. Or conversely, strategizing to preserve the old”. It is precisely at this nexus of meaning-making and place-making that cultural politics and the politics of local economic development meet.

3. The cultural politics of local economic development in Lexington, 1991–1997

The demise of Lexington’s branch plant economy and the uncertainty over the city’s future economic devel-

opment set the context for a series of political struggles over the future of the city’s economy, society, and built environment during the 1990s. I will focus mainly on the Reynolds Road case but will refer to other, related and concurrent disputes. A common thread running through these arguments was conflict between various interests who subscribed to differing interpretations of the city as a place to live, work, and form community and who based their political action over economic development policy on these interpretations of place. In the following paragraphs I will draw out how local economic development policy-making can be usefully understood as a struggle to fix meanings, define values, and (re)shape place through discourse. Specifically, I will interpret the case in terms of contested definitions of usually taken-for-granted concepts, activists’ attempts to recast common understandings of well-being and attachment to place, and in terms of the motivations and political strategies of opposition activists.

*“Growth is good” or “growth destroys bluegrass forever”:
conflicting interpretations of the site, the city, and economic development*

Local developers described the rezoning proposal that garnered the Baptist pastor’s vociferous support as crucial to the continued prosperity of Lexington. In their request for rezoning, which was supported by the city’s Chamber of Commerce, developers proposed that the Reynolds Road site be redeveloped with land uses consistent with their definition of Lexington as a commercial and retail service center with a substantial light industrial base. In their plan, commercial, retail, and industrial uses were to be coupled with medium- and high-density housing, some public uses, and a small park. For the developers, lobby, the site itself symbolized Lexington’s precarious economic position as it attempted to adjust to plant closures and reorient its development model. As Reynolds dismantled its tobacco processing operations at the site, business interests, politicians, and residents identified it as providing an opportunity to shape the future of the city’s economy, environment, and quality of life. The local newspaper went too far as to refer to it as “the promised land” (Lexington Herald-Leader, April 2, 1995a, pp. A1 and A11), a site toward which the hopes and aspirations of various interests in the city were directed.

From the developers’ perspective, redevelopment of the site was an economic imperative with city-wide implications since Lexington could only prosper if business flourished and the city’s economy was allowed to grow. This assertion was central to the first theme in the cultural politics that developed in the Lexington during the 1990s. The argument, and similar statements made in other contexts (McCann, 1997), precipitated a prolonged struggle over the meaning of such common terms

as growth, prosperity, and quality of life and, by extension, the very identity of the city. That local developers and their allies would interpret the Reynolds Road site and the city more generally as primarily a location for economic growth is hardly a surprising insight into contemporary urban studies the “local politics of business” (Cochrane, 1999; Cox and Mair, 1988; Logan and Molotch, 1987; Stone, 1989).

The growth machine thesis is a case in point. The Lexington developers’ conviction that the city must seize every opportunity to expand its economy resonates with the view of the city as a growth machine dominated by local rentiers (Logan and Molotch, 1987; Molotch, 1976; Wilson and Jonas, 1999). In its original formulation, the thesis argues

that the political and economic essence of virtually any given locality, in the present American context, is *growth*... a common interest in growth is the overriding commonality among people in a given locale... [Thus,] the very essence of a locality is its operation as a growth machine (Molotch, 1976, pp. 309–310, his emphasis).

While the later, extended formulation of the thesis (Logan and Molotch, 1987) takes account of the role played by ‘residents’ as opponents of rentiers’ actions in a way that this original formulation does not, the growth machine perspective does tend to understand urban politics primarily as the way that business and political elites promote economic development and inter-urban competition for investment without spending a great deal of time investigating the rhetorical strategies and struggles over meaning that serve in the construction of what Cox and Mair (1988, p. 319), call a “local ideology”. I suggest that we can better understand the intra-urban political moment in local economic development by understanding struggles over the meaning of place and such taken-for-granted terms as ‘growth’ that both underpin the construction and maintenance of local ideology and also form the basis for most contemporary theorizations of urban politics.

In the case of Lexington in the 1990s, struggles over meaning centered on issues of growth, both economic and geographical. The dispute over the Reynolds Road site was set in a larger context of struggle over the meaning of the city and its surrounding Bluegrass horse farm landscape. In this struggle, two opposing interpretations of the place – as a series of separate land parcels with which landowners could do whatever they chose, within the law and through which economic development could be fostered and, on the other hand, as a fragile, interconnected karst environment needing comprehensive planning and management in order to prevent over-development, environmental degradation, and a resultant decrease in the regional quality of life – were

set against each other in a series of policy-making processes.

These struggles over meaning were articulated by both sides through advertising, including the printing of bumper stickers containing pointed slogans intended to underscore both coalitions’ understanding of growth. A group of developers and their supporters, organized as “Citizens for a Better Lexington”, produced a green bumper sticker with the slogan “Growth is Good” written across it in white and orange lettering. This sticker, which quickly appeared on the company vehicles of a number of the city’s building contractors as well as on the cars of their supporters, was soon discussed in heated debates in the media.⁴ This statement was also answered with another green sticker proclaiming in white lettering that “Growth Destroys Bluegrass Forever”. The bumper sticker debate is an indication of various ways in which the politics of local economic development can be articulated in particular situations and the willingness of business coalitions and their opponents to invest resources ‘non-traditional’ forms of argumentation around urban policy. More significantly, the slogans reflected a wider shift in Lexington towards an explicit cultural politics in which interpretations of the meaning of city and the processes affecting it – such as economic expansion and suburban development – were central to attempts by various interest coalitions to shape the future of the place through the policy process.

An interesting aspect of this cultural politics was the local developers’ attempt to attach an absolute normative value to their understanding of growth. While those advocating environmental preservation were specific in identifying what they saw as continued growth’s destructive impact on local ecosystems (“Growth Destroys Bluegrass Forever”), developers chose to make a universal and unequivocal statement (“Growth is Good”). The developers’ understanding of the virtue of economic growth is, as Logan and Molotch (1987, p. 33) would suggest, grounded in their material circumstances as rentiers:

Aggregate growth is portrayed as a public good; increases in economic activity are believed to help the whole community. Growth, according to this argument, brings jobs, expands the tax base, and pays for urban services.

The question I am interested in here is one of cultural politics: how do growth coalitions construct certain representations of place and society so as to advance

⁴ Local wags with access to the bumper sticker and scissors had a field day. The “Growth is Good” sticker soon appeared around the city in modified form. Some of these creative appropriations included: “Growth is God”, “is Growth Good”, and for those with religious convictions (and more than one sticker), “God is Good”.

their material interests and how do groups who oppose their plans construct political arguments around place, meaning, and social values in order to effectively articulate alternative visions of the future? I will elaborate further on this issue in the following sections, with specific reference to the Reynolds Road site.

“Greenspace, greenspace, and more greenspace”: contested meanings of quality of life and environmental quality

From the day that Reynolds announced the closing of its plant to the final rezoning decision, the site was the object of struggle. Various groups, whose material interests and ideological positions led them to selectively highlight certain elements of the place, its history, and the broader forces affecting it, constructed political arguments that would influence policy (Lexington Herald-Leader, 1993a,b, 1994a,c,d,e, 1995b). Beyond being an element of the politics of defining ‘growth’ in the city, the Reynolds Road site – with its abandoned buildings and large amounts of open space, its location in a karst environment surrounded by middle class residential neighborhoods, and its symbolic links to the city’s past and future – was interpreted by neighborhood and environmental activists as the last chance to create a large urban park which would mitigate the effects of development in other parts of Lexington by providing refuge for wildlife and recreation for citizens. In a manner similar to the unfolding of struggles over urban expansion and the intensification of land uses in many US cities, the Reynolds Road dispute developed into one where questions of environmental quality, quality of life, and economic growth were considered together. This institutional context in which this dispute took place consisted of a series of hearings intended to produce a consensus plan for the site’s future, based on consideration of all opinions and of the relevant scientific and technical reports. A government-appointed group called the Reynolds Road Small Area Plan Committee organized this process.

Throughout the years of debate, neighborhood and environmental activists questioned the ability of the Small Area Plan Committee to produce a vision of the site’s future that was independent of the wishes of the developers’ lobby. As a result, activists strongly articulated a different political rhetoric which combined understandings of environmental quality focusing on the threat of flooding and the resultant loss of property values with notions of good quality of life, including appeals to concerns about children’s safety and well-being. Their political rhetoric was, as Jackson (1991, p. 226) notes, one that sought to define certain interpretations and meanings of the landscape as more salient than others:

Even apparently simple ‘economic’ resources... such as an urban park or an abandoned building, are subject to diverse readings by diverse groups in different material circumstances: a source of recreation and of danger, an opportunity for reinvestment, or a threat to neighboring properties.

Through this representational strategy, there was a concerted effort to disrupt the connection made by local business elites in Lexington, and almost every other city in the United States, between economic growth and quality of life. This standard place marketing approach to quality of life sees it as both a primary tool for attracting new investment, especially in the ‘new economy’ and as an outcome of economic development policy, where ‘quality of life’ is defined in terms of the presence of new sports stadia, shopping, and entertainment districts. In opposition to this, activists in Lexington highlighted the increasing environmental costs associated with contemporary economic development strategies and argued that public goods like parks and clean water must be the basis of any definition of quality of life.

In a meeting with planners in 1994, 150 people – mostly residents of surrounding neighborhoods – discussed the future of the site in ways that highlighted their definition of the site as a fragile environment and their interpretation of quality of life in surrounding neighborhoods as increasingly threatened by rapacious development. According to a representative of the Monticello Neighborhood Association, “Ninety percent [of those who attended the meeting]... prefer[ed] park space” as an alternative to development. As a resident put it,

Greenspace, greenspace and more greenspace is what we need here in Lexington... We don’t need another shopping center. We don’t need more apartments. We’ve got plenty of those kinds of things. But we need something to make this an attractive community for everyone to live in (Lexington Herald-Leader, 1994a, p. B3)

Other residents had specific environmental concerns that they linked both to their fears over declining property values and to concerns over environmental safety and quality of life. A representative of the Stonewall Neighborhood Association asserted that previous developments near the Reynolds land caused considerable drainage and flooding problems. “It cost the people who live in Stonewall a great deal of suffering and inconvenience and devaluation of property... If another subdivision is developed on the Reynolds property without adequate flood protection, we are going to be drowning all over again”. Another area of concern was the environmental consequences of the tobacco processing that had taken place on the land for decades. As one resident put it, “There are a number of toxic solvents that are

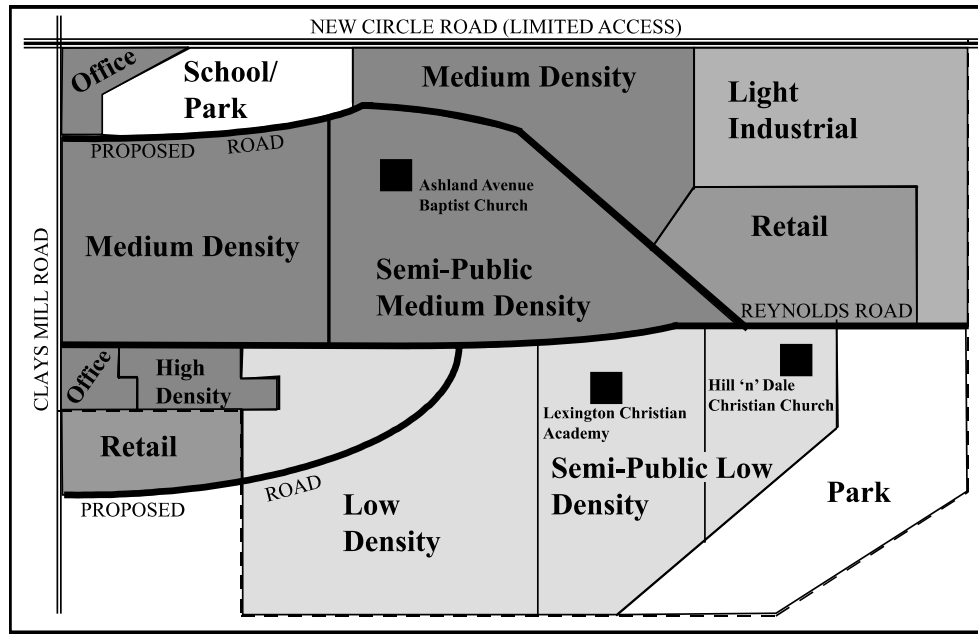


Fig. 2. The Reynolds Road small area plan.

used in the tobacco curing process which are sitting there in the ground... We're wondering if we are going to be facing more pollution problems if these solvents are stirred up and leach into the stream" (Lexington Herald-Leader, 1994a, p. B3).⁵ These themes were repeated throughout the dispute. As the Small Area Plan Committee unveiled its plan for the site – one that did indeed meet most of the wishes of the landowner and developers (Fig. 2) – one leading activist began to publicly discuss the site in terms that were deliberately counter to the idea that development would benefit Lexington by bringing jobs to the city. Drawing on a different logic of prosperity, he argued that "purchasing park land is an investment in Lexington's future. When this part of the city is built to saturation and our population swells to over 300 000, we will still have a few large green spaces left. Ultimately, it is a gift to our children and grandchildren" (Powell, 1995).

This statement was made at a time when environmentalists and neighborhood activists reorganized themselves into a new group named the Reynolds Park Campaign Committee with the intention of challenging the Small Area Plan Committee's vision. The Park Campaign Committee asked the city to buy the entire 450 acre site at its assessed value in order to preserve it as

greenspace. This group also formulated an alternative plan (Fig. 3) that envisioned the site as "the 'crown jewel' of a county-wide urban park system" (Powell, 1995). Having caught the attention of the local media, the new 'greenspace plan' quickly garnered enough support to have the council consider it as a possible alternative to the Small Area Plan Committee's proposal.

The ability of the activists opposing development to have their plan considered was based on their success in mobilizing, through the local media, a political rhetoric that challenged developers' definitions of growth, the good life, and citizen well-being (e.g., Powell, 1995; Talwalkar, 1995). The power of this rhetoric is revealed not only in the council's decision to consider the greenspace plan, but also, more significantly, in the developers' decision to frame their testimony with references to Christian values and social responsibility, rather than explicitly in terms of economic necessity. Thus, when Molotch (1976, p. 320) argues that one of the key ideological tools in business coalition discourse is the appeal to a particular definition of economic necessity – that jobs will accompany growth – he is, of course, correct (see also Cox and Mair, 1988, p. 316). The case at hand, however, suggests that, in certain contexts of economic and institutional change, this strictly economic appeal is seen by local business elites to have less persuasive political power than an appeal to what might be termed 'non-economic' or 'cultural' values embedded in everyday social life (Jonas and Wilson, 1999, p. 8).

By spring, 1997 these opposing plans were the only options being considered by the city council and it was in favor of the Small Area Plan Committee's proposal

⁵ These environmental concerns grew in tandem with worries over potential traffic congestion, especially around the junction of Reynolds Road and Nicholasville Road (one of the busiest roads in Lexington) to the east and junction of Reynolds Road and Clays Mill Road to the west (the location of a school) (Lexington Herald-Leader, May, 1994b).

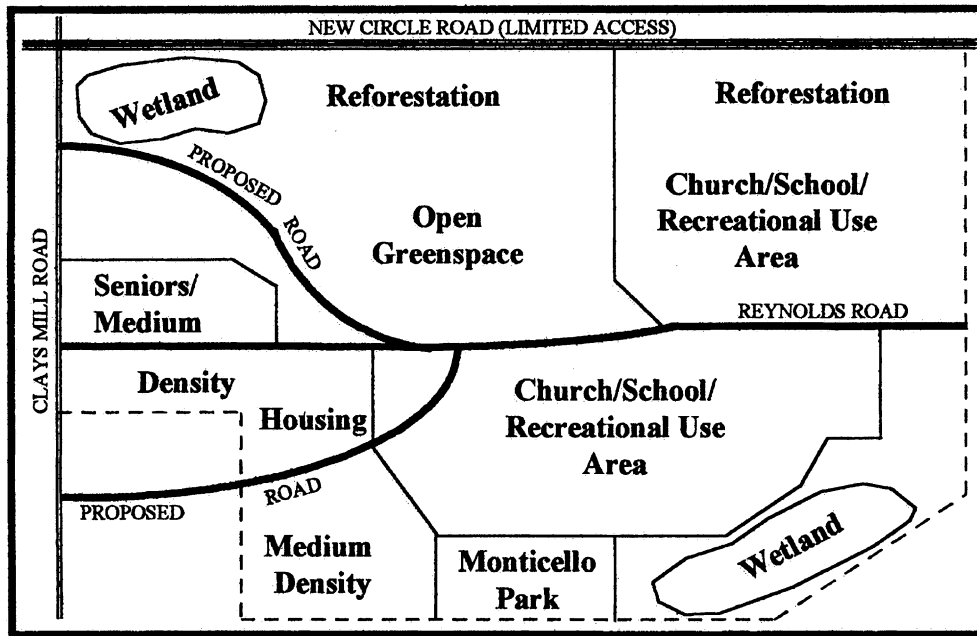


Fig. 3. The alternative, Reynolds Park Campaign plan.

that the Baptist pastor argued in the hearings held in March of that year.⁶ These final public hearings included detailed testimony by hired and volunteer experts on both sides. In these presentations, the relative merits of various economic, traffic, and environmental impact studies were argued over (Field Notes, 1997a,b). Most significant among these were the conflicting interpretations of the karst environment upon which the site stands and the likelihood that new development would increase runoff of rainwater from the site through underground limestone channels and into residential neighborhoods. The results of the testimony were inconclusive, with the consultant hired by the developers presenting a study suggesting that fears of increased runoff were unfounded and a volunteer expert for the opposition arguing otherwise but failing to present a convincing case under cross-examination by the developers' lawyer (Field Notes, 1997b). The relevant political moment lay outside the 'scientific' data of the various impact studies, however.

"Out there to be a blessing": social burdens, 'doing good', and political strategy

The testimony at the hearings in the spring of 1997 revealed a third aspect of city's cultural politics of local economic development: opposing views of the future of the Reynolds Road site were motivated by, and argued

in terms of, competing understandings of appropriate social values, moral leadership, and what it means to 'do good' in the world. Drawing on Molotch (1976), Jonas and Wilson (1999, p. 9) point to the importance of such ideological positions in the activities of powerful growth coalitions who

penetrate far corners of local life that tie growth stratagems to common-sense thought and taken-for-granted practice. Thus, power becomes wielded not through contextless articulations that foist power and a new way of seeing on an unsuspecting mainstream but through cultivating prevailing beliefs and values in an ongoing political intervention... [The language of growth coalitions] is infused with politicized meanings and values whose usage simultaneously illuminates and blinds with the impositions of one gaze. It is a politicized mix of manufactured presences, deliberate absences, contrived caricatures, subjective taxonomies.

It is worth noting that these discursive strategies are never entirely successful (Cox, 1999, p. 33), despite the various "propaganda projects" of pro-growth actors (Boyle, 1999). This is particularly the case in places where the "desire of populations to resist development" is coupled with a "capacity to influence decision making" (Boyle, 1999, p. 57, his emphases). In Lexington, the anti-development alliance matched the pro-development coalition both in its desire to have its vision of the city's future realized and in its ability to create a persuasive counter-discourse based on a different understanding of place, values, social responsibility, and everyday life.

⁶ The delay in the decision-making from summer 1995 to spring 1997 was a result of another planning dispute that held planners' attention (McCann, 1997).

Following the religiously inspired testimony at the first of these hearings, developers called on a number of local businesspeople to testify on behalf of the rezoning request. They also introduced testimony from a number of consultants hired to study the economic, environmental, and traffic impacts of the proposed development. This testimony appeared to present a strong case for development and left opposition activists pessimistic about their chances of swaying political opinion (Field Notes, 1997a). The developers' testimony lasted late into the evening – in what many of the Park Campaign activists saw as a deliberate stalling tactic intended to discourage participation by citizens with jobs and other commitments the following morning – and eventually forced the council to extend the hearing into a second session to be held one week later (Field Notes, 1997a). In the light of the impassioned testimony about using development to 'disciple' for Christ, it was ironic that the developer's extension of the decision-making process meant that, before the site's future could be determined, Lexington suffered what insurance adjusters might call an 'act of God'. In the week between the first and second meetings, a torrential rain flooded many low-lying areas of the city including the Monticello and Stonewall neighborhoods adjacent to the Reynolds site and seriously undermined developers' arguments that fears of flooding were exaggerated.

Neighborhood activists, Park Campaign members, and other opponents of development arrived at the second meeting in force, with increased resolve, and a new set of political strategies which speak directly to Jonas and Wilson's (1999, p. 8) assertion that powerful political rhetoric in the local economic development process "is a contested terrain, a set of conceptual spaces for the taking, whose struggle for and control by interest groups is always unstable and transforming", rather than only a tool of powerful development interests. First, they responded to the sloganeering of the Baptist Church's "Catch Our Vision" buttons and the religious slant of its pastor's presentation with their own cheaply produced badges. These contained the simple phrase, "Vote Your Conscience", which was directed toward the city council members and intended to undermine the moral high ground claimed by the developers through the support of the Baptist congregation. Second, those opposing development attempted to use humor and performance to underscore the contradiction between the results of the developers' environmental impact studies and the massive flood that had just struck many of their homes. One opponent of development arrived at the televised meeting wearing a sailor's cap and rubber boots and carrying a cardboard replica of a boat while another made a presentation to the council dressed in scuba gear, complete with flippers, face mask, and oxygen tank (Field Notes, 1997b). For these citizens, current run-off from the site was bad enough, leaving

substantial proportions of surrounding neighborhoods under water after heavy spring rains, and future development would only make this situation worse.

A third strategy took a less humorous, but more effective direction. Activists used a video presentation and graphic testimony from neighborhood residents to portray the effect of flood damage on the everyday lives of neighborhood residents. The video consisted of a series of local residents' photographs depicting the height of flood waters in the surrounding subdivisions, the rate at which the water rose, the external and internal damage to houses, and the debris left when the water receded (including waste from damaged sewer pipes). Added to these pictures was a soundtrack of flowing water that emphasized the rapidity and force of the floodwaters during and after the storm. This presentation was complemented by the emotional testimony of a number of those whose houses had been ruined by floodwaters. One woman had a lasting impact when, in angry and tearful words, she demanded to know how she could replace souvenirs of her daughter's first years of life.

We came home that night... and we couldn't even go downstairs because when you got to the steps you saw five and a half feet of water and every possession that was in there floating in mud and sewage... [raises a plastic bag above her shoulder] I have twenty five video tapes in this bag covered with sewage of my daughter growing up. They will *never* be replaced... I'd like to present that to you as evidence, then I'm going to *try* to save them... [long pause] and that's pretty much the sum of it [begins to cry] (Field Notes, 1997b).

This testimony emphasized the high personal stakes for the people living close to the development. It would, therefore, be wrong to ascribe the political rhetoric of attachment to place and family found in the activists' testimony merely to political expediency. Those opposing the development of the Reynolds site were motivated by, among other things, feelings of connection to the city where many of them had grown up and by feelings of social responsibility, as much as the pastor, his congregation, and the developers' lobby. In interviews I conducted, anti-development activists spoke of how they feared for their children's health as development threatened to pollute play areas and drinking water, while others related stories of deep personal loss which touched off feelings about their place in the world and their desire to "make a difference" and "do something good".⁷

⁷ On a tangential note, it could be argued that the orchestration of this and similar testimony speaks to a level of political ability and organization among oppositional groups that is often overlooked in many studies of the local politics of business (Molotch, 1993, p. 34; Jonas and Wilson, 1999, p. 8).

The political power of these motivations and the discourses constructed around them was demonstrated in the second hearing where the weight of opinion among the council members swung firmly behind those residents and activists who opposed commercial development of the Reynolds Road site. Confronted with residents' emotional testimony (and with ever-present television cameras recording their reactions), the council voted the developers' plan to be unacceptable, despite its endorsement by the city's own land use planning staff (Field Notes, 1997b; *Lexington Herald-Leader*, March 13, 1997). The site was, as a result, to remain mostly undeveloped for the moment – a clear victory for the Park Campaign and a resounding and unusual defeat for the landowner and developers and the wider Lexington growth coalition.

4. Discussion and conclusion

The struggle over the proposed development of the Reynolds Road site is a common form of land use dispute in US cities. Analyses of the politics of local economic development that emphasize the power of discourse in constituting meaning-making/place-making processes are less common, however. It is in this context that I deploy the notion of a cultural politics of local economic development in order to understand urban politics as a complex socio-spatial process. I would not go as far as to suggest that the engagement in a cultural politics by local political activists will always bring success in arguing against standard economic development strategies. Even in the case of Reynolds Road, those opposing development enjoyed success for a short time after the council's decision before the developers took the matter out of the planning process and into the courts, eventually winning the ability to develop the land, but to a lesser extent than they had hoped. Furthermore, I would not suggest that the character of a 'cultural political' coalition will be more stable, or less in need of constant work and maintenance than any other coalition. The alliance between the churches and the developers also cooled after the council's decision although the Christian school and Baptist church are now features of the new Reynolds Road landscape, along with some housing, recreational facilities, and a large supermarket. What can be said is that analyses of how business coalitions and their opponents weave stories around aspects of their place and draw on larger ideologies in American life to shape that place's future space economy can provide important insight into the politics of local economic development.

Cultural politics and urban political economy

Among the aspects of urban politics that can be illuminated by this approach are the role of non-elite

groups in influencing urban policy (Cochrane, 1999) and the role of everyday life in urban politics (Gilbert, 1999). Cochrane speaks to the first of these when he points out that the strength of the "local politics of business" approach lies in its identification of the role *elites* play in urban politics, but therein also lies one of its weaknesses:

[it] may exclude from consideration within urban politics those groups who are excluded or marginal to the elites and their formation. On occasion the existence of these groups is acknowledged, but because the focus of attention is on the elites, the significance is likely to be understated, and – at best – they may be incorporated as spear carriers for locally dependent business (Cochrane, 1999, p. 118; see also Clarke et al., 1995; Gilbert, 1999 for discussions of silences in the 'new urban politics' literature)

Analyses of urban politics that define 'politics' mainly in terms of local elite power and 'economy' in terms of development decisions risk both "exclud[ing] from consideration within urban politics those groups who are excluded or marginal to the elites and their formation" (Cochrane, 1999, p. 118) and also running contrary to Gilbert's (1999, p. 102) salutary admonition that "[e]veryday life should not be treated as a backdrop to the processes that shape the city. Rather, people's everyday lives shape, and are shaped by, urban processes".⁸

This argument resonates with those made in contemporary economic geography. For instance, Lee (1994, pp. 147–148), following Dicken (1992) chooses to define 'economic geography' in terms of "people's struggle to make a living", a concern that he argues "is always and should always be present in any economic geography which insists upon the subordination of the merely economic for the richly human". Similarly, studies of the politics surrounding the way local space economies are constructed must engage with the variety of interests, discourses, and motivations involved in people's struggle to make a living – a term that connotes more than merely making a wage but also indicates a whole range of everyday practices and meanings involved in making a life and making place.

⁸ Furthermore, Brown's (1999) recent engagement with the urban regime approach is pertinent in that it "reinforces recent efforts to look beyond the state and market as potential sites for the conduct of city politics" (p. 77). Drawing from Elkin's (1987) approach to regimes, more than from Stone (1989), Brown argues that urban politics should be understood not in terms of "public-private partnerships per se, but rather [in reference to the various ways] that political ideals were manifest in actually existing structures and practices of politics" (p.72) and in terms of how political structures "constitutively embody the ideal of citizen well-being, which Wolman and Goldsmith (1992) have argued is a fundamental aim of city politics (p. 82)".

While everyday life in the neighborhoods surrounding the Reynolds Road site was a central aspect of the politics over the development proposal, it is worth noting that the question of ‘non-elite’ participation in the politics must be considered carefully. The activists who spearheaded the challenge to the development of the Reynolds Road site were, in many ways, elites in their own right. Residents living in the neighborhoods around the site were almost all middle class whites with high levels of formal education and their median family income was significantly higher than that of the city as a whole. The fact that the only recent major defeat to the city’s economic elites was dealt out by a coalition of highly educated middle class white people in a city deeply segregated along lines of race and class (McCann, 1999) might suggest that cultural politics is the preserve of the relatively privileged. A great deal of work on the topic would contradict this assertion, however (Alvarez et al., 1998; Jordan and Weedon, 1995; Mitchell, 2000). I would suggest that the definition of ‘elites’ and ‘non-elites’ is itself contextual. One context for cultural political struggle is the policy-making process, and as the urban regime approach has emphasized, the inclusion of a groups’ interests in a governing coalition is crucial to its ability to shape the future of a place. Therefore when, as in the case of the Reynolds Road site, those who organized against the proposed development are on the outside of the traditional growth coalition, they can be considered to be positioned outside of the existing elite-dominated policy-making framework, even when they have certain advantages that set them apart from large portions of the city’s population.

Planning policies are the objects of both elite and non-elite politics because their ability to assign certain economic and social activities to certain locations and to legitimate those decisions in reference to ideals of democracy is fundamental to the character of everyday life in localities. Transportation and fiscal policies order the flows of people and materials between land uses and thus affect certain groups’ ability to make a living. Environmental planning policies influence social reproduction since decisions on acceptable levels of pollution, for example, impact the quality of life of given groups of people and shape their ability or willingness to engage in economic, political, or social activities. The concerns of these policy institutions may appear relatively mundane but it is precisely for this reason that they can often inspire such deep feelings. What, after all, can be more important than having a job, being sheltered, feeding your family, not being marginalized or discriminated against, and being sure that the water you drink or food you eat is not contaminated? An analysis of the cultural politics around these policies provides the opportunity to understand how the economic is also cultural and the cultural economic.

‘Culture’, ‘economy’, and rhetorical strategy

Such an attention to cultural politics may contribute to the “culturally enriched” understanding of local economic development for which Jackson (1991, p. 226) argued. Certainly, the case of Lexington suggests that an approach that is attuned to discursive struggles over meaning-making and the definition of appropriate values highlights aspects of politics that some suggest are neglected in many political economy approaches, without losing the valuable insights into political economy. The Lexington case also speaks to another aspect of Jackson’s argument, one that has been articulated by others (e.g., Jacobs and Fincher, 1998): an insistence on a reconceptualization of the culture–economy dualism. While the division between ‘culture’ and ‘economy’ is a problematic construct that can be profitably reworked in analyses that understand the ‘economic’ as always already ‘cultural’ and vice versa, it would be wrong to simply act as if the dualism has no ideological, discursive, or material power.⁹ Indeed, the case of the politics around the Reynolds Road site suggests that the widely held understanding of the world as divided into a ‘cultural’ sphere, including religion, attachment to family and so on, and an ‘economic’ sphere, including the imperative to profit from land development, is central to the rhetorical strategies of all groups in the political process. The membership of a growth coalition that, for instance, includes religious leaders and developers, indicates this interconnection. Nonetheless, these coalitions’ political rhetoric is frequently built on the discursive separation of ‘economic’ interests from ‘cultural’ (or spiritual) ones in order to support economic development through appeals to certain definitions of social burdens and values that are defined as pure. This complex tension between ‘culture’ and ‘economy’ in the politics of local economic development is continually being reworked through political practice in specific socio-spatial contexts.¹⁰

In Lexington during the 1990s, there was increasing opposition to the standard employment-based justification for growth (Molotch, 1976, p. 320). The skepticism over the supposed benefits of growth and the ability of local elites to sustain employment had been heightened by concerns over the environmental effects of rapid urban development and by the crumbling of the city’s branch plant economic development model. The city was one in which standard “propaganda projects” were undermined by an increasing desire and capacity of certain groups in the population to resist development (Boyle, 1999, p. 57; Cox, 1999). Faced with increasingly

⁹ In making this point, I am not suggesting that Jackson would argue that such binaries have no ‘real world’ power.

¹⁰ This is an argument that I think runs parallel to that set out in Mitchell’s (1995) article, “There’s no such thing as culture”.

popular visions of the future of the city that both emphasized environmental sustainability and social justice and also blamed existing economic development policy for the city's problems, local rentiers attempted to lessen opposition to their projects by constructing a political rhetoric of social responsibility, Christian values, and attachment to place. This new pro-growth argument continued to emphasize the material benefits of increased economic growth, but was complemented by a rhetoric that attempted to position the need for land development *outside* the generally understood realm of the 'economic'. The Baptist pastor's testimony, like the "Growth is Good" campaign, sought to define the meaning of growth in terms of 'purer', less assailable social and spiritual values, rather than in reference to what might be regarded as 'baser' economic interests. The appeal to the unequivocal 'goodness' of growth and to the 'God-given' values of certain pro-development activists, rather than merely to an employment-based argument, was a well thought out strategy with serious intent. On the other hand, opposition groups' extensive use of emotional testimony in the final hearing and their adoption of the slogan "Vote Your Conscience" can also be seen as a rhetorical strategy intended to exploit the popularly understood separation between economic and cultural interests. As much as the developers de-emphasized their material interests in developing the site for intensive commercial land uses, activists from the surrounding neighborhoods chose to highlight the loss of family heirlooms and the environmental benefits of greenspace over their fears of decreased property values if development took place.

If the politics around the Reynolds Road site can be understood as the strategic use of the conventional distinction between 'culture' and 'economy' for the purposes of shaping place for certain interests, then cultural politics is important in the analysis of the politics of local economic development. It provides insight into the continual struggle over the power to name, to represent 'common sense', to create 'official versions', and to legitimate the social world by speaking for respectable, decent society that is both constituted by and productive of materiality (Jordan and Weedon, 1995, p. 13). Analyses of the cultural politics of local economic development, whether in traditional realms of activism and elite institutions or in the wider context of everyday life (Gilbert, 1999), provide the opportunity to better analyze the "strategies of power" (Mitchell, 1995, p. 110) in and through which local space economies are produced. "[What are] the appropriate kinds of growth,... who should lead it, what their values should be, what the public's values should be, and who are the locality's potential civic and moral saviors" (Jonas and Wilson, 1999, p. 8) are questions worked out through this politics. The politics of local *economic* development must, then, be understood as always, simultaneously, the *cul-*

tural politics of making meaning, making a living, and making place.

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