

AT STREET LEVEL: BUREAUCRATIC PRACTICE IN THE MANAGEMENT OF URBAN NEIGHBORHOOD CHANGE¹

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Abstract: Bureaucratic regulation shapes cities in important ways. Yet certain aspects of how state regulation operates in urban neighborhoods have been understudied in geography and cognate disciplines. This article focuses on one understudied group of state actors: property use, health, and liquor inspectors, part of a wider group of “street-level bureaucrats” who, through their face-to-face contact with the public, affect how and where regulatory enforcement gets done. Through a case study of inspectors in Vancouver, British Columbia, this study identifies the role of street-level bureaucratic practice in shaping urban neighborhoods and in managing neighborhood change. We discuss how street-level bureaucrats negotiate the constraints and pressures inherent to their practice while also exercising a degree of discretion. And we argue that these micro-level concerns are important to understanding how cities are produced but they must also be linked with analyses of wider processes that shape contemporary urban development. [Key words: Street-level bureaucracy, urban governance, neighborhood change, regulation.]

INTRODUCTION

Bureaucratic regulation has significant consequences for contemporary urbanism. Regulations such as building codes, liquor licenses, and public health ordinances order social practices in cities according to the political objectives of government, policymakers, and local elites. Legal regulations are expressions of hegemonic discourses, which provide a normative framework for how urban change should be managed. A key element of law is that it is generally understood to be universally applicable across any national territory. Therefore, through its apparent universality, it is commonly seen to be impartial and objective. Indeed, since laws appear rational and objective as a result of their aspatial character, regulations that treat certain places or individuals differently from others lose this aura of rationality and impartiality. Instead, they appear political and therefore questionable. This engagement between space, power, society, and the law is central to the

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literature on legal geographies (Blomley, 1994; Herbert, 1996a, 1996b, 1996c; Blomley et al., 2001).

In practice, however, enforcement is often selective and geographically uneven. Legal geographers have noted this, as have others researching the strategic selectivity and spatiality of the state (Jonas et al., 2004). In cities, for example, a wide array of practices and problems—panhandling, noise pollution, and untidy premises, among others—tend to be tolerated more in some neighborhoods than in others. The law regulates these activities geographically, ordering them by regulating where they can occur—a local spatial fix, of sorts (cf. Harvey, 1982). In large part, judgments as to how and where these questions of enforcement are addressed are made by street-level bureaucrats—“[p]ublic service workers who interact directly with citizens in the course of their jobs, and who have substantial discretion in the execution of their work” (Lipsky, 1980, p. 3). The variation in bureaucrats’ enforcement practices is produced by and also enforces an uneven and often unstable geography of norms and regulatory practice. Recognizing the importance of discretionary practice, Lipsky (1980, p. xii, his emphasis) argues that policy is best studied where it is *enacted*, rather than where it is drafted: “the decisions of street-level bureaucrats, the routines they establish, the devices they invent to cope with uncertainties and work pressures, effectively *become* the public policies they carry out.” In this study, we will discuss the enforcement practices of three related groups of street-level bureaucrats—property use inspectors, health inspectors, and liquor inspectors—and we will explore how their everyday practices shape and are shaped by the neighborhood spaces they regulate.

We suggest that micro-practices of regulatory enforcement are crucial, yet relatively understudied elements of the management and shaping of change in cities (see DeVerteuil et al. [2002], writing in an urban context, and Philo and Parr’s [2000] related collection on institutional geographies). Our specific concern here is with how street-level bureaucrats understand urban space and how they employ their understandings to manage neighborhood change. In order to explore this issue, we begin in the next section by engaging with literatures on bureaucratic practice (Lipsky, 1980; Hawkins, 1992), on discourse and spatial practice (Herbert, 1996a, 1996b, 1996c), and on work that seeks to theorize the seemingly prosaic practices and figures who constitute and operationalize state power (Hacking, 1991; Dean, 1999; Rose, 1999; MacKinnon, 2000). These literatures provide a framework in which to locate a case study of the relationships between street-level regulatory practice and urban change in Vancouver, British Columbia, a city experiencing significant change and markedly uneven geographies of regulatory enforcement. We present an overview of the Vancouver case following development of the conceptual framework, and subsequently provide a detailed discussion of bureaucratic practice through interviews with street-level bureaucrats. This study concludes with a discussion of how we might link analyses of the micro-practices of enforcement to theorizations of the wider processes and forces that structure urban development. It is important, we suggest, to focus on the practices of minor bureaucrats in order to understand the role of the state in mediating urban change. Yet in doing so we argue that it is also necessary to look beyond street-level. In this regard, we point to existing challenges to as well as potential avenues for future research.

UNDERSTANDING URBAN GOVERNANCE THROUGH STREET-LEVEL BUREAUCRATS

A central tenet of contemporary geographic scholarship is that urban space is socially produced. The role of capital in the creative destruction of built environments has been well documented (see for example, Harvey, 1982, 1985, 1989; Logan and Molotch, 1987; Lefebvre, 1991; Brenner and Theodore, 2002). This understanding of the pursuit of exchange value as a force of urban change is paralleled by attention to how struggles for the maintenance and enhancement of use value have shaped cities (Castells, 1983; Purcell, 2000, 2001; McCann, 2003; Martin, 2004). These literatures also acknowledge that the state plays a key role in such struggles over use and exchange value. We seek to contribute to the study of the state's role in the production of urban space through a focus on street-level bureaucrats and their role in managing change in urban neighborhoods. This approach resonates with what Rose (1999) refers to as the *how* of government—the practices and subjectivities of individual state actors that constitute regulation and enforcement (cf. MacKinnon, 2000). The actions of the state, then, can be used to *explain* many aspects of urban development. Yet, the state—as a sociospatially embedded set of institutions, individuals, and practices—also requires *explanation*. This can be achieved in part by examining the practices of street-level bureaucrats.

How might we conceptualize a study that seeks further understanding of urban governance through a focus on its minor figures? A useful starting point is the concept of discretion, which Lipsky and others have deployed to highlight the way that bureaucrats, while somewhat constrained by the social and institutional contexts in which they work, invent or “make up” (cf. Ward, 2006) models of enforcement. The logic underlying discretionary decisions is therefore of interest, and Herbert (1996a, 1996b, 1996c), in his research on police officers (another group of street-level bureaucrats) identifies organizing discourses that constitute bureaucratic practice and facilitate the analysis of how bureaucrats understand and legitimize their professional practice. We will elaborate on bureaucratic practice and organizing discourses below. In doing so we will suggest the discretionary activities of street-level bureaucrats are always balanced by management oversight, by pressure from the public, and by feelings of duty to the law; they have, as Lipsky (1980, p. 16, our emphasis) puts it, “*relative autonomy*.” Accordingly, we will adopt an analytical perspective on street-level bureaucratic practice that stresses how discretionary practice manages physical and social change in urban neighborhoods while acknowledging the administrative constraints under which inspectors work.

Discretion and Constraint in the Work of Street-Level Bureaucrats

Whereas bureaucratic work is often characterized as epitomizing the rote and the routine, in practice many street-level bureaucrats hold significant amounts of responsibility and frequently make “judgment calls” in the course of deciding if or how to enforce regulations. It is, to an important extent, through their actions that the state acts selectively. Hawkins (1992), writing from a legal perspective, argues that discretion is a key component of bureaucratic practice for pragmatic reasons. Given the numerous codes and regulations that might be relevant to a given case or situation, he notes that bureaucrats must exercise some discretion in order to make the work of enforcement practically

possible. Were bureaucrats to enforce every regulation on every occasion, their work would grind to a halt. This argument about the pragmatic necessity of discretion underscores Lipsky's (1980) arguments about the role of street-level bureaucracy in the production of policy. He is concerned with how citizens experience government policy through direct interactions with bureaucrats and how, in turn, street-level bureaucrats embody and operationalize policy. Their individual decisions and routines "add up to agency behavior" (Lipsky, 1980, p. 13). Thus he argues, "public policy is not best understood as made in legislatures or top-floor suites of high-ranking administrators, because in important ways it is actually made in the crowded offices and daily encounters of street-level workers" (p. xii).

Yet the demands of legislators, managers, and of course the expectations and complaints of the public all exert pressures and constraints on the discretion of bureaucrats. They "can never be free from the implications of significant constraints," Lipsky says. Normally bureaucrats claim, "that they are functioning effectively under the constraints they encounter" he continues (1980, pp. 81–82). As our discussion of the Vancouver inspectors will illustrate, street-level bureaucrats continually balance their ability to treat specific situations more or less harshly with legal, political, and "client pressures" (ibid, p. 149), such as complaints about upkeep or noise that come from people willing and able to hire attorneys and/or directly exert influence on politicians or managers. A discussion of bureaucratic practice, then, must balance an attention to discretion with a sober eye to the overarching institutional, political, and social contexts in which discretion can be exercised. Inspectors' practice is frequently complaint-driven, yet within and without the context of responses to complainers they employ a number of strategies that enable and justify their exercise of discretion.

Space and the Discourses of Street-Level Bureaucrats

Specifically, these bureaucrats negotiate the problems and tensions of their daily practice not only by inventing certain modes of interaction, as Lipsky notes, but also by constructing a series of what Herbert (1996a, 1996c) suggests are organizing discourses that constitute bureaucratic practice. Through his ethnographies of police officers, Herbert conceptualizes these street-level bureaucrats' territoriality and provides a geographic reading of police power and discretion. He calls attention to the discourses that animate police territoriality and actions, identifying two "orders" of discourse, one formalized and one less so. The formal order encapsulates systems of law and bureaucratic control that have profound implications for police powers. Law, he argues, determines what officers are responsible for investigating as well as what means are appropriate to that investigation. Police officers see social activities in terms of whether they conform to or violate legal codes. Likewise, they see space in terms of what police actions are permissible at particular time and places.

These formal discourses of law and bureaucratic control need not only be applied to the police. They resonate equally with the practices of health, liquor, and property inspectors. Legally, inspectors are charged with the enforcement of a limited and particular set of bylaws and a defined geographic territory in which to conduct their investigations. They also carry out their responsibilities under bureaucratic conditions that specify the powers and discretion they are afforded and to whom they must answer. Yet Herbert

notes that this formal order of bureaucratic control is interwoven with an informal order of discourses. For his police officers, these informal discourses include adventure/machismo, safety, and morality. While these specific ordering discourses clearly do not apply directly to the daily practices of Vancouver's inspectors, our interviews identified a number of informal discourses—order, uniformity, livability, and the public good—that inspectors seemed to rely on to organize and legitimize their exercise of discretion and enforcement power. These, of course, are only the most immediate set of such discourses. We can also surmise that discourses of community, family, domestic tranquility, and the like also frame their thoughts, but these were not directly expressed in the interviews.

Herbert's attention to how discourses function in bureaucracies parallels Rose's (1999, p. 20) concern with *how* government gets done. Rose's "analytics of government" is distinct from approaches that have as their object of investigation "an emergent pattern or order of a social system . . . [and] seek to describe a field of institutions, of structures, of functional patterns or whatever." Rather, to understand government, Rose proposes—in an argument that again echoes Lipsky's—to "diagnose an array of lines of thought, of will, of invention, of programs and failures, of acts and counter-acts" (p. 20) that constitute regimes of government. This entails an attention to the discursive and micro-practical production of truth and authority in government; to "what authorities of various sorts [want] to happen, in relation to problems defined how, in pursuit of what objectives, through what strategies and techniques" (p. 20; see also Larner, 2003).

When carefully combined, the scholarship discussed here outlines a useful approach to the study of property, health, and liquor inspectors as bureaucrats, whose daily street-level practice has a considerable influence on the sociospatial character of urban neighborhoods. Clearly, Lipsky provides a starting point by emphasizing the discretion bureaucrats have in their interactions with clients. Yet his focus on discretion needs to be understood in terms of its place within broader structures of pressure and constraint. Lipsky is clear about this wider context but his contribution is to highlight often-overlooked discretionary practices. Here, we identify a productive tension between discretion and constraint to account for the way inspectors operate within the context of institutional expectations, citizen complaints, and their understanding of themselves as (somewhat) empowered professionals. Lipsky's approach, and that of Hawkins, can also be extended through an attention to the spatiality of bureaucratic practice. Herbert's work on police officers provides a solid grounding for such an approach. Nevertheless, the spatially inflected organizing discourses he identified in the officers' practice cannot simply be mapped onto the activities of other street-level bureaucrats. Rather, our interviews provide a set of similarly spatialized discourses around which inspectors organize their practice and through which they influence urban geographies. In turn, an approach to street-level bureaucrats that recognizes their discretion, constraints, and spatiality offers the opportunity to draw from and speak to contemporary governmentality approaches in human geography by asking both *how* and *where* (urban) government gets done.

REGULATORY INSTITUTIONS AND THE MANAGEMENT OF URBAN CHANGE IN CONTEMPORARY VANCOUVER

Agnew (1997) suggests that political and policy actions can be analyzed particularly effectively in times and places experiencing marked social change. This, we suggest, is

especially true of the analysis of bureaucrats whose daily practice involves managing rapid urban change. Since the mid-1980s, Vancouver has moved from relative regional obscurity to become a city with significant economic and social ties to East Asia and elsewhere (Hiebert, 2000; Ley and Murphy, 2001; Olds, 2001; Hiebert and Ley, 2003; Mitchell, 2004). This change has involved a significant reworking of the city's socioeconomic makeup and its property markets, particularly in the central city core (Hutton, 2004). Vancouver continues to engage in a planning discourse that emphasizes "livability" (Lees and Demeritt, 1998), to experience gentrification in downtown and surrounding neighborhoods (Ley, 1996; Smith, 2003; Blomley, 2004), and to institute strategies that encourage rapid increases in residential density. These have both gained the city an international reputation among planners for "sustainable," dense development, and have also produced a new landscape of high-rise (and high-priced) condominium towers in and around the downtown core. The city is also experiencing a crisis in affordable housing provision for both the poor and the middle class (Anderson, 2006; Eby, 2006), a situation that many link to its periodic pursuit of spectacular mega-events, such as the World Exposition in 1986 (Ley and Olds, 1988) and the 2010 Winter Olympic Games (Vancouver 2010 Bid Corporation, 2002).

Street-Level Bureaucrats and Their Agencies

Street-level bureaucrats and the institutions within which they work have been charged with managing these rapid and politically charged changes in, and uses of, the built environment. To explore the bureaucrat's role, we draw on research into three institutions that govern key aspects of Vancouver's built environment and social life: the City of Vancouver's Department of Property Use and Licensing, the Office of the Medical Health Officer at the Vancouver Coastal Health Authority, and the Provincial Liquor Control and Licensing Branch's Compliance and Enforcement Division. Each agency is responsible for a different aspect of regulation and enforcement, but they overlap and sometimes coordinate their enforcement efforts. During 2005 and 2006, 16 hour-long semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives of these agencies. Eight City of Vancouver Property Use inspectors were interviewed, as were two of their managers. At the Vancouver Coastal Health Department, one manager and three inspectors were interviewed. One liquor inspector and one manager from the Provincial Liquor Control Board also provided interviews. Finally, one interview was conducted with the Vancouver Police Department's Liquor Liaison officer. Whereas our study is informed by discussions with all these bureaucrats, it draws primarily from interviews in the property use and health departments. It is also worth noting here that a number of requests were made to "shadow" or engage in "ride-alongs" with inspectors, with the intent of adding an ethnographic component to our understanding of their practice. These efforts were unsuccessful because of uneasiness on the part of middle-level managers.

The City of Vancouver's Licenses and Property Use Department enforces three principal bylaws. The Standards of Maintenance Bylaw No. 5462 regulates the physical condition of buildings and property, including structural stability, dismantled vehicles in view, and broken windows, for example. The Untidy Premises or "neighborhood standards" Bylaw No. 4548 is concerned with such issues as household refuse and unkempt lawns, and the Licensing Bylaw No. 4450 that regulates business licensing controls

which activities are permitted under zoning laws and where they may locate. Beyond the routine licensing of most retailing establishments, this Bylaw also regulates food service establishments, cabarets, massage parlors, pawn-brokers, and other businesses that are defined as “regulable problems.” The Department consists of managers and property use inspectors, who cover 24 districts in Vancouver. The exact number of inspectors varies, depending on numbers of temporary and specialized staff, but each district is managed by at least one property use inspector.

The activities of the city’s inspectors are complemented by those of the Vancouver Coastal Health Authority, a local agency of the provincial government, and its Environmental Health Department, which administers several programs mandated by the Public Health Act including food safety, noise control, and housing and sanitation. The Department’s 25 field inspectors are each responsible for one of the Department’s districts, which cover the entire city and contain approximately 250 food service facilities apiece, as well as other sites of regulation including schools and grocery stores. Inspectors are responsible for a wide variety of health-related concerns and must be prepared to regulate situations as diverse as barber shops properly sterilizing equipment, restaurants handling food in the approved manner, and controlling pest problems on public lands. In conducting their daily inspections, these officers rely on strong formal and informal relationships with the city inspectors described above. In interviews, field inspectors spoke regularly of interactions they had with Property Use inspectors who shared their district and of communication between the two departments regarding their overlapping mandates. Formal relationships between the departments are also evident in the city’s Neighborhood Integrated Service Teams (NIST), which coordinate comprehensive interventions into specific neighborhoods by drawing together health, liquor, property use, fire, and building inspectors with police officers (City of Vancouver, 2005).

The Liquor Control and Licensing Branch is a provincial government body with a regional office in Vancouver. The compliance and enforcement officers who work there are responsible for enforcing the Liquor Control Act. Each inspector monitors roughly 300 licensed establishments in districts that are similar to those of property and health inspectors. Since changes were made to the Liquor Control Act in 2001, inspectors now focus their enforcement efforts on four major infractions relating to liquor and food service establishments: overcrowding, access to alcohol by minors, intoxication, and illicit or diluted alcohol. Although enforcement is certainly not limited to these issues, they receive extra attention because of priorities set by the provincial government, and in practice they constitute the majority of compliance officers’ time and effort.

Organizing Discourses and Street-Level Bureaucracy

The daily activities of these bureaucrats are conditioned both by the rapid and profound changes occurring in the city and by the institutional frameworks within which they operate. In this context, how do these street-level bureaucrats understand, legitimize, and operationalize regulation on an everyday basis? Herbert’s notion of organizing discourses sheds light on how Vancouver’s regulatory officials deal with changing conditions in their districts. These discourses—order, uniformity, livability, and the public good—are not only fundamentally geographical, but they also recurred in interviews with inspectors in the different agencies, strongly suggesting they also form the basis for

a range of regulatory practices. This is indeed the case, even as the discourses can also be seen to be contradictory and tension-ridden, necessitating the exercise of discretion by individual officers.

In the interviews, inspectors were unanimous in the belief that drinking alcohol, preparing and selling food, and tending to one's property ought to be ordered and regulated by the state. While perhaps unremarkable by itself, the inspectors' conviction is worth noting here because it is consistently discussed in terms of how such practices are to be regulated in a spatial context. Inspectors possess a clear sense that a spatial order is necessary and natural, that noxious land uses should be separated from others, and that noisy activities are best located out of the earshot of residents. This representation of space, and the apparent transparency and abstractness it ascribes to space, must, however, be tempered by an understanding of urban geographies as socially constructed, complex, and historically contingent (Lefebvre, 1991). In Vancouver, for instance, a key element of the city's recent planning agenda has been to construct dense mixed-use neighborhoods with apartments and townhouses located adjacent to and above various other uses, including food retailing, laundries, and nightclubs. This change in government attitudes toward zoning has presented new challenges for regulatory officials and their sense of spatial order. Their daily practice, as we will show, entails negotiating tensions between competing ideas of order in a changing built environment.

Their conviction that (spatial) order is key to the management of neighborhoods dovetails with a second organizing discourse that identifies uniformity and consistency as crucial goals in the process of enforcement, even as it acknowledges the need for case-specific responses. Although they discuss uniformity as a legal necessity that ensures fairness, inspectors frequently refer to the difficulty of achieving uniform enforcement across the city's neighborhoods. This was frequently attributed to the idiosyncrasies of inspectors—their “styles of enforcement” as “negotiators” or “hardliners.” Yet inspectors and managers alike acknowledge that uneven geographic application of regulations is necessary and desirable in, for example, neighborhoods where older buildings make sanitation or upkeep more problematic (Health Manager, July 2005). This tension between the necessity of uniformity within legal structures and the practical importance of inconsistency in enforcement animates a significant part of inspectors' regulatory practices.

Livability is an increasingly powerful policy discourse in North American cities (McCann, 2004, 2007) and one with a long history in Vancouver (Ley, 1980). The idea of “living well” in the city—of minimizing inconvenience felt by residents as a result of noise or untidy premises—informs and motivates a great deal of how and whether Vancouver's inspectors decide to enforce regulations. Yet the inspectors' outlook involves a tension, since many recognize that new urban residents seem disturbed by some of the fundamental activities that make contemporary urbanism what it is. As central Vancouver undergoes density increases and gentrification—indeed, as the social and economic character of the city changes—the discourse of livability is employed to justify changes in enforcement and address the changing concerns of residents.

The three discourses of order, uniformity, and livability are overarched by another: the public good. Whereas Kenny (1992), among others, notes the problematic and contestable nature of appeals to the “public good” in urban policymaking, the bureaucrats interviewed believe strongly that their everyday practice promotes a safer, fairer, more livable, enjoyable, and efficiently run city that offered benefits to all its residents. We have no

grounds upon which to question their good intentions, although it is important to note the existence of larger structures that favor certain interests in society at the expense of others, despite the best efforts of individuals. What we can say is that the idea of serving the public good through proper regulation does indeed motivate the inspectors in their daily activities (Lipsky, 1980). This organizing discourse together with the others frames the geographical imagination of the state at the level of the minor figures who enact policy. What these discourses produce is a reciprocal interaction between the production of regulatory space and the spatial production of regulation.

INSPECTORS' GEOGRAPHICAL IMAGINATIONS AND THEIR ROLE IN MANAGING NEIGHBORHOODS

Inspectors' enforcement decisions are shaped by their geographical imaginations—sets of opinions, assumptions, and ways of seeing/speaking about areas that affect the decisions inspectors make and what they see as appropriate in given spaces (Harvey, 1973, p. 24, 1990; Soja, 1989; Lefebvre, 1991; Gregory, 1994). Their organizing discourses and geographical imaginations reflect and shape their practice, informing how they use their discretion to enforce neighborhood standards and manage neighborhood change.

Bureaucratic geographical imaginations draw on deeply held, social (rather than individual or personal) discourses about places as desirable, dangerous, unhealthy, problematic and so forth. These discourses order and direct policy (e.g., Beauregard, 1993; Weber, 2002). They have formal and informal—codified and uncoded—expressions. Formal expressions are manifest in regulations like zoning and “activity zone” bylaws, which order the landscape in terms of specific uses. Additionally, bylaws regulating parking, panhandling, alcohol sales, business licensing, and the like are similarly spatial. Around these codified expressions of the inspectors' geographical imaginations are a set of informal expressions—perceptions of urban spaces and spatialities that condition discretionary decisions. Certain key geographic demarcations appeared repeatedly in the interviews with inspectors. Most prevalent was Vancouver's east–west divide, between the affluent Westside neighborhoods, such as Kitsilano and Point Grey, and traditionally working-class East Vancouver, including Mount Pleasant, Grandview-Woodlands, and the Downtown Eastside (Ley, 1980). This uncoded yet powerful binary conditions at least two elements of inspectors' practice—what we term tolerance and modes of interaction.

As a matter of daily practice, it is neither desirable nor possible for inspectors to enforce all bylaws all the time. Rather, inspectors' actions are largely complaint driven. This applies particularly to complaints about untidy premises and work-without-permit issues that concern property use inspectors in residential areas. Unless a property is clearly unacceptable—with rusting cars and piles of refuse on the lawn, for example—enforcement will only occur if issues are brought to the city's attention through neighbors' complaints (City Manager 1, July 2005). Neighbors' levels of tolerance for particular infractions are, therefore, spatialized in the minds of inspectors. They are acutely aware of which residents of which neighborhoods are most likely to complain about certain issues. Similarly, they carry around a mental map of neighborhoods and residents who are more “tolerant” or at least do not complain. In turn, this element of their

geographical imagination shapes their discretionary decisions. When asked about differences they see between neighborhoods in the city, many inspectors referred to perceived east–west differences. Eastsiders are seen as more tolerant, less likely to complain, and less concerned with their neighbors’ business. Westside residents are seen as more frequent complainers.

In the whole Eastside, you don’t get anywhere near the amount of complaints you get on the Westside. People are just much more tolerant ... People mind their own business more. They’re not so worried about what other people are doing. It’s like, “you know what, we’re all just regular Joes here.” Everyone’s just trying to get along and I think they feel more of a sense of neighborhood than people on the Westside, I really do. (Property Use Inspector 2, October 2005)

Although the east–west mapping is a crude binary—and one that inspectors themselves frequently undermined during interviews—they often invoke it to explain how they exercised discretion.

The second theme in inspectors’ geographical imaginations refers to their modes of interaction with citizens in different neighborhoods. For example, a city inspector describes how it is often more difficult to accomplish things on the Westside:

People on the Westside often talk down to civil servants. They also tend to—what’s the word—*snub* problems or dealings with inspectors. They are much quicker to have more attitude and not comply with things that we are dealing with. People on the Eastside, generally speaking, I find them much easier to deal with. They don’t give you as much grief ... once you sort of explain things to them. On the Westside as well you have a more educated population so they tend to question authority a lot more and that makes it difficult to deal with problems. Things can still get done but they take a lot longer (City Inspector 4, October 2005).

Inspectors furthered this characterization with reference to situations in which residents employed legal representation to engage with city government.

It’s not uncommon to deal with lawyers, or the sons and daughters [who] are lawyers, or the friends who are lawyers, so it’s definitely more difficult. Even just the way you approach problems; you have to be so much more diplomatic and so much more careful about what you’re saying (City Inspector 4, October 2005).

This image is a powerful contrast to the earlier description of “regular Joes” on the Eastside. It illustrates how inspectors’ geographical imaginations intersect with issues of class, among others. As we will now suggest, these mental maps of society and space—whether or not they are objectively “true”—profoundly shape how these bureaucrats enforce standards and manage change.

NEIGHBORHOOD STANDARDS

Neighborhood standards are a legal expression of assumptions about particular areas, which in some ways overarch the distinction between formal and informal elements of

the bureaucratic geographical imagination described above. Indeed, “neighborhood standards” is a colloquial term that does not appear in Vancouver’s city charter. As a practical regulatory philosophy, it operates through the ambiguity found in regulations such as municipal Bylaw No. 4548, the Untidy Premises bylaw: “Every owner or occupier of real property shall maintain the said property in a neat and tidy condition in keeping with a reasonable standard of maintenance prevailing in the neighborhood” (City of Vancouver, 1971, p. 1). Note the geographical definition given to “reasonable standards.” Instead of an aesthetic definition (e.g., grass must be kept no longer than 6 in.) or a functional definition (e.g., objects in a yard must not obstruct passage to the dwelling), the bylaw is founded on conformity to the standards of surrounding properties. Although Bylaw 4548 goes on to stipulate specific offenses such as “the accumulation of rubbish and discarded materials” and the requirement to keep areas “cleared of weeds, brush, trees, and other growth,” it should be noted that the primary definition of appropriate standards is spatial.

A city property use inspector relates how the “neighborhood standards” philosophy operates:

Essentially what [neighborhood standards] says is that you have to keep your property to the standards that the rest of your neighbors do ... it doesn’t deal with the site-specific problem; it’s very grey. If you had a neighborhood where everybody collected junk, then that’s the neighborhood standard; we couldn’t really take that to court (City Inspector 4, October, 2005).

This spatial-relational definition then contributes to an uneven application of the Untidy Premises Bylaw across the city. Inspectors are generally supportive of this approach, however, because it affords them discretionary latitude and is regarded as responsive to particular neighborhood character. The lack of fixed aesthetic or functional definitions does occasionally cause inspectors difficulties when they bring owners of untidy premises to court or to city council, however. Inspectors issue notices requiring the owner of an untidy property to remedy the situation within a certain number of days. If the owner does not comply, the city is legally permitted to enter the property and charge the owner with clean-up costs. If, however, the owner contends that the property is acceptable within the standards of the neighborhood, then the inspector must be prepared to make the case before council or the court. Inspectors must then assemble photographic evidence of the offending site and surrounding properties to specify neighborhood standards. “When we do take untidy premises to court,” a city inspector explains,

... we’ve always been told to take photos of the site and at least two other properties on either side and to the back. That way the judge has an idea of what the neighborhood is like. And if you have someone with a golf green and someone with a pile of junk then it’s easy. (City Inspector 4, October, 2005)

This process does not always work smoothly, however. Owners charged under the Untidy Premises Bylaw often present counter-evidence, offering a competing representation of their property’s spatial context:

[Y]ou know, over the years we've had people come in with their own photos. You know, taken a block away—not that far away but far enough—and say, “Well, this is like mine.” And they have [a case] because it's unclear. (ibid)

The vagueness and spatial contingency of the “neighborhood standards” approach is illustrated in the case of the proverbial “collector.” “Collector” is a term used by city inspectors to describe owners or residents who amass such things as lumber, metal, vehicles, or other “salvageables” on their property. Their front or back yards are often filled with these materials, exposed to the elements and in various states of repair. They present difficulties for inspectors. What are at issue, one explained, are different conceptions of value. To the collector, the materials in question have inherent value as useful objects, personal possessions, or even artwork. To complaining neighbors and the city government, the objects' visual presence constitutes a threat to property values, health and safety, and so on. “These people who are chronic collectors, they think their garbage is gold,” says one inspector.

This isn't stuff you throw away; this is stuff they see value in. Vicino [a pseudonym] is probably a good example of this. He collected old cars and had piles of old steel and lawn chairs, which he probably saw as beautiful things [but] we saw them as broken old pieces of junk! (City Inspector 4, October, 2005)

There is a geography to “collectors,” but not one that is as stark as a simple east–west binary might suggest.

[I]t's not black and white. Definitely, there is a different standard—really generally speaking—on the Westside than there is on the East, especially in specific areas. But when I was in Kits [Kitsilano on the Westside] ... there's always one or two or a few people who are those collectors (City Inspector 4, October, 2005).

Inspectors, then, negotiate challenges to their imagination just as they negotiate bylaw violations. Their daily practice involves responses to complexities within districts and attempts to cope with the fluidity and contradictions of the city. The inspector's discussion of “collectors” turns to their relationships with their neighbors. Usually, he continues,

if they're a long-term person and the neighbors have been there forever and they know him and they feel sorry for him, then they sort of back off. And then what happens is eventually neighbourhoods change and people move and die off and new people come in and then they won't put up with what the neighborhood put up with before (City Inspector 4, October, 2005).

NEIGHBORHOOD CHANGE

As neighborhoods change and as inspectors are reassigned, their working knowledge of the city changes, in both practical and more abstract ways. A key interview topic addressed the ways in which enforcement and regulation are shaped by changes in the socioeconomic character of the city. Whereas laws and bylaws do not change as often as

neighborhoods do, enforcement practices do change and it is at this level, the level of practice in specific neighborhoods, that bureaucrats adapt to and also shape the changing city.

As Vancouver has rapidly gentrified and increased in density, residential, commercial, and industrial uses have found themselves in increasingly closer proximity. This reworking of zoning—particularly the “new urbanist” desire to encourage mixed-use neighborhoods—has produced conflict. As people have moved downtown to live in new high-rise condominiums located close to—and frequently on top of—restaurants, bars, night clubs, theaters, and shopping centers, issues of noise pollution, odors, and parking have become increasingly prominent in the public sphere (e.g., City of Vancouver Urban Noise Task Force, 1997). Furthermore, older inner-suburban neighborhoods in East Vancouver have experienced gentrification-related tensions as professionals have moved into traditionally working-class areas.

In the interviews, inspectors refer to the difficulties they face as neighborhoods change and existing uses conflict with new practices and expectations. In the increasingly mixed-use downtown, this entailed more numerous complaints, specifically from newly arrived residents who objected to noises and odors emanating from existing commercial establishments. For example, it has become relatively common for inspectors to receive complaints about noisy restaurant exhaust fans from nearby condo owners. Similarly, residents of high-rise buildings often complain about nightclubs on their buildings’ ground floors. Inspectors expressed irritation at what they perceive to be trivial complaints or ones that appear to be directed toward land uses that new residents ought to have investigated before purchasing their homes. Nevertheless, inspectors were unanimous in their belief that bylaws still needed to be enforced, regardless of the longevity of the business in question or of the complainant.

A manager in the Environmental Health Office offers an example of these sorts of complaints and also voiced the opinion that they might be avoided if inspectors are consulted during the initial stages of development as well as afterwards.

I think one of the biggest problems when I was in the [downtown] district was the laundry place ... off of Davie. All the condos went up around it and the first thing when the condos went up was they complained about the sound of the laundry. They said, “We paid a lot of money for these condos, we don’t expect to hear the fans going off in the morning,” yet the condos came well after.... We should be looking at it [prior to] development ... and we [should] have our input at that point ... you can’t stand in the way of progress, you know? (Health Manager, July 2005)

Other inspectors are somewhat less generous and more irritated with chronic noise complainers:

A lot of [complainers], unfortunately, have the attitude that where they live should be pristinely quiet. Well, if you’re living in the [downtown], you can’t have the expectation of it being as quiet as the suburbs. We’ve got a couple where it’s just hilarious, you know? They’ll call and complain about a fan from the walk-in cooler of a restaurant that’s really loud. Or the back door’s open and they can hear people clanging dishes. I mean, there’re certain things [where] you do feel for them but

there's certain things where it's like, "You chose to live here!" (Health Inspector 1, July 2005).

Regardless of inspectors' levels of sympathy for complainants, a strong sense of public service as well as institutional pressures are evident in their decisions to enforce bylaws:

... we've had a couple times, like in Gastown [a gentrified area of downtown with numerous tourist and entertainment establishments], where a nightclub has been there for 20 years and operating. All of a sudden an apartment building goes in on the alley behind and now the club had to put in all these measures to control the noise because they were next to a residential [building] ... It's hard not to feel bad for the club because I don't think it's really fair but that's what the bylaw is, that's what we do, you know? I kind of don't have as much sympathy [for the new residents, but that] doesn't mean I don't do my job. (City Inspector 3, October, 2005)

This inspector expresses her sense of the new challenges she faces due to neighborhood change and the constraints within which she works. Yet, for Lipsky (1980, p. 149), "denying discretion ... that they have influence, are free to make decisions, or offer service alternatives" is in itself an assertion of a particular form of discretionary power by street-level bureaucrats. They choose when and where to say "'That's the way things are,' 'It's the law,' [because these] rationalizations not only protect [them] from client pressures, but also protect them from confronting their own shortcomings as participants in public service work."

Whereas this "protective" appeal to written policy characterizes bureaucratic practice, inspectors frequently take the opposite tack and use their discretion on a case-by-case basis. For example, a manager in the health department remarks that regulations are indeed "all there in black and white" (Health Manager 1, July 2005) but a subsequent health inspector qualified this statement saying that "you don't want [client interactions] to *become* black and white" (Health Inspector 1, July 2005), arguing that by-the-book enforcement benefits no one. Indeed, in discussing problem restaurants she remarked,

you don't want to go in there, you don't want to deal with them. And your discretion, if they really annoy you, well, you're going to be a lot harder with them ... you're going to be more black and white and that's not good for either party involved. (ibid)

The exercise of discretion also extends to the regulation of intoxication by liquor inspectors. In British Columbia, intoxication is a legal category measured by volume of alcohol consumed in a given period of time, related to body weight—three alcoholic beverages consumed within two hours by a 190-pound (86 kg) man, for example (Liquor Inspector 1, August 2005). While an establishment's owner is potentially liable for over-service, a serious infraction against a liquor license, many patrons over-consume in bars all over the city without being denied service or being removed by liquor inspectors. Inspectors rely on visible signs of intoxication, which opens up substantial scope for discretion:

Well ... it can be hard and sometimes we have a very short period of time. Sometimes it's just a snapshot. I don't want to say you jump to a conclusion because you don't; there are indicators. Sometimes it's almost amusing, someone drunk will come up and actually bump right into us and practically knock us over, of all the people in the whole place! So sometimes these things literally land in your lap (Liquor Inspector 1, August 2005).

Public intoxication, like nightclub noise, is increasingly being defined as a livability issue in Vancouver as the downtown neighborhood changes and increasingly meets the definition of a mixed-use leisure, consumption, and residential space (Bula, 2007; Ramsey, 2007). In this context, inspectors' exercise of discretion in the regulation of intoxication is increasingly important to the character of the neighborhood because it sets a context in which restaurants and bars can continue to serve reasonable amounts of alcohol while neighboring residents are not inconvenienced by public drunkenness and associated noise, litter, property damage, and violence. Inspectors in Liquor Control, Health, and Property Use were unanimous in their belief that discretion is key to this sort of regulation.

Inspectors' decisions to invoke or deny discretion in the changing neighborhoods in and around downtown Vancouver generally tend to produce an urban landscape amenable to development and elite forms of consumption and, as a corollary, they produce a city that is more livable, affordable, and welcoming for some than for many others (Brenner and Theodore, 2002; McCann, 2004, 2007; Anderson, 2006; Eby, 2006). Inspectors, after all, tend to feel that enforcement must change with the character of the neighborhood itself and that their role as expert professionals can facilitate this change. Outside of the downtown core, particularly in East Vancouver neighborhoods, inspectors also negotiate ongoing change. The difference between this area and the downtown is that there have not been the same significant changes in zoning and property use that have characterized CBD redevelopment, although levels of "densification" are increasing under the city's new "EcoDensity" strategy. Consequently, changes in enforcement practice have not yet been as pronounced in East Vancouver as they have downtown. Where changes in enforcement do occur, inspectors note that their assumptions about the high tolerance levels of East Vancouverites need to change. An inspector working in the area is explicit:

We have people moving in from the Westside [into East Vancouver] who will be quick to point out something about their neighbors. Do some of them mellow out? I think they do but it takes them a little longer in order to shed all that (City Inspector 3, October, 2005).

Whereas former Westsiders are again characterized as lacking in tolerance and quick to complain, their new Eastside neighbors and the neighborhood they constitute are seen as embodying tolerance that could potentially "rub off" on new arrivals. In the same discussion, the inspector also asserted that "people here have a very strong sense of community," thereby defining community in terms of tolerance.

Questions of community and neighborhood change in Vancouver are also shaped by the city's multicultural, immigrant character. One street-level bureaucrat, working in East

Vancouver recounted an emotional story of ethnic intolerance that placed her in a difficult ethical and professional position:

I got a complaint [for work without permit] on a house where the owners had just moved into it [but] the work was *so old*. So how is that fair? The neighbor didn't care when it was the previous owner? And the [new residents] were wonderful people, wonderful people. I don't know how long they had been in the country, they were from the Philippines, I think.... You know, I don't know why the complaint came in, all I can think is that [the complainants] didn't like that a Filipino family had moved in.... With this one, we had already started the process of enforcement [when I became involved] and I was just sick with it. I had spoken to a number of different people saying this isn't fair and this is wrong; it's morally so wrong to do this to these people. I even cried with them in their kitchen about it. It wasn't going my way, we had started enforcement and we needed to follow through. Finally I went to another manager and said, "This is so wrong" and thank God this person agreed (City Inspector 6, October 2005).

Whether or not the issue indeed concerned racism is uncertain but the incident was clearly very difficult for the inspector in question. Her willingness to pursue the case and connect personally with the residents resonates with Lipsky's (1980, p. 15) point that, "to a degree, the society seeks not only impartiality from its public agencies but also compassion for special circumstances and flexibility in dealing with them." Furthermore, it underscores his discussion of the "tenacity of street-level bureaucrats in resisting efforts to limit their discretion" through complaints or through pressure to stick to "black-and-white" regulations. They resist, he continues, "in order to salvage a semblance of proper client treatment as they define it." (p. 150). This example's illustration of how discretion and constraint are two sides of the same bureaucratic coin also serves to complicate the easy binary of the tolerant east and whining west in Vancouver. Whereas concepts like tolerance, modes of interaction, and legally inscribed neighborhood standards are frequently coded through an east-west imagination, discussions with inspectors revealed a complex and nuanced vision of city space and bureaucratic practice in which discretion and personal convictions shaped enforcement.

BEYOND STREET LEVEL: LINKING UP MICRO-PRACTICES WITH BROADER PROCESSES

In this article we have argued that street-level bureaucrats' daily practice provides useful insights into how contemporary urban neighborhood change is managed. We suggested that street-level bureaucrats, their negotiation of discretion and constraint, their organizing discourses, their understanding of urban space, and their practical role in shaping development have been understudied. To add to the limited urban geography literature on these actors, we provided a case study of how property use, health, and liquor inspectors in Vancouver understand the city in sociospatial terms, how they classify their knowledge of the city in terms of four key organizing discourses (order, uniformity, livability, and the public good), and how—through reference to their geographical

imaginations and organizing discourses—they conduct enforcement in their assigned neighborhoods.

Interviews with the inspectors suggested that they are finely attuned to the character of their particular jurisdictions and think carefully both about the social, political, and economic implications of their interactions with those whose activities and properties they regulate. These street-level bureaucrats are particularly aware of the impact urban change has on their own practice and on the people with whom they engage. As we have suggested, Vancouver has developed massively during the past two decades and is currently experiencing a residential building boom. This change, together with the city government's focus on building compact, mixed-use, urban neighborhoods, have combined to create new combinations and juxtapositions of land uses that often caused friction among residents, business owners, and other users, and consequently, became regulatory problems. Following—and extending—the work of Lipsky, Herbert, and Rose, we suggest that an understanding of how these new forms of urban development are managed by the state must pay sustained attention not just to the way regulations are written in policy documents but also to how they are enacted through the daily practices of bureaucrats. To understand the process and politics of contemporary urban development in cities like Vancouver, it is necessary to attend to the (seemingly) minor, prosaic practices of bureaucrats at street level.

Yet this focus on the micro and the minor, the contingent and the particular, raises conceptual and methodological questions that are worth dealing with briefly in the remainder of this study. There is an ongoing discussion in the literature about how best to conceptualize the connections between micro-, meso-, and macro-level processes that are shaping contemporary cities. Peck and Tickell (2002, p. 34) argue, for example, that analyzing the political economy of contemporary urbanism

means walking a line of sorts between producing, on the one hand, overgeneralized accounts of a monolithic and omnipresent neoliberalism, which tend to be insufficiently sensitive to its local variability and complex internal constitution, and on the other hand, excessively concrete and contingent analyses of (local) neoliberal strategies, which are inadequately attentive to the substantial connections and necessary characteristics of neoliberalism as an extralocal project.

Their specific focus is the neoliberalization of urban space, and much of the current discussion over how to conceptualize urban change refers directly to neoliberalism. Our case study is certainly contextualized by many aspects of neoliberal urbanism, but neoliberalization is not our specific analytical focus—much that happens in cities cannot be simply or wholly inserted into the neoliberal frame. Instead, we want to acknowledge Peck and Tickell's more general admonition: that the best analyses of sociospatial processes privilege neither macro analyses of global political economic tendencies nor investigations of locally situated micro-practices. Instead, the most useful work seeks to hold these poles and their interconnections in simultaneous focus. The point, then, is to produce analyses of contemporary urban development and government that are neither "local" nor "global" but instead subscribe to a "both/and" logic that seeks to analyze local change in terms of other scales and vice versa.

This logic is evident in Wilson's (2004) argument for paying attention to contingency in contemporary urban studies. In developing urban-scale, case study analyses of Midwestern cities, his

goal is to refine understanding of rather than peripheralize the power of capitalist economic and political imperatives. I thus argue not for the evidence of autonomous "agency" effects but rather their inseparable and embedded connection to grounded, humanly made structures. Urban governances are posited as constructed ... through grounded social relations, understandings, biographies, and histories. (Wilson, 2004, p. 780)

Peck, Tickell, and Wilson are calling for analyses of contemporary urban change that emphasize *connections* between actors and processes operating at a range of scales. We agree that any understanding of street-level bureaucratic practice must be linked to wider processes. Space constraints prohibit a detailed account of these connections here, but we can briefly draw on Wilson's work to point out some ways in which the "grounded social relations, understandings, biographies, and histories" of regulatory enforcement in Vancouver connect to broader processes and imperatives shaping that city and others.

One aspect of contemporary urban development policies in many parts of the world is the mobilization of "city space as an arena both for market-oriented economic growth and for elite consumption practices" (Brenner and Theodore, 2002, p. 21). Certainly, the street-level bureaucrats we have discussed could be seen as the shock troops of market-oriented urban development, purifying space (MacLeod, 2002) and making the city safe for commerce and consumption. Yet, there seems to be more to it than this. Wilson (2004, p. 773) argues that broad changes in how cities are governed and developed are "constituted through situated political forces, political cultures, active resistances, and institutional legacies" and are created from the "grounded practices" and "ongoing initiatives" of "individuals or collectivities . . . within deeply textured social and political life." This suggests that urban expressions of wider political economic change are always contingent, contradictory, sometimes surprising, and potentially negotiable. Wilson points to two contingent processes that resonate with our discussion of Vancouver's street-level bureaucrats.

First, he underscores the importance of representational practices in constituting the spaces within which policies intervene and through which problematic people and activities are identified and engaged. This point parallels our discussion of the geographical imagination of the inspectors, but Wilson is keen to keep his analysis of particular urban experiences linked to broader processes, and therefore he emphasizes that spatial discourses dealing with local spaces are always tied—often in the same sentence—with representations of the market and capital at the global level (see Machimura, 1998; Saito and Thornley, 2002; and González, 2006 on the use of representations of the global and globalization in local politics and policymaking). Although this global connection is somewhat less evident in our quotations from Vancouver's inspectors, the city's globally recognized and copied livability and sustainable urban design agenda motivates and frames a great deal of the city's policymaking and is a powerful discourse for these street-level bureaucrats. Whereas this discourse does not determine how inspectors act, it does

constitute a significant part of the institutional context within which they work, and is frequently invoked by inspectors to justify or explain discretionary decisions.

Second, Wilson's perspective draws attention to the mutability and incompleteness of policies aimed at managing urban change. They are, he argues, "a fluid and evolving set of formations," conditioned by a range of factors operating across various scales. "In hyper-changing cities," he continues, "improvisational responses to circumstances are frequently crucial," and they underscore a point also made by Tickell and Peck (2003)—that the local actualities of contemporary development belie the notion that urban change is a "sedimented and completed project" (Wilson, 2004, p. 779). Certainly, Vancouver is a "hyper-changing" city, and the level of discretion and improvisational ability held by street-level bureaucrats as well as increasing questioning of development agendas by various neighborhood and anti-poverty groups in the city suggests that the locally hegemonic development model is neither externally nor structurally determined.

Our study of the role street-level bureaucrats play in managing change in cities offers a modest contribution to these ongoing efforts to conceptualize contemporary urban development. Through a series of neighborhood-scale examples, we highlighted how inspectors conceptualized the social spaces they managed, how they negotiated discretion and constraint in their everyday practice, and how their practice made a difference to the way that neighborhoods looked and operated. Yet our research has its limits. First, it is interview based and therefore relies largely on what inspectors say they do. Inspectors were, for instance, unwilling to directly discuss how they might have ignored complaints from some groups while being more likely to pursue them in others. Information like this might have been gathered through ethnographic methods (e.g., Herbert engaged in "ride-alongs" with the LAPD) which would have allowed us to "triangulate" written policies regarding what inspectors should do, interview data on what they say they do, and direct observation of what they actually do. Requests to engage in "ride-alongs" were unsuccessful in our project, but this limitation suggests an opportunity for future research. Second, our project provided evidence of causal relationships between inspectors' constrained discretion and the nature of change in the neighborhoods they oversee. More detailed work—employing a wider range of methods over a longer research period—is needed to show how, precisely, these varied and neighborhood-scale impacts of bureaucratic practice combine to shape the character of development in the city as a whole.

Despite these limits, our research does illustrate how street-level bureaucrats manage neighborhood change, often shaping them into increasingly marketized and consumption-oriented spaces by managing the tensions and contradictions thrown up by gentrification and "densification." But our narrative did not suggest that inspectors were simply single-minded shock troops of what Smith (2002) has identified as a market-oriented "global urban strategy." Rather, they thought carefully and often cared deeply about their exercise of discretion and enforcement while adhering closely to certain principles of good practice. Of course, their actions, when generalized, often did benefit certain class fractions over others. Indeed, the way that Vancouver's livability discourse is enacted by street-level bureaucrats certainly does produce an ordered landscape made safe for very expensive residential developments and associated elite consumption. Our study indicates, however, that this may only be one contingent outcome of regulatory practice. It identifies a context for further engagement with the practical and material manifestations of urban governance at (and beyond) street level.

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