Leading questions about Learning Spaces: The constrained voice of academic denizens in Higher Education estates management consultation

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Part 1 Abstract

The upsurge in recent scholarship on Learning Spaces indicates a renewed interest in the relationships between the built environment of HE and pedagogical practice. Yet, typically, the role of academic practitioners when learning and teaching spaces are designed, commissioned and refurbished remains confined to formalised consultation phases within wider processes driven by Estates managers. This paper focusses on the experiences of those academics who participate in such consultation processes, examining how they articulate their own voices about pedagogy and space and how their ability to do so is constrained by the manner in which they are consulted. Such experiences have hitherto been poorly documented within the literature on Learning Spaces. We consider these experiences as attempts by academics to assert their values within the context of established institutional infrastructures, such as policy-level Estates strategies, procedural norms of campus planning, and professionalised recipes for estates production.

Part 2 Outline

Recent scholarship highlights an increased interest in Learning Spaces, the relationships between material University settings and the pedagogy that takes place within those environments (Oblinger, 2006; Boys, 2011; Boddington and Boys, 2011; Temple 2014). Points of focus for such scholarship include design guidelines and reports of design project outcomes (Jamieson, 2003; Watson, 2007), the complex relationships between learners' experiences and how spaces are socially produced (Boys, 2011), the notion that space underpins institutional identity (Neary et al., 2010) and critique of how institutions value and evaluate their portfolio of estates investments (Bligh & Pearshouse, 2011). The modest upturn in interest in this topic is occurring after a considerable period in which the physical estate of Universities had been "under-researched" in general by academic scholars (Temple, 2008), and overlooked in particular within most discussions of pedagogical theory within HE (Boys, 2011).

Yet the fact that physical space has come to be increasingly recognised as a *pedagogical* concern within this relatively specialised academic literature has not typically resulted in any increased role for academics within actual institutional practices. When particular physical spaces are being designed, commissioned or refurbished, such institutional practices remain professionalised and closely controlled by specialist Estates service units. While the Learning Spaces literature does document a range of approaches that might be used to support a greater participation of academics in such processes, for the most part such work has failed to gain traction within mainstream estates management (Bligh, 2014). Yet the practices of mainstream estates management certainly do already recognise the importance of involving academics in more modest ways, within periods of formal consultation. The purpose of such consultation is typically to gain access to the experiences of those academics so as to provide greater insight for ongoing design processes (Leighton & Weber, 1999; Bickford, 2002). This paper examines the experiences of academics who have been asked to participate within such routine consultation processes within their own institutions. These experiences have hitherto been poorly documented within the literature. The paper examines how academics are already able to positively articulate their own voices within these infrastructural

processes, and discusses how the form taken by consultation serves to neutralise those voices to a considerable degree.

In particular, this paper focusses on the experiences of those we term academic *denizens* (cf. Bligh, 2014). By this, we indicate a particular focus on those academics whose opinion is sought because they *inhabit* the spaces that are the object of inquiry, yet who do not possess any particular expertise in spatial design. These denizens possess an intimate, embodied knowledge of practice within particular spaces, but experience a state of relative disempowerment within estates management consultation processes when working alongside estates professionals, senior managers, and commissioned architects.

The data for this paper is drawn from semi-structured interviews with academics from four Universities across the UK and Ireland. An active interviewing strategy was used as the basis for the semi-structured interviews (Cousin, 2009). The main interview questions were organised around initial themes such as the participants' experiences and perceptions of design teams and committees, being asked to participate, client-architect relationships, architectural 'grand statements', promoting the institutional brand, student experience and demands, space conflicts, how their views of institutional space changed as a result of their involvement, and their motivation for further contributions towards such processes in future. These themes formed only a loose framework for discussion, with participants' responses probed for further information as the basis for iterative development of the themes themselves.

It is crucial to the argument of the paper that the estates management processes that these denizens have experienced are themselves a part of the *infrastructure* of the institution. While the support these processes provide to the wider activities of Universities is crucial, most people within the institution will rarely become consciously aware of those processes unless a breakdown occurs (Engeström, 2008). Established work on institutional infrastructures and social agency will be used as the starting point for analysis. Reportage of findings will be organised around Engeström's (2008) categories of distribution infrastructure, exchange infrastructure and production infrastructure. We shall characterise the distribution infrastructure as relating to *policy-level Estates strategies*—drawing attention to participants' perceptions of pressure to support institutional mission and status, and the management of cost. We shall argue that the exchange infrastructure is constituted within the *procedural norms of campus planning*—including the constraining influence of committee structures and historically-influenced space conflicts between denizens and other stakeholders. We shall describe the production infrastructure as tied up within *formal and professionalised recipes* for estates production—characterised by formalised "project programming" processes and an attendant separation of denizens from concrete decision-making.

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