

## Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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A Critical and Hauntological Perspective on New-build HE Spaces

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**Research Domain:** Academic practice ,work, careers and cultures (AP)

**Abstract:** The expansion of university estates over the last ten years can be viewed as a phenomenon connected to the ‘massification’ of HE (Leach 2013) but also to its commodification as HEIs compete for students in a mass-marketised (Tomlinson 2017) environment where income depends on student numbers. But what do these newly built HE spaces tell us about the meaning and connected activities of teaching & learning and working in higher education?

This paper draws on research carried out at a West Midlands modern university and contrasts the rhythms and ‘feel’ of two of its campuses through the use of walking interviews with staff and timelapse photography. Data from the campuses (one is now demolished) is contrasted providing insights into how ‘conceived’ HE space (Lefebvre 1991) is changing before a theoretical commentary is developed about some of the hauntological (Fisher 2009, Gordon 2008) consequences of these changes.

**Paper:**

**Context**

This paper positions the latest expansion of HE estate in a strand of educational policy that connects with the *Building Schools for the Future* (BSF: 2005-2010) and *Building Colleges for the Future* (BCF: 2008-2009) initiatives. Both these earlier policy initiatives produced buildings that ideologically express a particular vision of what educational space should look like. The instrumentalist purpose of education that underpins this vision maps across to the process of ‘neoliberalisation’ (Peck 2010) and marketisation in education (Tomlinson 2017) that has characterised the last quarter century –

particularly in England.

Rather than originating in centralised policy-making, the expansion of HE estate nationally can be characterised more specifically as a product of the marketization of the sector. These new-build campuses are a de-centred institutional response to a competitive environment in which students are attracted by the facilities on offer, but also and more nebulously, by the aura and allure of the meaning of 'being a student' that is conjured up by their glazed façades and bustling atria. Faced by these changes, staff also face a need to adapt to environments that are sometimes not conducive to teaching and learning (see Smith 2017). To that extent, they communicate important messages about the commodification of HE and the conceived role of HE teachers.

### **Research Methodology & theoretical perspectives**

The paper draws on data from two campuses of the university. Data was gathered with members of staff wearing a bodycam in accompanied walking interviews. Timelapse video was used to provide an appropriate form of data (Jewitt et al 2009) that could capture movement in particular *institutionally constitutive* spaces: the campus library, at the external entrance and in the main 'social learning' space.

This paper focuses on specific elements of the project data from staff to develop a critical comparison of the institutionally constitutive spaces of two campuses: one which at the time of the project was in the last months of use and was 60% 'mothballed' and one of the new-build campuses in a different part of the city which in its social learning spaces and atria typify some of the key characteristics of the current wave of HE new-builds.

### **Theoretical perspectives**

Hauntology takes a theoretical position that, through encounters with text, artefacts and events, explores how the present contains within it an imagining of the future and also a residue of the past. Fisher's 2012 essay *What is Hauntology?* explains how haunting signals possible futures:

*The future is always experienced as a haunting: as a virtuality that already impinges on the present, conditioning expectations and motivating cultural production. (Fisher 2012: 16)*

The experience of haunting as the recognition of an absence, often signalling a lack of closure in the present, is explored by Gordon (2008). Gordon equates her approaches with Benjamin's materialist historiography (Benjamin 2015), seeing it as a:

*reciprocal relationship between the type of thinking the analyst employs ready for the shock and moment of understanding and the animating role of the life or the era or the events the analysts confronts. (Gordon 2008: 66)*

In the next section I develop a brief commentary on some examples from the data.

### **Findings and discussion**

Participants in the walking interviews from the project were asked to lead the interviewer to places of significance in their workplace. For the participant in the new-build campus, one such space was the stairwell designated as a fire escape route.

### [Figure 1](#)

The stillness and quiet of this space were qualities that were not easily produced in the participant's staffroom. The necessity of entering a stairwell to find a space for reflection in an HE environment denotes a general absence in the 'conceived' space of the designers of the building. Here, quiet and stillness, ironically in an under-used 'public' part of the building, facilitated intellectual labour: it was a place for thinking (see Dakka and Smith 2019). A hauntological reading of this encounter suggests that the conceived space of the new-build encodes an imagined future in which the labour of academics (at modern 'teaching intensive'?) universities does not require private space or seclusion. Their workspace is materialised as social and interactive at all times. This is also seen in collective spaces: grandiose atria, social learning spaces, even (broadly speaking) libraries.

The participant in the old and soon-to-be-abandoned campus quite separately sought out a similar location. Travelling up in a lift to the eighth floor of a half empty building (only the first four floors were in use) afforded a view over the neighbourhood: an arterial road and flyover and a huge shopping centre.

### [Figure 2](#)

For this participant, the sense of quiet was not an escape but rather, provided historical echoes from a teaching experience in a further education college. In a similar, competitively marketised setting, enrolments had fallen and the college had felt deserted. This immediately preceded a funding crisis, redundancies and ultimately the relocation of the college to new-build premises.

The hauntological significance of the space in this case relates to a sense of the bigger cycle of change, renewal, waste and abandonment that marketization entails and the impact of this on educational settings and careers. The view from the upper storey window is a historiographical one in Benjamin's sense. This moment of arrest 'crystallises the social gist' (Gordon 2008: 65) of the panorama.

Similarly the new-build social learning space (below) contrasts in its bustle with the abandoned library space of the old campus. The social learning space is *institutionally constitutive* as it is overlooked: designed to make students visible to each other as subjects caught up in the flow and illuminated by the aura of the HE experience, conjuring an embedded identity into being.

### [Figure 3](#)

Like atria, social learning spaces only make sense as peopled spaces. They are dependent for their meaning on 'footfall' and find their meaning in movement, exchange and interaction.

### [Figure 4](#)

In that sense, the abandoned library is the shadow, the complementary counterpart to the bustling atria. The two spaces are co-dependent and interdependent components of a marketised environment that encompasses both decline and growth.

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