

**The Physical University: Contours of space and place in higher education**, edited by Paul Temple, Abingdon, Routledge, 2014, 248pp., £90 (hbk), ISBN 978-0-415-66231-4; £68.73 (ebk), ISBN 978-1-315-81377-6

The markers of city respectability change over time. At one time, to be a city was to be marked by the presence of a cathedral, preferably dominating the landscape for miles around. Then, every self-respecting city looked to possess a grand railway station, symbolic of travel and social change. Subsequently, no city would be without its large shopping mall. Even the architecture of those buildings had a passing resemblance over time: large supermarkets, not to mention railway stations, could sometimes be seen to be borrowing architectural features from cathedrals. And now so it is with the university: each town with any pretensions to status and significance looks to have its own university. The presence of a university is now *pari passu* with part of the meaning of a city.

But, we may note, even in this digital age, it is bricks, glass and steel, and preferably large imaginative structures, that are sought. The university is still associated with physical structures, as both occupying a space in some region of a town and as having a strong presence through those structures. There is local pride at work here. Inhabitants of the town may never frequent the university environs but there would be sentiments felt in relation to it, both of economic vitality and of life chances. The physical presence of a university conveys symbolic power. However, we have little understanding of the effects of the physical university, of its impact on the life of the institution itself and of those who work and study within it, and on the wider environment. The buildings budget – the capital spend – within a system of higher education might run to some billions of pounds (or its equivalent in the national currency) but of the value (as against the cost) of such physical structures, we know very little. This book, accordingly, is exceptionally timely.

Among the topics raised by the 12 chapters of this volume are the relationships between the university as place and as space; the matter of learning space; ways in which the physical layout of a campus can affect social interactions (either encouraging, say, serendipitous encounters, or constraining, or even preventing some social activities); environmental sustainability; the university as a site of culture; the physical character of the university as a reflection of fundamental ideas about its social purpose and meaning; pockets of resistance to overt features of a university campus; and interactions with the wider locale across an increasingly fuzzy border around 'the campus'. Key, though, to the overall power and significance of this volume is the conceptual level at which the contributors make their mark. A wide gamut of concepts are brought into play and, in the process, this book opens out a new field of the university as a site of spatial studies.

A key theme of this volume is that implied in its sub-title: to what degree and in what ways might a university as a physical space *become* a space? That is, how might we account for the university in its physical form affecting those who inhabit it, such that they come to form some sentiments towards their university? After all, when individuals who have had some association with a university, whether as student, manager, or academic, reflect on that experience, do they not quite frequently recall particular physical points across the university environs? And such recollections may go beyond formal parts of the structure such as spaces in the library, a particular office, a memorable lecture in an auditorium, or even a sports hall. The volume includes a brilliant chapter by Zhongyuan Zhang, pointedly entitled: "Let's go for the Chicken-Drum": The everyday production of social space in a Chinese University'. The invitation in the chapter's title is a reference to an informal and somewhat subversive snack area and, in particular, a night-stall that became a social centre for students, representative of a different and oppositional set of values from those of the university itself. Non-profit, messy, 'shabby' and run-down: the café became a space for collective meaning-making and identity-formation among the students.

An important feature of this volume is the way in which Paul Temple, as its editor, has brought together experts from a wide variety of specialities. Perspectives that contributors bring to bear include those of environmental sustainability studies, space and spatial studies (drawing on social theory), architecture, history of university systems, learning spaces, planning, philosophy of the university, and cultural studies. The book is not merely a multidisciplinary venture but is an interdisciplinary project, with many of the discussions straddling and criss-crossing these various sub-fields. Perhaps a next step would be to see if some meta-concepts can be developed so as to form the field as a trans-disciplinary inquiry.

The eclectic nature of this collection is a considerable strength, for it includes, as implied, a wide variety of intellectual approaches. Here, the old categories of hard/soft and pure/applied come to mind. Some chapters are hard and applied, for instance, in offering insight into the ways in which the hard sciences can help to monitor the performance of buildings; some chapters are more soft and applied, for instance in reviewing the design and architecture of entire university environs and the opportunities that they afford for social interactions, or in analysing the display of cultural artefacts in the grounds of universities; still other chapters are soft and pure, deploying a rich medley of concepts. It is striking how spatial studies of academic life are revealed as having subversive and even oppositional potential. Several of the chapters draw tellingly on the work of the Marxist, Henri Lefebvre, whose 'social ontology of space' opened vistas of rights and possibilities of space being exploited by inhabitants, often so as to subvert the dominant spatial messages of a set of surroundings.

This is a tremendous book. For anyone interested in universities as a physical place, there is surely something here. I just hope that the publishers will soon issue a paperback edition so that it can become accessible to the wide audiences that it deserves.

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