



Architecture and Politics Workshop – July 15th 2009
Birkbeck College
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'If you put MPs in a palace, they are going to behave like princes and princesses.'

This view has no doubt gained wider support in the wake of the allowances and expenses scandal at Westminster. The impact of architecture and public space on political behaviour was one of a range of themes addressed at a recent workshop on Architecture and Political Representation held at Birkbeck College. Connections between buildings and behaviour are frequently mooted in politics. One of the most well-known theses suggests an adversarial chamber such as Westminster's encourages adversarial politics, in contrast to the more consensual politics supposedly facilitated by legislative chambers arranged in a semi-circle or 'banana' shape. While speculation about such influences and connections is a popular pastime, surprisingly little scholarly work has been conducted on these issues. One group setting out to change this is the Gendered Ceremony and Ritual in Parliaments research group, funded by The Leverhulme Trust over four years. Composed of ten academics and PhD students at Birkbeck, Warwick, Sheffield and Bristol Universities, the group aims to develop comparative analyses of the parliaments of India, South Africa and the UK as distinct cultural and architectural institutions. The research programme is sponsoring a series of workshops and seminars, the latest of which was the Architecture and Political Representation event.

Four academics at the leading edge of this interdisciplinary field presented their current research. On the first panel was Jane Rendell (Bartlett School of Architecture, UCL), who presented her paper, 'Trafalgar Square: Détournement (A Site-Writing)', and Linda Mulcahy (Law, Birkbeck College), 'Legal architecture and restraint of the uncontrollable impulse of the feminine'. These papers considered various aspects of the social and cultural assumptions built into architecture and urban spaces. In particular, Jane Rendell explored how the concept of 'site writing' can be used to inject reflexivity into the critical interpretation of architectural norms. She juxtaposed traditional accounts of the monuments in Trafalgar Square with reflections on recent protests that had taken place therein and the wars that the UK is involved in Iraq and the situation of the Palestinians. Lynda Mulcahy's paper examined the effects of the architecture and layout of courtrooms on the practice of 'judgecraft'. Her paper showed how ostensibly neutral physical spaces express changing notions about the role of courtroom participants. Two examples were the entry of women's bodies into new zones and the marginalised role of the public indicated by their increasingly restricted viewing gallery. Nirmal Puwar, author of *Space Invaders: Race, Gender and Bodies Out of Place*, helped to lead off the discussion.

On the second panel was John Parkinson (Politics, University of York), who presented a paper entitled, 'Space and place, cues and nudges: the relationship

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between physical form and political action.’ This forms part of Parkinson’s on-going research programme, Democracy and Public Space, which explores the links between public space and democratic performance. Georgina Waylen (Politics, University of Sheffield), and a member of the Gendered Ceremony and Ritual in Parliaments research group, presented her paper, ‘Building New Democracies: Understanding Symbols and Space?’. A central issue taken up by these papers was the relationship between the physical environment and political action. Parkinson argued that political buildings and spaces do influence the behaviour of its participants, but only insofar as reinforcing dominant norms and values. Employing two parliament buildings as case studies – the Reichstag in Germany and Stormont in Northern Ireland – Waylen’s paper examined the importance of the construction and control of symbols in building democracy. The papers prompted spirited discussion amongst participants about the importance of buildings and symbols vis-à-vis other political factors, and about the subjective meaning of buildings: the buildings are often less important than the stories told about them and the crucial issue lies with who has control over authoring and narrating the stories. There was also discussion about different epistemological and methodological approaches to the study of space, architecture and politics.
