

## @: Places of Learning

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Things that resist keyword searches can be telling. Search for ‘university architecture’ and you will be provided with an extensive list of university departments of architecture. ‘Harvard architecture’ will take you to accounts of a particular form of computer structure, which is distinguished from von Neumann architecture. The architecture of knowledge has become very largely an abstract or immaterial affair. And yet, no university can be fully ‘open’, for it must always represent a concentration of knowledge as well as a means of distributing it. Even when a university has become ubiquitous, beyond the point of having any local habitation, the institution of the university will still harbour the idea of the concentration of knowing. The internet is not a university.

Of course universities like to represent themselves as places where knowledge and knowing are made accessible. The function that is often fulfilled by the embodied architecture of knowledge to be found in universities is that of the sequestered open. The university represents a pocket of apartness within an otherwise open field of information exchange, though its function is not to retard but selectively to accelerate the exchange of knowledge. The economics of the database in principle means that I can read a rare seventeenth century book like Nathaniel Fairfax’s *The Bulk and Selvedge of the World* anywhere where I can get an internet connection. But in fact, I need also to have credentials that allow me to log in to the Early English Books Online database, which may require me to be a member of a particular constituency. Seamus Heaney’s ‘Villanelle for an Anniversary’, written to celebrate the 350th anniversary of the founding of Harvard, deploys these opposites of openness and closure, hardness and the softness of spirit. The ‘here’ of Harvard Yard is a place where you imagine the kind of location it is, a place of layered, spectral coincidences:

A spirit moved, John Harvard walked the yard,  
The atom lay unsplit, the west unwon,  
The books stood open and the gates unbarred.

The maps dreamt on like moondust. Nothing stirred.  
The future was a verb in hibernation.  
A spirit moved, John Harvard walked the yard [...]

Begin again where frosts and tests were hard.  
Find yourself or founder. Here, imagine  
A spirit moves, John Harvard walks the yard,  
The books stand open and the gates unbarred. (Heaney 1998, 289)

The poem is a touch sentimental to be sure, but the syllepsis of ‘where frosts and tests were hard’ pleasantly correlates the hard and soft senses in which something may be hard.

A university is a place that is not one. A place of learning is a place that leads to nowhere. I am deeply irritated by the word ‘acadeemia’, but it is not a new coinage and aptly evokes the idea of an unfixed region, half place and half idea. There were indeed olive groves, dedicated to Athena, in the place known as the Academy, and this bequeaths to all subsequent universities something of the open air. ‘Let no one enter here who is not a geometer’ is supposed to have been inscribed over the entrance to Plato’s Academy. Since it was first used by Sainte-Beuve in his poem ‘A M. Villemain’ in *Pensées d’août*, the ‘ivory tower’ has got something to do with this imaginary disposition of place (Sainte-Beuve 1837, 152). We owe the ‘Grove of Academe’ to Milton, whose *Paradise Regained* evokes it as part of the withdrawn wisdom of Athens.

Athens the eye of Greece, Mother of Arts  
 And Eloquence, native to famous wits  
 Or hospitable, in her sweet recess,  
 City or Suburban, studious walks and shades;  
 See there the Olive Grove of Academe,  
 Plato’s retirement, where the Attic Bird  
 Trills her thick-warbl’d notes the summer long. (Milton 2008, 351)

Henry Peacham had in fact employed a similar phrase in his 1612 *Minerva Britanna*, in a poem expressing the longing for retreat from the bustle of London – ‘Thy solitaire Academe should be/Some shadie grove, upon the THAMES fair side’ (Peacham 1612, 185).

And yet, at the same time, there is a powerful pull to space and place in thinking about learning and knowing. One ‘graduates’, one gains ‘degrees’: one has an ‘area’ of specialism. The university often functions as a map of the orders of knowledge. The Bodleian Quadrangle in the University of Oxford distributes the classical subjects of the medieval university around its doors (in my day the Schola Astronomiae et Rhetoricae marked the gents lavatory, but I believe it is nowadays the gift shop). The spaces of knowledge are guarded and defended, against the assaults of doubters and opponents, and the incursions of the unqualified. There remains a relation, which it is hard to volatilise entirely, between physical place and the idea of a university. Indeed, we might say that this is in large part the purpose of university architecture - to provide a verbomotor staging of the idea of a university, as a place of approaches, transitions and passages, to provide an animated image of the interface between the hard and the soft locations of learning and understandings of place. Even as solid and seemingly imperturbably perdurable a place as the University of Cambridge is to be understood as a kind of Potemkin village, designed to embody precisely the oxymoronic relation between idea and embodiment: the more actual it seems the more symbolic its solidity seems to be. The role of a Vice-Chancellor has become interchangeable with that of a CEO of a multinational group of companies, nearly always with a large property development portfolio.

The idea that a university might be a kind of insulator, or black box, at once thermodynamic and thaumaturgic, surfaces surprisingly right at the beginning of John Henry Newman’s *The Idea of a University*, in which Newman speaks of the advantage accruing to the Protestant North from their need for physical seclusion:

Where the sun shines bright, in the warm climate of the south, the natives of the place know little of safeguards against cold and wet. They have, indeed, bleak and piercing blasts; they have chill and pouring rain, but only now and then, for a day or a week; they bear the inconvenience as they best may, but they have not made it an art to repel it; it is not worth their while; the science of calefaction and ventilation is reserved for the north. It is in this way that Catholics stand relatively to Protestants in the science of Education; Protestants depending on human means mainly, are led to make the most of them: their sole resource is to use what they have; "Knowledge is" their "power" and nothing else; they are the anxious cultivators of a rugged soil. It is otherwise with us; "*funes ceciderunt mihi in præclaris.*" We have a goodly inheritance. (Newman 1996, 16-17)

But the university has become since Newman was writing, and perhaps was already beginning to become while he was writing, a very different kind of institution, with a very different set of spatial relations to its environment. A university used to be a place where knowledge was shored up. Robert Burton thought the Fens a good place for a university because its cloying and fetid atmosphere would reinforce the workings of memory. But the university has become a means of passage, a kind of airport, its inhabitants at any one time constituting a Larkinian 'frail travelling coincidence' (Larkin 1990, 116). The university has become less a monastery than a kind of factory: less a black box than a transmitter, existing in a complex sociospatial ecology with its apparent outside. Might we in fact begin to consider the university, in its specifically topographic aspects, a medium?

The university has become ever more a kind of virtual place. Academics travel much more than your average lawyer or banker, albeit on much cheaper airlines, and increasingly, since its formation in 2002, the enactment of this is the eduroam network. Eduroam was originally established under the auspices of TERENA, the Trans-European Research and Education Networking Association, and is now managed by GEANT, which connects national research and education networks (NRENs) across Europe. Eduroam is principally a distributed authentication system, that allows academic users visiting other universities to use their local credentials to access those local systems. The neatness of the eduroam system is that it requires a one-time login: once you have established a link between a particular device and your home institution, it will automatically connect you to the local network. No matter what campus you may find yourself in, jetlagged, weary and disorientated, no matter how stubbornly the embedded sound files in your Powerpoint presentation may refuse to play, your phone or laptop will be telling you that you are back home, dunroamin in eduroam. My friend, the Birkbeck crystallographer Alan MacKay, discover of five-fold symmetry in nature, where it has no right to be, an early visionary of open access who back in the 1980s was pushing hard for all publicly-funded scientists to declare their work in the public domain, was insisting that he was a citizen of no nation state, but of the floating Republic of Knowledge. We are seeing the disembedding of this polity: following the Brexit vote, where the vote to remain was extraordinary concentrated in university locations, nowhere more than in this very place, there were serious reflections on the possibility of certain places, like Oxford, Cambridge and the City of London, seceding from the planned secession, in the hope of remaining exactly where they were, in the nowhere in particular, and resisting deportation back into place. The new politics of place seems to offer a choice between place and the placeless, locations and locutions, astronomy and rhetoric.

One of the most concrete embodiments of the extraterrestrial nature of the Floating Republic of Knowledge is the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena. The JPL is in fact a department of the California Institute of Technology, though its scale and reach dwarf its parent institution. Visiting the JPL, the mailing address of which is 4800 Oak Grove Drive, Pasadena, but which is in fact located, if that is quite the word, 20 miles or so to the north in the town of Flintridge, you can see the next Mars landing vehicle under construction, in a space that is designed to be itself kept under observation. Lest they forget their theatrical function, workers in biosuits work alongside a life-size mannequin, which fulfils their function for when visitors arrive and there is no construction work going on. Mission control communicates with the Curiosity rover on Mars, the Cassini–Huygens mission orbiting Saturn, and the Juno spacecraft orbiting Jupiter, along with the two Voyager spacecraft, now moving into space beyond the solar system. When a real-time simulation of data flows up and down from the various transmission stations round the earth was provided for the public gallery, scientists and technicians demanded one of their own. A sculpture in the reception area shows data flowing downwards and upwards in real-time Lucretian rain.

It is still important to go to particular places in academic life. This was a principle borne in upon me years ago when it was discovered at my previous institution that the largest fieldwork budget by far in the Faculty of Arts had been for years that of the Department of Philosophy. In one sense it is not necessary any more to be as we still quaintly say in many contexts ‘in residence’. At the same time, the capacity to be ubiquitous, or indifferent to place is concentrated in particular places. *Alice in Wonderland* seems to belong to the architecture of Oxford, with its peephole gates in castellated exterior walls, giving tantalising glimpses of glowing green lawns. Cambridge seems much too open to the elements for this kind of play of scales - there are many more three-sided courts than in Oxford, where quads are usually enclosed. Carroll’s Alice engineers a perpendicular encounter between the cramping, claustrophobic order of three-dimensional space and the abstract orders of number:

At this moment the King, who had been for some time busily writing in his note-book, cackled out ‘Silence!’ and read out from his book, ‘Rule Forty-two. *All persons more than a mile high to leave the court.*’

Everybody looked at Alice.

‘I’m not a mile high,’ said Alice.

‘You are,’ said the King.

‘Nearly two miles high,’ added the Queen.

‘Well, I sha’n’t go, at any rate,’ said Alice: ‘besides, that’s not a regular rule: you invented it just now.’

‘It’s the oldest rule in the book,’ said the King.

‘Then it ought to be Number One,’ said Alice.

The King turned pale, and shut his note-book hastily. 'Consider your verdict,' he said to the jury, in a low, trembling voice. (Carroll 1998, 105)

Like all places of mediation, the university is a mediator of place, or place of holomorphic exchanges, distributions and transmissions. It is not so much a heterotopia, a place apart, or a utopia, a no-place, or even a pantopia, an everywhere, but a metatopia, a place for the communication and mediate vehiculation of place itself.

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