

## Chapter 9

Character Building: how accommodating is the FE Newbuild™?

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### **Abstract**

In his seminal essay *Building Dwelling Thinking*, the philosopher Martin Heidegger argues for a relationship between ideas about 'dwelling' and 'building', suggesting "Only if we are capable of dwelling, only then can we build" (Heidegger, 1971: 160). He suggests that the task is "to trace in thought the nature of dwelling" and to ask the question: "what is the state of dwelling in our precarious age?" (Heidegger, 1971: 161). In contemporary post-compulsory education the most demonstrative sign of investment in recent times has been an investment in 'building' and this chapter to some extent is an attempt to "to trace in thought the nature of dwelling" to explore the extent to which high quality accommodation is genuinely accommodating.

Taking these observations as a starting point, this chapter develops a critique of recently built FE colleges in Birmingham and the Black Country.

"When the future's architected by a carnival of idiots on show, you'd better lie low!" (Coldplay, *Violet Hill*)

This chapter addresses the ‘architecturing’ of the future both literally and metaphorically with specific reference to what the title calls ‘the FE Newbuild™’, the proliferation of newly built or considerably improved college campuses. The philosopher Martin Heidegger suggested that an essential relationship exists between ideas about ‘dwelling’ and ‘abiding’ (even ‘building’) on the one hand and ideas about ‘thinking’, even ‘being’ on the other: that who we are is intrinsically bound up with where we are situated (Heidegger, 1971: 143). He is particularly taken by a line from the German poet Hölderlin which simply states “man dwells poetically” further suggesting the situatedness of being human and also the potentially harmonic relationship between our ‘abode’ and notions of ‘health and well-being’ (*ibid.*). If education’s proper subject might be expressed as various kinds of understanding surrounding being human and being alive, this might be a real fine place to start. It may be that this ur-act of ‘inhabiting’ is inextricably bound up with those developments of human potential sometimes called ‘learning’. In fact a tentative hypothesis might suggest that we will ‘work’/ ‘learn’ best when best accommodated, where ‘best’ implies ‘most at home’ since ‘home’ is that special name we give to places in which we are effectively accommodated.

On the face of it this bodes well for contemporary education, or at least the formal part of it. Though there have been significant differences of emphasis both the last Labour government and the subsequent Coalition have committed resources to improving the accommodation provided by schools and colleges whether this be part of the accelerated Academies programme or the 'does-what-it-says-on-the tin' directness of 'Building Schools for the Future'. Thinking explicitly about Post-Compulsory Education provision in Birmingham and the surrounding Black Country, all of the major F.E. players have had major investment in 'bricks and mortar' (and especially glass and steel!). Within a decade the 'rolling stock' of local FE provision has been overhauled, enhanced, or, most often, replaced. And what is not in doubt is that these building 'projects' project, making significant statements both aesthetically and ideologically. These 'grand designs' attest to the significance of PCE in our time, however else they are understood, not least that the 'Lifelong Learning Sector' is the biggest it has ever been and a player to be reckoned with. They are certainly 'grand' architecturally inviting inevitable comparisons with commercial corporate buildings or even cathedrals and temples (of learning?). This is interesting and a little out of kilter with the human proportions implicit in Heidegger's earlier formulation. Before these literally monumental constructions the human is all too easily lost to a feeling

closer to 'awe' as exterior waterfalls and towering atria declare rather than invite.

It is the stated intention of this chapter to explore this apparent contradiction which may reference a tension at the heart of contemporary 'schooling' since 'the schooled society' now stretches significantly beyond schools from the cradle gravewards. Is it possible that objectively 'better' accommodation has failed to make the places we go to be educated more accommodating? The critical methodology I will use is admittedly both speculative and tentative based on theoretical models prompted by the work of Foucault and Lefebvre and on opportunistic observations rather than the systematic garnering of data from stake holders. Thus it is not so much a review of research as a call for more significant and detailed examinations. Though the 'hunch' which prompted this writing hypothesised a building programme consolidating and extending the managerialist foundations of an FE sector servicing economic needs and soothing social ills, there is much here also to engender hope. As ever the resourcefulness of educator-learners and learner-educators engaging in rather than modelling educative experiences within these corporate knowledge foundries is simply inspiring. In the act of inhabitation, even in potentially uninhabitable spaces is the essence of participation, of criticality, of autonomy.

I have a fanciful notion, based on my experience as student, teacher and teacher educator that the key to a productive 'learning environment' is that it pass the 'Cheers' test. The American sit-com, set in a bar, you may recall offered, in its theme song, the idea that "sometimes you want to go where everybody knows your name and everybody's glad you came!" The idea of a place that welcomes you for who you are and which promises active participation seems a pretty good starting point for anyone who wants to encourage learning or even contrive it. If our simplest ambition is to encourage our students to bring as much of themselves as they can into our classrooms, two things surely must follow. The first is that **we** do likewise and then that we work to create and maintain a space which makes these things more likely. In FE one problem is that the physical places in which we meet our students have unhelpful associations, stale smells of pedagogies past: they look and feel like places that were neither welcoming nor safe and then sometimes operate as if the greatest threat to public safety are the students themselves.

There is certainly a world of difference between the cosy refuge offered by *Cheers* and the declamatory rhetoric of the educational 'new build', between the modest and the spectacular and this is not entirely about scale. Guy Debord, who dubbed our contemporary *milieu* '*The Society of the Spectacle*'

does well to remind us that “The spectacle is the flip side of money” since in this case it might help to shed light on the character of these spectacular investments of time, spirit and, especially, money (Debord, 1967: 24). In an educational context where ‘investment’ has largely reconstituted itself as a loaded metaphor (where ‘investments’ are most often in ‘people’ or ‘futures’ or ‘aspirations’) it is as well to return regularly to the real ‘bottom line’.

Governments claim to be ‘investing in education and on the whole we and they believe this to be the case (we ‘buy’ it) but looking more closely this may not be exactly where the money’s going. The truth is, whatever your concerns about accountability or ‘value for money’ that capital projects at best spend their money ‘in support of’ education, enhancing the paraphernalia which may be thought to (but not proven to) further the educative act while ‘education’ remains rather difficult to ‘reach’.

While material resources and the aesthetic impact of award-winning architecture will clearly have an impact, informing both the marketing and market, it would be naïve to see this explicit evidence of investment as unproblematic when judged by its educational outcomes. As critical and reflective practitioners we would do well to be both critical and reflective in the hope of unearthing a few simple and perhaps crucial questions. One such

is the question of 'audience: what has the standard 'corporate splendour' refit to do with a core market of 16 to 19 year olds?

It's a question that gets lost in the generic aesthetic appreciation/ 'shock and awe' engendered by so many of these 'spectacles' where the eager desire to meet the future and its apparent needs might be seen to skilfully divert attention from a more traumatic past and uncertain present. Just as once we were asked to swop local high streets for out-of-town megastores on the grounds that the latter were just significantly/ objectively 'better' (newer, bigger, brighter) versions of the former so we are invited to bury the last fifteen years of FE beneath marble and glass as if it didn't happen. History though is not that easy to outrun even when absorbed by myth: it speaks through every architectural gesture. And here is such a reading, an interpretation.

**"Look on my works ye mighty and despair"**

The famous local lexicographer Samuel Johnson used to argue that most was revealed about a person by listening to them speak, by what they have to say and how this is being said. Applying this same model to the Lifelong Learning Sector opens up an interesting tension in terms of a sector charged with addressing a catastrophic skills shortage, emanating from poor achievement at school and meeting the needs of a cohort who for the first time are being

'required' to continue their unsuccessful educational journey presumably at a more conducive location and in a more appropriate register. How do we think these monumental structures seem to the 'hard to reach'? They certainly have 'volume' but can they hope to find an appropriate 'pitch'? It seems a very difficult match: the only precedent that comes to mind is the relationship between the 'wretched sinner' and the medieval cathedral, a dynamic more unashamedly based on power and hierarchy, an uncompromising and uncompromised path to salvation.

What I don't want to do at this point is to merely to demonise a power hungry corporation but rather to consider the ways in which 'interesting' spaces communicate things about their identities, functions and relationships, whatever their intention. Obviously my initial reading is not the only one available and is presumably a way away from the colleges' own stated intentions. Nor is there any necessary problem with college buildings making powerful statements or even statements about power, certainly 'new builds' add status to a sector often dubbed the Cinderella sector and formerly occupying crumbling Victorian buildings or examples of seventies Brutalism. The philosopher Foucault reminds us that 'power' is not to be seen as a necessarily negative element, that it is productive rather than merely repressive but to be effective must be 'exercised' rather than 'possessed'. For

Foucault power relations make connections and form relationships, surely a useful prompt for those genuinely interested in 'investing' in education. Power is a strategy that, for Foucault, creates and maintains relationships between what he dubs 'the sayable and 'the visible', for example the conversations about/ discourses of education on the one hand and the building we are raising to house them on the other (Kendall & Wickham, 1999: 49-50). What is said and just as importantly what it is possible to say both inside and about 'education' is played out in the structures we create for realising these notions. If the talk is of problems and deficit and compensation it is not surprising that we end up with elegant 'houses of correction'. And of course this is a complex process since the form of the visible does much to determine what it is possible to say within these visible 'technologies of learning'.

As what Foucault would term "a form of visibility", the college New Build™ is involved in a public conversation about education which Nick Peim has dubbed "the master myth of our time" (Peim, 2013: 32). Peim sees these institutions, "the machinery of education" he calls them, as dominating "both the built environment and the social experience" (Peim, 2013: 33). In doing so, they proclaim their "series of specific myths" as a simple cure for complex ills. The register (high declamatory) is relevant here since it 'registers' a significant if unnoticed shift of emphasis at the level of discourse, since myth is essentially a

form of speech. The 'college' is properly a collective noun, denoting a community of scholars (teachers and students), a configuration that cannot ordinarily 'declaim', being inclined more to 'discuss' or 'debate'. The shift from this collective notion to an 'executive' notion is vital to our understanding of a contemporary FE in which the 'college' becomes a physical manifestation of the corporate 'structure', writ large in the landscape. And with the concept of 'corporation' comes all of the corporate superstructure; organisation, livery and ethos. And all this, bizarrely, at the very moment that the FE agenda is focused on those least well served by formal education, the 'client' formerly and briefly known as NEET on the way back from "ne'er-do-well". What will these newly 'christened' 'learners' find when they arrive at the security cordon at the nearly new local FE provider they are obliged to attend? At worst they will find that we have extended the school leaving age entirely to deal with those whose needs formal education has palpably failed to address and that this now merely continues in airier spaces. In fact, at worst, they will find colleges 'braced' for the challenge in the manner that once Roman soldiers on Hadrian's Wall prepared for the 'challenge' of Picts and Scots.

It would be easier to be less cynical if there was any evidence that we'd learnt some kind of lesson with these 'kids': my preferred tag since it is as kids that these 'individuals' [though more accurately largely disadvantaged 'groups'] are

first faced with the displacing *non-sequitur* which is an academic education predicated on somebody else's nation's curriculum. This is not a new problem but it perhaps needs some new solution. Since the emergence of an urban working class in the nineteenth century the two best answers have been either to not feel obliged to bother with people who show no inclination to benefit from formal education or conversely to create an economy which has meaningful work which allows these folks to flourish subsequent to a short spell in school. The current prescription of extended confinement in 'interesting' spaces coupled with more 'difficult' and opportunity-defining tests (where difficult really means more alien and irrelevant) seems unlikely to break the cycle of failure: I mean, of course, a cycle of failure for the system, for governments and, to some degree, even teachers.

You don't need Bourdieu to understand that both 'curriculum' and 'cathedral' are somebody else's dreams and that the more colleges resemble the interesting spaces of Art, the less well will they 'accommodate' their 'learners'. The painful truth is that if the first lesson you learn is that this place is not properly yours nor will ever be, then West Bromwich or Dudley or Wolverhampton will be just as much a prison as Denmark ever was to a Hamlet much more concerned to know who he is than 'accept his responsibilities'. We don't need Bourdieu because we have a rich social realist tradition which

poignantly captures the reality without ever quite convincing us to change tack, in fact the opposite.

In 2018, Billy Caspar, Barry Hines' emblematic 'urchin' immortalised by Ken Loach and David Bradley in *Kes* will be retirement age. If fictional characters could critically reflect what would Billy, or more crucially Hines, have to say about prospects for the working class 'runt' half a century on. In the early eighties, after spending the seventies taught by "belligerent ghouls in Manchester schools" Stephen Patrick Morrissey had this reflection:

"All I learnt was to have no self-esteem and to feel ashamed without knowing why. It's part of being working class, this pathetic belief that somebody else, somewhere, knows better than you do and knows what's best for you"

(Fletcher, 2012: 93-94)

The stately pleasure domes of FE seem unlikely to be places where those forced to stay on, presumably as an extended punishment for their failure, will be consulted about what makes them tick or even what made them fail. Instead they'll be likely offered 'Employability', a subject interestingly never offered the most employable, who find that degrees from the better universities fit this bill nicely. Meanwhile the unemployed and unemployable have their aspirations, or at least their eyes, raised by the promise of salvation.

This for Nick Peim is the most sinister aspect of the education myth, the notion, contrary to all evidence that education is “the key to social salvation”. For Peim, the “glaringly obvious fact” is that “the apparatuses of education are clearly designed to reproduce inequality” (Peim, 2013: 33) . And what more significant embodiment of this than the FE *‘Grand Design, a modern Titanic,* with courses at various levels to suit the public pocket and plenty of room in ‘Steerage’. For so many of these ‘below deck’ types, Peim opines that education is an offer than can be neither refused nor accepted. The desire though is to see these New Builds™ as department stores of education, stocked full with learning (or at least ‘learners’), “the gift that keeps on giving”. Perhaps a metaphor too far? Meet the new structure, same as the old structure.

**“The whole earth is a hospital, endowed by the ruined millionaire”**

Peim is concerned with a process of representation long in the making which portrays those who lack education or fail to dance to its catchy tune as “being in need of reorientation, salvation, and realignment” (Peim, 2013: 38). In this story colleges are reconstituted as treatment centres or community learning hospitals, sanatoria of the soul. Here is the visible manifestation of a trend spotted by Zukas and Malcolm as early as 1999 which creates “the educator as psycho-diagnostician and facilitator of learning” in studied difference to the student, now dubbed ‘learner’, perhaps due to his imagined unwillingness to

learn. Here “the role of the teacher is firstly to diagnose the learner’s needs” and then “to facilitate their learning by using techniques, tools and approaches which meet those needs” (Zukas and Malcolm, 1999a: 3).

‘Diagnosis’ and its family may have a lot to answer for in the context of contemporary FE as the focus of a deficit model of education in which students ‘lack’ and colleges ‘treat’ and ‘fix’, even ‘cure’. In such a world, as Zukas and Malcolm prophesied, the student-learner is “an anonymous, decontextualized and degendered being” whose responsibility is to acquire skills (Zukas and Malcolm, 1999a: 3). And what better place to ‘process’ needs than the ubiquitous anonymous, decontextualized and degendered ‘complexes’ that most colleges have become. Insensitive, even oblivious, to their surroundings, these acts of architectural auteurship scream ‘otherness’ and ‘exclusivity’ to those in need of familiarity and reassurance. In such a place the great divide theory is apotheosised with educators in every sense ‘other’ than student-learners with an emphasis on technologies of learning rather than communities of practice, organisation rather than culture, managing rather than engaging.

Like colonial warehouses which, with their decorated facades and impressive designations (India House, Orient House) give little indication of what lies beneath so these new Workhouses, clearing the streets of the urban poor

(now “socially excluded”), give no outward indication of their role in “population management”. There is a Monty Python sketch about an architect charged with designing a new residential development whose previous experience has been entirely in designing abattoirs. Though the model he presents to the selection panel fits the bill, it only takes a couple of questions to reveal that a key driver of the design is the clean and effective disposal of excess blood. Similarly the New Build™ epitomises the neo-liberal agendas of FE’s recent past: ask not what your college can do for you, rather ask what you can do for your college. These are models of power relationships as clearly as the diagrams of management ‘structures’ which are displayed on the internal walls and moreover these former models are more abiding (effectively permanent).

Roland Barthes famously proclaimed that “the city is a writing and he who moves through it is a kind of reader”(Barthes, 1986: 95): the New Build™ similarly. In the depersonalised environments offered by significant capital investment where ‘hot desking’ has given way to ‘hot rooming’ and most rooms seem to present as ‘laboratories of learning’, one might perhaps believe that learning can be manufactured and achievement guaranteed. Certainly this is not a model in which the so-called learner is required to bring very much of themselves. It is as if the residue of the last ‘student’ reinventions (as

'customers' or 'clients') has returned with a vengeance in buildings increasingly taking their aesthetic from Retail Parks. While we may on occasions think that colleges are places where education is bought and sold, the 'customers' of FE differ from retail customers in one important respect. Retail customers pay their money and collect their goods: that is their role: they are not required to engage and give of themselves to access their goods, their purchases are not obstructed by their attitude or effort. This is a long way from De Certeau's notion of the 'reader' furnishing the rented room of the text "with their acts and memories", filling the imaginative landscapes "with the forests of their desires and goals" (de Certeau 1984, xxi).

#### **"The lunatics are taking over the asylum"**

What cause then to hope? Clearly these 'airy spaces' are not all proving mausolea of the imagination and many will embrace the comfortably new over the even sentimentally inadequate old buildings which opened their doors to learning previously. Also students and teachers will and do find a way to make better (rather than 'proper') use of the facilities, addressing it like any other 'social product'. This is Lefebvre's term taken from his seminal publication *The Production of Space*, where he addresses 'space' as a social *product*, no longer "passive or empty" but rather "part of the relations and force of production" (Lefebvre, 2003: 208). As a Marxist reading of space it appears on the surface

to offer little more than what we already have: culture and ideology are reproduced and redistributed.

However where Lefebvre is intriguing is in his explication of the ways in which space is socially appropriated by those who ostensibly lack ownership of it or dominion over it in spontaneous acts of resistance. Lefebvre raises and acknowledges some of the arguments explicated and implied within this chapter about the relationships between space and power, property and propaganda: in simple terms “It is bought and sold: it has exchange and use value” (Lefebvre, 2003: 208). In Marxist terms he accepts that “social space could be seen as a superstructure, as outcome of forces of production and structures”, manifestations of the dominant mode of production, in this case, capitalism. However, Lefebvre cannot reduce space to a mere product, insisting rather that “space intervenes in production itself” and as such is “not located on this or that ‘level’ or ‘plane’ as defined by traditional hierarchies” (Lefebvre, 2003: 209). Space acts “unevenly, therefore, but everywhere”.

In this way Lefebvre opens up the possibilities that space offers, speculating that it shares these qualities with only a couple of special elements: “Like time? Perhaps! Like language?” (Lefebvre, 2003: 209) So whatever the intentions of state sponsors or architects space acts as “effect, cause and reason, all at once” and “it changes with societies”. And this promises much

for an appreciation of the potential of the hitherto maligned Newbuild™ situated in a brave new FE desperate to expunge its past from the public record since for Lefebvre “The concept of space links the mental and the cultural, the social and the historical” (Lefebvre, 2003: 209). Context, as they say, is all.

Ask anyone who has enacted a ‘Migration Plan’ and taken possession of a bespoke Newbuild™ in the last decade and I suspect they’ll bear witness to what Lefebvre calls “a complex process” and “a process that is gradual, genetic...”. Lefebvre’s model has three key operations:

- *Discovery*: (of new or unknown spaces, of continents or of the cosmos{metaphorically})
- *Production*: (of the spatial organisation characteristic of each society)
- *Creation*: (of *oeuvres*: landscape, the city with monumentality and décor)

(Lefebvre, 2003: 208)

While the contrast between ‘landscape’ and the ‘city’ may be rather less pronounced on most educational builds (though rarely entirely absent), no one across the West Midlands conurbation would doubt their “monumentality and décor”: they are certainly vast and vain. They are also, like all spaces for Lefebvre, “complicated”.

Lefebvre would question the direct connection between a space and its mode of production, challenging the clarity of messages about “the neo-liberal agendas of FE’s recent past” in the spaces these produced. Rather Lefebvre finds that “There are discrepancies; ideologies are interpolated, illusions interposed” (Lefebvre, 2003: 209). In other words he observes the “dialectization of this static picture” with “everything in motion, in contradictions and transformations” (Lefebvre, 2003: 213). In these contradictions possibility and potential persist unpoliced as “space exerts a curious logic” that “does not exclude (far from it) conflicts, struggles and contradictions, nor conversely, agreements, understandings, alliances” (Lefebvre, 2003: 211). In this dialectical interplay reside our hopes for a re-made FE sector and ironically so, given that as the economist David Harvey observes ““One of the curious things about our educational system, I would note, is that the better trained you are in a discipline, the less used to dialectical method you're likely to be” (Harvey, 2010: 12) .

These may indeed be places to learn but only if they’re not places where learning is contained or even delivered. Rather they must be places in which learning and knowledge are discovered, produced and created irrespective of the posturings of policy and patronage. These Newbuilds™ are important contemporary texts and must be treated as such where ‘readings’ are active

and not preordained. De Certeau wrote in *The Practice of Everyday Life* that “Today, the text is society itself. It takes urbanistic, industrial, commercial, or televised forms.” (De Certeau, 1984: 167) . Raymond Williams had argued twenty years before of the importance of studying systems of communication (chiefly public media systems) but also that “society is a form of communication, through which experience is described, shared, modified and preserved” (Williams 1962: 10). “We need to say what many of us know in experience”, Williams argues, “that the struggle to learn, to describe, to understand, to educate is a central and necessary part of our humanity”. For Williams “This struggle is not begun second hand after reality has occurred. It is in itself a major way in which reality is formed and changed”. Perhaps if we can come to understand these Newbuilds™ as texts in our time we can begin to engage in a fundamental way with the way we live, and learn, now.

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