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Multi Public Educational Spaces

23 March 2024

Thank you for your invitation Kaavous and Julia, great to see some old friends and colleagues, and to meet new people I have wanted to meet for a while and completely new people.

Intro slide

I said I would discuss my PhD which I sometimes do in talks, but only superficially, so this is a good occasion to delve back into the material that kept me busy for 6 years, from 2016 to 2022, while I was a director of Open School East. I rarely read from a paper by the way, and I hope to make it as dynamic as possible, but there is so much I want to share that it'll keep me in check to follow my lines. There will however be slides.

My PhD researched models of educational organisations in the UK, historically and today, that have combined the trinal functions of school, community centre, and cultural space. It did so through the analysis of three main case studies: **slide** the late 19th century university settlement **Toynbee Hall** – a residential centre for educational, social, and cultural work among the socioeconomically deprived in Whitechapel, East London; **slide** the 1970s community arts space **Centerprise** – a neighbourhood centre integrating a bookshop, a cafe-bar, literacy and publishing activities, and an advice centre in Hackney, East London; **slide** and the 2010s independent art school and cultural space **Open School East** in Hackney and later Margate, East Kent.

The multi-vision, multi-purpose, and multi-public nature of these three organisations distinguishes them from the more common model by which schools serve students through the means of learning activities, community centres serve members of the local community through the means of social and cultural inclusion activities, and cultural centres serve spectators, viewers, and/or participants through the means of artistic experiences and activities.

In contrast, Toynbee Hall, Centerprise, and Open School East have provided activities and programmes that are simultaneously engaged with learning, social inclusion, and the provision of cultural and artistic experiences, and that concurrently serve people of diverse generations, classes, cultures, and communities of interests; amateurs and professionals; and locals and non-locals. Central to the three case studies' mission is the creation of a space for the cohabitation of diverse uses, publics, and sociabilities. Users converge in one building, perhaps not all at the same time and perhaps in their own, dedicated spaces, but nonetheless with the recognition that they belong, for a time at least, to a community of users of that

building, of that organisation. When the organisation does not have a dedicated space for cross-user socialisation, formal and informal occasions are created for users to congregate, interact with one another, and familiarise themselves with the other activities in the building.

As aspiring micro-societies, these establishments evoke or take inspiration from a range of multi-use spaces infused with democratic ideals of togetherness and of equality of access to education and culture. Historically, one may name the early 19th century phalanstery [slide](#) – an architecture imagined by French utopian socialist Charles Fourier to host self-contained communities working for their mutual benefit and sharing property; the late 19th century people's palace [slide](#) – dedicated to the entertainment, recreation, and education of local residents in areas of socioeconomic deprivation in Britain; or the Brazilian Mission of the Social Service of Commerce (SESC) [slide](#) – created in 1946 to contribute to socioeconomic and cultural development in Brazil and enable the exercise of citizenship. SESCOs continue to exist to this day and include over 600 centres incorporating leisure, learning, cultural, social, and/or lodging facilities. Moving on to more recently created endeavours, one may point to what are known in France as [slide](#) *tiers-lieux*, physical spaces that have emerged in the past seven years to bring under one roof entities and programmes that may include food cooperatives, local manufactures, training, coworking, makerspaces, grassroots social services, social clubs, and cultural activities. Another example one may give are contemporary art centres [slide](#), an increasing number of which have, in the past decade and this time throughout the world, shifted part of their resources away from exhibition-making and towards cultural, pedagogical, and research projects with tangible social outcomes, as well as given over parts of their space to space-less local groups and initiatives.

By the same token, one could argue that today's forward-thinking contemporary art museum [slide](#) too operates a multi-purpose and multi-public model, working across the arts, learning, research, and, increasingly, the social sphere. Yet, and among other factors, despite the museum's efforts to de-compartmentalise its programmes, tasks and specialisms still remain largely segmented: the curator (expected to be trained in curating, conservation, or art history) principally curates, and the learning officer (expected to have skills in a wider range of fields including education, training, and project management) principally plans and oversees activities connected to learning and engagement. Similarly, despite the museum's efforts to take a flexible approach to space use in order to accommodate new forms of engagement and community-building, spatial possibilities are often constrained by conservation needs, including climate-controlled spaces and stores, and by consumer activity, be it retail and catering swallowing up space to the detriment of congregation, or ticket-selling blockbusters favoured over experimental and risk-taking exhibitions.

In contrast, the organisational model under scrutiny in my PhD tends towards versatility, agility, openness, and contemporaneity, and away from constraint, tradition, and commercial interests. It leans towards an ideal of alternativeness, a determination to operate differently, unexpectedly, holistically, and in a reactive manner rather than by design. Specifically, this model is characterised by: a small staff with generalist and/or multitasking skills; spatial flexibility, with rooms often hosting a number of unconnected activities on different days of the week; an informal and often participant-led approach to programming and delivery; an agenda in flux, responding to needs, circumstances, and events as they occur; and, last but not least, material instability. Put differently, and in a nutshell, the type of organisation my thesis enquired into is non-specialist, collaborative, reactive, nimble, and grassroots. Its informal, open-ended, and ever-evolving nature, so crucial to its ethos, can also place a strain on both its human resources and ability to sustain itself financially.

The mixed-model organisations that constituted the object of my enquiry have the particularity of being infused with democratic ideals – in that they are public, aimed at civil society, preoccupied with equality and accessibility, and participatory in form – as well as with utopian ideals of the good life, of collective emancipation, and of togetherness in difference (Muñoz, 2020). Accordingly, these organisations have much in common with what geographer Kurt Iveson describes as a “multi-public model of public space” (Iveson, 2014, p.189). This model is informed by feminist philosophers Nancy Fraser and Iris Marion Young’s critique of philosopher Jürgen Habermas’ conception of the liberal public sphere, whereby slide “good public space is considered as space which is open and accessible to all, with social difference ignored” (ibid, p. 188); a model that Fraser and Young deemed exclusionary and bourgeois.

In contrast, multi-public public space is envisioned as facilitating “the interaction of a number of publics” (ibid, p. 189) as well as the emergence of what Fraser calls “subaltern counterpublics”.. Fraser postulates that the coexistence of multiple publics is a prerequisite for egalitarian societies. In her view, slide “egalitarian societies [...] are classless societies without gender or racial divisions of labor. However, they need not be culturally homogeneous” (Young, p. 68). Similarly, Young advocates for a culturally heterogeneous and inclusive model in which difference is embraced, dissension is valued, and “complete mutual understanding” isn’t aspired to (Young, 1990, p. 241). Young’s proposed model of public space is expressed by a metaphor: that of “an ideal of city life”. By city life, Young means the slide “being together of strangers in openness to group difference” (ibid, p. 256): slide “Their being together entails some common problems and common interests, but they do not create a community of shared

final ends, of mutual identification and reciprocity” (ibid, p. 238).

In my thesis, I used the shorthand ‘multi-public educational and cultural spaces’ to refer to the organisational model I have just described. **Multi-public**, that is to say generating interactions and not just simple cohabitation between publics, and expanding discursive space through representation of the margins (Fraser, 1990; Iveson, 2014). As geographer Doreen Massey posits: **slide** “Without space, no multiplicity; without multiplicity, no space” (2005, p. 9). **Educational** for the reason that, if the organisations under scrutiny in the PhD are simultaneously engaged with learning, welfare, and cultural production, education remains at the core of their plural mission and the main process by which one gets involved with them. Becoming a published writer, a community leader, or an artist; taking part in a campaign for housing rights; attending a lecture series on cooperative economies or anti-racism; or joining a trade union: these are some of the outcomes of one’s involvement with Toynbee Hall, Centerprise, and Open School East, and the direct development of one’s self-actualisation; social or political awakenin;; and choice to self-educate. Lastly, **space**, for the organisations’ physical anchorage in their respective locality is key to their identity and narrative. Indeed, all three case studies have developed and adapted their approach and outputs in relation to their neighbourhood’s demographics, socioeconomics, and infrastructure. Further to that, their building – in Toynbee Hall’s case part-converted, part-purpose-built **slide**, and in Centerprise and Open School East’s **slide** cases barely converted from their original and/or previous uses – has dictated some of the activities, uses, and behaviour that have populated these organisations. As each has developed into a neighbourhood hub, they have in turn affected local social life.

The mutually constitutive nature of spatiality and sociality within these organisations, or what Edward Soja (1980) calls **slide** “socio-spatial dialectic”, echoes David Harvey’s conception of space – defined here as **slide** “the material forms that processes assume ‘on the ground’ as buildings, infrastructure, consumption sites and so on” – as **slide** “both cause and effect in/of social life” (Castree, 2008, p. 183). Multi-public educational and cultural organisations further resonate with Massey’s formulation of space as **slide** “the product of interrelations; as constituted through interactions” (2005, p. 9); **slide** “as the sphere of heterogeneity” (ibid, p. 99); and, last but not least, “as always under construction”:

Slide Precisely because space [...] is a product of relations-between, relations which are necessarily embedded material practices which have to be carried out, it is always in the process of being made. It is never finished; never closed. Perhaps we could imagine space as a simultaneity of stories-so-far (Massey, 2005, p. 9).

Continuing with the theme of spatial qualities and metaphors, let us turn to feminist scholar Sara Ahmed's critical analysis of institutional space. In her study of the misalignment between institutional values and practices, Ahmed considers the institution in its physicality, using the dual metaphor of an organic body and machine: **Slide** "Both metaphors work to convey an entity that is made up of parts, where the communication between parts is essential to an overall performance" (2012, p. 28). Bearing in mind that Ahmed has dedicated much of the past twelve years deconstructing and denouncing structural violence and power abuse in academia (2012; 2019; 2021), the other material components of the institution she turns towards as metaphors are hard, sharp, and cold. They include: doors – closed to complaints and open for the progression of some, but not others; blinds – spelling opacity and exposure to potential harassment; filing cabinets – standing for institutional closets; and brick walls – against which diversity officers (the subject of her 2012 study) bang their head. Resistant to flows and change, the institutional space discussed by Ahmed is a far cry from Massey's hopeful and poetic, yet purely conceptual, metaphor for space as 'a simultaneity of stories-so-far'. Both nonetheless provide perspectives from which to apprehend, study, and critique the idealistic multi-public educational space, and contribute to shaping a version of its future.

Some considerations on the term alternative

The anthropologists Esther Fihl and Jens Dahl have defined alternative spaces as: **Slide**

'in-between' spaces rather than oppositional structures, and as such both 'inside' and 'outside' its constitutive elements. The in-between position potentially gives the 'members' of the alternative spaces the possibility of controlling their own agenda without engaging in open conflict with the existing dominant structures. [...] As alternative spaces are found to be nurtured by the very power structures that they potentially react against, however [...] [they] are not sites for revolution or rebellion as such; they are, rather, sites of volatile resistance linked to other forms of power that lies in the ability to manoeuvre just outside of the dominant institutions or systems (2013, pp. 2-3).

Writing about alternative education and its tendency to be "pitched as a binarised 'other'" to mainstream education **slide** (Kraftl, 2013, p. 5), geographer Peter Kraftl similarly calls for alternative learning spaces and approaches to be both "connected and disconnected from the 'mainstream'" (ibid, p. 3). In their book **slide** *Alternative Education for the 21st Century* (2009), educationalists Philip Woods and Glenys J. Woods identify three possible orientations for

alternative forms of education, namely “separation, engagement, and activist” (2009, p. 228). The first one entails distance from non-alternative forms of education which, the authors suggest, doesn't preclude mutual influence between educational systems, but nonetheless stresses the creation and maintenance of an autonomous educational environment. The second one indicates an engagement between systems through “pragmatic relationships” (ibid, p. 229); here the authors take the example of a Steiner school entering the publicly-funded sector. Lastly, the third one is about “a wider social aim” (ibid), which is the infiltration of alternative pedagogical approaches, visions, and practices in mainstream education. Woods and Woods illustrate this final activist orientation with the recognition and subsequent use of Indigenous knowledge in Euro- or Western-centric schooling.

Slide Besides my three main case studies, I also looked at micro case studies in France, the UK, the US and Canada. One which is dear to me, because of its link to horticulture, a field I have been training in for the last three years, is the Village College.

The concept of the Village College was invented by Henry Morris, Cambridgeshire's Chief Education Officer between 1922 and 1954. During his appointment, five Village Colleges were created in the county, and three more were established after his retirement. Morris envisioned the Village Colleges as taking:

Slide all the various vital but isolated activities in village life – the School, the Village Hall and Reading Room, the Evening Classes, the Agricultural Education Courses, the Women's Institute, the British Legion, Boy Scouts and Girl Guides, the recreation ground, the branch of the County Rural Library, the Athletics and Recreation Clubs – and, bringing them together into relation, [to] create a new institution for the English countryside (Ree, 1973, p. 154).

Slide In his *Village College Memorandum* (1925), Morris delineated the contours of what he hoped would become an expansive movement. It started from the recognition that education in rural zones was deficient. Morris argued that country children had the choice of going to school in towns, but that they came out equipped with skills that bore no relation to working in the countryside. His concerns also extended to the poor provision of adult education in rural areas, the absence of a corresponding movement to the Workers' Educational Association, and the isolation of social agencies. In an article entitled “Institutionalism and Freedom in Education”, published in *New Ideas Quarterly* in 1926, Morris shared his vision for education to be “conterminous with life” and to mean “the attempt, critical and constructive, to increase

the sum and enhance the quality of good life” (Morris cited in Ree, 1984, p. 38-40). Associating education with other constituents that make life worth living – “art, literature, music, recreation, festivals” (ibid, p. 39) – and adorning this vision with buildings whose architecture and interior design would be of “permanent benefit [to] our visual environment” (ibid, p. 105) was part of Morris’ programme. Morris was after excellence; his “communal space of right living” (Matless, 2016, p. 325) not only required outstanding architecture and art – Morris would lend artworks to the colleges from his own collection as well as commission new works (Matless, 2016) – but also enlightened leadership.

Slide Impington Village College was the fourth college to be built. Morris commissioned a major figure of the Modernist movement, Walter Gropius, the former director of the Bauhaus, to build it. Collaborating with British architect Maxwell Fry, Gropius made plans for a one-storey building following the finger plan – thin corridors leading to a number of classrooms and at the tip of the building, a swimming school and a gymnasium, all looking out onto the gardens and surrounding woods. The adult wing was in the north part of the building alongside the hall, and was connected to the main school through a central promenade that functioned both as a passageway and a social space connecting learners and teachers of all generations (Read, 1943; Ree, 1973; Burke and Grosvenor, 2008). The college, which opened in 1939, was described as “a chaste and severe, but intense [...] masterpiece” by Morris (cited in Burke and Grosvenor, 2008, p. 87), and “the pattern of much to come” by architectural historian Nikolaus Pevsner (cited in Ree, 1973, p. 77), who further qualified it as “one of the best buildings of its date in England, if not the best” (cited in Burke and Grosvenor, 2008, p. 87).

In the chapter of *Education Through Art* (1943) dedicated to Impington, art historian and literary critic Herbert Read describes the general features of the college, which he argues every school, whether rural or urban, should adopt. These include the aforementioned promenade; the hall – “with seating capacity for the whole school together with parents and other members of the regional community”; the withdrawing room – “a place where the pupil can retire to read or meditate undisturbed”; recreation rooms (i.e. table tennis, billiard and card rooms); and “the vegetable garden [and] horticultural and stock breeding stations” (Read, 1943, p. 293).

Conclusion

I would like to finish by trying to answer the question What Makes a Space Alternative?

Earlier, I outlined the characteristics of the organisational model under exploration as follows:

Slide

1. Run by a small staff with generalist and/or multitasking skills;
2. Resorting to an informal and often participant-led approach to programming and delivery;
3. Subject to a fluctuating agenda – responding to needs, circumstances, and events as they occur;
4. Demonstrating spatial flexibility, with rooms often hosting a number of unconnected activities on different days of the week;
5. Frequent exposure to unsteady finances.

Put differently, the values of multi-public educational and cultural spaces could be described as:

Slide

- 1- Versatile, responsive, nimble
- 2- Agentive
- 3- Open-ended, ever-evolving
- 4- In-between

I'll start with the first set of qualities: **Versatile, Responsive, Nimble**

Looking back at my three case studies, Toynbee Hall, Centerprise, and Open School East had in common the simultaneous running of programmes and activities directed at varied groups and audiences of diverse generations. For instance, Open School East brought together under one roof a development programme for adult artists; a crafts class for children; lectures, seminars, and skills-based workshops; an accredited art, design, English, and maths programme for adolescents; and participatory, locally-focused creative projects.

In all three cases, new programmes, activities, and uses were added as needs and opportunities arose. Being small-staffed, decisions could be made promptly, and being multi-function in nature, the organisations did not shy away from reorganising their schedule or space as and when needed; in other words, they were nimble at heart. Meanwhile, existing programmes, activities, and facilities were routinely fine-tuned, reshaped, replaced, or discontinued, again according to need and in response to users' feedback. Accordingly, change, diversification, accumulation, and superimposition superseded fixity, repetition, and sobriety which, in turn, came with the risk of making the organisation illegible, chaotic, burnout

inducing, and harder to fundraise for.

In order to cater for the multifarious cultural and educational offer of the organisation, staff needed to have versatile skills and dispositions. Focusing again on Open School East, during my time, the directors simultaneously acted as managers, fundraisers, programmers, mentors to the associates, and artists' liaisons. All other roles within the organisation also involved a wide variety of tasks from safeguarding and pastoral care, to marketing and communication, through to technical and practical support, leading to the regular rewriting of job descriptions and contracts to reflect the changed positions. While dynamic and skills-inducing, the wearing of too many hats came with the risk of loss of consistency and quality, and to the staff firefighting rather than meticulously attending to their respective areas of work and specialism.

Moving on to the term **Agentive**

Central to the mission of the three organisations was a commitment to developing learners and users' agency. Open School East's contribution to agency-building materialised in the learner-centred and self-directed nature of its programmes. Engaging the young associates to take part in projects through which to reflect their lived experiences and inscribe themselves in the narrative of the changing town was one aspect of it. Enabling the associates to take a leading role in the choice of guests, formats, and themes, or letting children lead Open School East in taking its first steps in understanding safeguarding were further examples of the organisation's participant-led approach. Those who went through OSE's programmes not only expanded their base of knowledge and artistic and critical skills, but also, and perhaps more importantly, they became decision-makers, producers, facilitators, and hosts, which led a number of them to subsequently set up their own organisations and informal collective spaces.

Then onto **Open-ended and Ever-evolving**

When it comes to the *raison d'être* and the spirit of the foundational years of Open School East, one may qualify it as utopian, according to Rurth Levitas' conception of utopia "as a journey and not a goal", demanding "an open and indeterminate future, which refuses the 'illusory coherence' of a fully worked out alternative" (2013, p. 109). If Open School East responded to a specific problem – the dearth of affordable art education opportunities – the organisation had no pre-defined plan when instituting itself.

Open School East's programmes, projects, and approaches developed organically, following a process of trial and error and of reaction to local as well as national events and

circumstances, be they social, economic, or political. Open School East echoed and probably still echoes today Wright's definition of utopian institutions as "capable of dynamic change", "rather than of institutions which are so perfect that they need no further change" (2010, p. i).

The spirit of open-endedness further manifested in the organisation's pedagogical methods, adopting a critical pedagogy crafted in opposition to formal education, whereby agentivity and self-direction opened the door to multiple forms of learning – collective, intergenerational, bottom-up, deconstructive of established epistemologies, and relevant to the experiences and identities of learners, and therefore fluctuating, indeterminate, and spatially and temporally unconfined.

The final quality of alternative spaces is **In-between**

Earlier, I quoted anthropologists Esther Fihl and Jens Dahl [repeat slide](#).

Open School East can be said to have operated in-between the establishment and the grassroots; it understood power and navigated its structures with the view to directing opportunities at those precisely devoid of power.

Open School East was started thanks to a substantial subsidy granted by a large institution, the Barbican Centre. A handful of people who happened to have started alternative art schools in the UK, either before or around the same time as OSE, would publicly and privately describe Open School East as a sell-out. In their under-nuanced view, spaces could only be truly alternative if fully separated from dominant structures. If the tie with the Barbican Centre was often burdensome, accepting the grant and the requirements that came with it however allowed Open School East to establish the seeds of what would become a sturdy and internationally recognised artists' development programme. After the initial Barbican grant, much of the funds that were raised came from generous and wealthy individuals introduced to the organisation by some of the trustees who were moving in privileged circles. In a time of austerity and high student debt, the organisation appealed to some of those in a position to help and who had witnessed better times for the art education sector. Here again, those funds were used for the educational benefit of a range of individuals ranging from, though not exclusive to, socioeconomically underprivileged children and young people, indebted students, and socially isolated senior citizens.

What has become evident is that the ability for Open School East to straddle the establishment and the grassroots, and to co-opt in order to redistribute, was enabled by the fact that it was set up by people with some form of privilege – be it educational, financial, and/or social. One could argue that without such predispositions and networks, Open School East may have taken a very different form and direction, or folded early on. The question is therefore not just: What makes an alternative space?, but ‘Who can make an alternative space?’. I will end here.