Building Colleges for the Future: Pedagogical and Ideological Spaces

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This article focuses on the *Building Colleges for the Future* (BCF) initiative (2008) which saw a wave of new-build Further Education (FE) colleges spring up across England in the final years of the New Labour government. It draws on qualitative data from a research study focusing on four new-build colleges in the West Midlands of England to theorise the BCF initiative. Using theory derived primarily from Lefebvre, the paper contextualises BCF within a frame of neoliberalisation and discusses the impact of the 'production of space' represented by the initiative with a research focus on two areas: pedagogy and ideology. The main findings are that these new-build colleges can be interpreted as spatial expressions of policymakers and others' perceptions of teaching and learning; in ideological terms, they also trumpet a 'new lifestyle' and a 'new art of living' for FE staff and students that is however, in tension with residual pedagogical practices and values. The article concludes that despite being an expression of neoliberal abstract space, these new-builds can still be seen as providing a frame for alternative individual and collective encounters with education which may subvert and outlast the processes of neoliberalisation that they appear to embody.

Key words: Further Education, Building Colleges for the Future, architecture, abstract space

The Context of the Building Colleges for the Future Initiative

This article will start by touching on a direct policy antecedent to the *Building Colleges for the Future* policy (hereafter BCF) and will then look at some of the key concepts underpinning the initiative before moving onto the research.

Emerging as it did immediately prior to the financial crisis of 2008/9, the BCF policy initiative (2008-2010) can be viewed as representing a confident, (though prelapsarian) statement of intent about FE and its purposes. FE had been well-

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funded under New Labour, enjoying large injections of cash, as seen in spending on the Skills for Life initiative which had reached £995m by 2007 (NAO 2008, 8). In addition, the sector was gearing up to introduce a new qualification as part of a government 'drive to involve 100 per cent of learners in education and training up to the age of 18' through the 14-19 Diploma (Nuffield Foundation 2007, 1). These examples illustrate the centrality of FE to government policy of the time relating to education and training. To that extent, FE had become a locus for the articulation of neoliberal values around the relationship between education, employment and the national economy.

By 'neoliberal', I am referring to a wave of policies across the (western) world traceable back to Hayekian economic doctrine that seek 'to replace political judgement with economic evaluation' (Davies 2014, 4). Davies views neoliberalism specifically as 'the disenchantment of politics by economics' (ibid. 5). Peck (2010) suggests that *neoliberalisation* as a 'processual definition' is prefereable to thinking about neoliberalism in 'regime-like' terms which are too 'static' (ibid. 19). This 'contradictory process' denotes 'a problem space, together with an accompanying ethos of market-complementing regulation' (Peck 2010, 20).

In my view, the funding methodology that operates in FE and the way it has economised the consciousness of FE teachers and managers (Smith and O'Leary 2013, 252) provides a good example of this 'disenchantment' and of the everyday life and work of teachers that is colonised by the hegemonic performance imperatives of the FE quasi-market and, beyond those, the economic and 'skills' needs of UK plc. Both Davies and Peck emphasise the importance of context in understanding how neoliberalism plays out and see neoliberal practices spreading across different parts of the public sector through a process of 'neoliberalisation' that is distinct in each case.

While there is almost no research literature on new FE architecture, a schools-based initiative, the *Building Schools for the Future* programme, launched in 2003, has been critiqued. According to Mahony et al. (2011), this school equivalent, (hereafter BSF), was:

> clearly located within an education policy context in which enhanced skills and knowledge are deemed to play a key role in the global dynamics of economic competition between states. (346)

Emerging from what Davies calls the New Labour neoliberal *Belle Epoque* (Davies 2014, 36-7), in which meritocracy coupled with social mobility, BSF was a scheme 'intended to point forwards to educational and social visions for the twenty-first century' (Mahony and Hextall 2013, 866). Mahony et al. (2011) also cite the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) as identifying a direct link between 'state of the art' learning environments and the 'improvement of standards':

> [O]ur research, and the increasing number of case studies that are becoming available, show a clear link between capital investment and improvements in school standards (DfES 2003, 4).

The policy focus on bringing about improvement not through teaching but rather through the immersive influence of the learning environment is, to some extent, undermined by Woolner et al.'s review of literature from the last forty years which was unable to identify any unambiguous causal link between improved environment and enhanced learning. While acknowledging that 'considered and targeted environmental improvement is worthwhile' (2007, 63), they suggest that:

> Large-scale investment, particularly that which is trumpeted as 'future-proofed', will necessarily be less organic and rooted in the needs of specific communities than smaller-scale projects. (Woolner et al. 2007, 61).

While the original aims of BSF included the idea that the new buildings should provide more access to ICT and enable 'personalised' approaches to learning, by 2009, there were criticisms that schools and local authorities had been given 'little support to achieve the educational aims of BSF' (Public Accounts Committee 2009, 5). The BSF policy can be summarized, not just as a well-funded exercise in improving the school estate but also as an opportunity for reimagining the way education happens and how spaces and buildings can shape this. Justified through an invocation of what Laclau might term the 'empty signifier' (Laclau 1996) of 'raised standards', in Lefebvrian terms, BSF can be seen as an attempt to reformulate the 'everyday' of students and teachers in and through the production of educational space.

Compared to BSF, BCF involved fewer but larger buildings. As with its predecessor, an initial focus of BCF was on 'greener' buildings and colleges were invited by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), the funding body for FE at that time, to 'propose eco-friendly and efficient designs in order to gain funds' (LSC 2007A, 1). Under the programme, old FE estate – sometimes locally dispersed in a heterogeneous collection of often repurposed buildings – was replaced with new buildings, commonly having glazed entrance hallways and featuring carefully designed social spaces. Alongside this 'eco-friendly' emphasis, a broadly neoliberal purpose gradually came into focus with an explicit instrumentalist agenda:

> Capital investment is a key part of our drive to boost the UK's productivity and global competitiveness. It will help to secure capacity for high-quality Diploma programmes, improve employer responsiveness, and build a more specialised and vocationally excellent FE system to deliver the ambitions of Lord Leitch's report, *Prosperity for all in the global economy – world class skills* (LSC 2008, 2).

The BCF initiative was formally launched in March 2008, and by spring 2009, against the backdrop of a financial crisis whose global significance was yet to be fully appreciated, seventy five colleges had projects with approval in principle. The total LSC grants these involved were £2.3bn (LSC 2008, 1). As evidenced by the

hegemonic instrumentalism in the passage above, FE's traditional role as growing out of local historical (often municipal) development and of providing 'second chance' education for students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds (Kennedy 1997) was largely eclipsed by a neoliberal perspective that positioned FE primarily as an abstract space of 'skills' production.

Alongside this framing of neoliberalisation, this article will draw on the ideas of Henri Lefebvre as theoretical tools capable of illuminating the research data and the context of BCF. As a Marxist theorist of the city (Lefebvre 2003), Lefebvre sees space as 'produced and reproduced in connection with the forces of production (and with the relations of production)' (1992, 77) within society. He also challenges the Cartesian duality of real as opposed to mental space, arguing that they are 'indistinguishable' (1992, 27).

Overall, Lefebvre's work provides a rich and attractive storehouse for anyone interested in critiquing FE architecture. His writings connect space to ideology.

> What is an ideology without a space to which it refers, a space which it describes… and whose code it embodies?... what we call ideology only achieves consistency by intervening in social space and in its production, and by thus taking on body therein. (Lefebvre 1992, 44).

Famously, Lefebvre's theorising on space centres on a triadic conceptualisation which he insists should not be used as an abstract 'model' (1991, 40) but rather as enabling a critical awareness of collectively created spatiality (Watkins 2005, 211). He proposes three interconnecting, dialectical terms: representations of space (conceived space) – exemplified by maps, blueprints and codes; spatial practices (perceived space) – which ensure continuity and cohesion, accepted and 'given' or customary practices and behaviour linked to particular spaces and social formations; and spaces of representation, sometimes translated as 'representational space', (lived space) – the space that individuals 'inhabit' and to which individuals bring their own meanings, values and action. Lefebvre sees them as combining in ways that allow elites to dominate but that still contain opportunities for creative and transformative change.

Lefebvre's theorisation of the 'everyday' (Lefebvre 2002) as repetition and the recurrence of drudgery as dictated by the rhythm of capital is another concept that will inform the discussion that follows. It connects to the gramscian notion of hegemony and refers to things that are taken for granted and common sense and are therefore supposed to be inevitable. Its relevance in any critique of FE emerges when the researcher contemplates the blurring of the distinction between education and training or, put another way, the assumption that further education means simply and/or only the development of skills for employment. Lefebvre's way of thinking about space traverses physical boundaries and moves into the ideological domain.

His concept of 'abstract space' as set against lived experience is useful in this regard. For Lefebvre, abstract space functions:

> …as a set of things/signs and their formal relationships: glass and stone, concrete and steel... Formal and quantitative, it erases distinctions as much those which derive from nature and (historical) time as those which originate in the body… What we seem to have then is an apparent subject, an impersonal pseudo-subject… and – hidden within it, concealed by its illusory transparency – the real subject, namely state (political) power... (Here), lived experience is crushed, vanquished by what is 'conceived of'. (Lefebvre 1992, 49-51).

Looking at the FE sector through this lens enables us to see how centralisation has produced, as one of its effects, an articulation of FE as transcendent and homogeneous: unitary, more than and different from the college provision arising from local ecologies. A centralised (and abstract) ideological determination of the meaning and purpose of FE was enabled in particular by the incorporation of colleges that took place in 1993 which, by deracinating colleges: severing their links with local authorities, prepared the ground for the neoliberalisation of the sector from the centre.

Figure 1. 'Flagship' buildings embodying the 'abstract space of FE'

In the context of the FE sector, neoliberalisation as expressed through the BCF initiative, interconnected with New Labour Third Way policy values (Giddens 2000). It connected capital investment to a social inclusion dividend by coupling the neoliberal skills discourse with an agenda for social mobility through educational attainment. In addition, the initiative may be seen as rooted in a New Labour communitarian notion of 'reciprocal obligation' as outlined by Driver and Martell:

for example, welfare rights should be conditional on recipients fulfilling certain responsibilities and duties, like accepting a training place when offered; or individuals should be partly responsible for contributing to the cost of their Learn as You Earn accounts or the fees for their university degree (Driver and Martell 1997, 37)

In that sense, the buildings were viewed as a symbolic and spectacular representation of the State's investment in the rights of individuals to access FE – to be answered by the responsibilities of individuals to engage in the economic and training aims of the FE sector:

> State-of-the-art buildings make a huge difference to educational attainment.… Our investment will… result in cutting-edge facilities, it will also ensure that our workforce has the skills it needs to succeed in a rapidly changing world. This document sets out how we are… ensuring that the FE and skills sector has the investment needed to achieve its full potential as the driver for economic growth and social mobility. (LSC 2008, 1)

This passage evidences a trend in policy makers' perspectives of FE: from the locally embedded role of colleges pre-incorporation, BCF crystallises FE as 'abstract space' and, as an aspect of that, promotes a view of college buildings as environments that are shaped primarily by the national economic interest.

Figure 2. The college as 'economic bridgehead' for eceonomically depressed locales.

The 'social mobility' dimension of the policy rests on the classic neoliberal assumption that state intervention to pump-prime the skills supply will result in economic growth and the social benefits accruing from a 'trickle-down' of wealth (Harvey 2005, 64-5). This emphasis on economic growth suggests that BCF

conceptualised new-build colleges as bridgeheads into economically under-performing locales to stimulate economic regeneration:

> (I)t is essential that specialist FE facilities are cutting-edge and state-of-the-art, and that the FE estate is modernised accordingly…. (to) benefit generations of learners to come, meet the skills needs of employers and act as a catalyst for community regeneration. (LSC 2008, 21)

In terms of pedagogy, BCF policy documents typically over-emphasise the virtues and efficiency ILT supposedly affords; they also conceptualise new-build colleges as heralding the development of 'more modern teaching and learning methods (such as information and learning technology (ILT)-led open learning)' (LSC 2008, 23). At the time, this connected to a deficit discourse about the 'quality' of teaching, priming the 'existential anxiety' characteristic of neoliberal competitive rhetoric (Davies 2014, 134) that colonises the 'everyday' of FE work.

Having provided a contextual and theoretical frame for the article, I will now move to the research.

Research Methods and Methodology
Due to the financial crisis of 2008/09, only a fraction of what might otherwise have been built under the BCF policy was completed. In the five years preceding the study, that included four colleges in the West Midlands region, each costing between £70 and £90 million to build. In terms of my positionality as a researcher, I was a teacher in an FE college up until 2004, four years before the BCF initiative began and as teacher educator had become familiar with the newbuilds in the study.

Data was gathered in four stages over a three year period. Data was gathered in four stages over a three year period. The first stage comprised interviews with a group of ten student teachers and newly qualified teachers. This part of the sample focused on individuals who were either current or recent students from a Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) course at a West Midlands Higher Education Institution (HEI). The data from one interviewee was supplemented with observation notes from one of her assessed observations, undertaken at a new-build college in which issues connected to the teaching and learning environment had been noted (see Box 1 below).

The second stage of the research sought to triangulate data from the first phase through interviews with a range of experienced staff working at the same new-build colleges. The interview questions put to participants in stages one and two were:
1. How have the new college premises impacted on teaching and learning in positive and / or negative ways?
2. How have the new premises impacted on the way staff interact with each other and / or how students interact with each other?

The interviews were semi-structured and, as the table shows, data was gathered on four different colleges in the West Midlands area (Southern College, Western College, Cherrytree College and Municipal College).

Then, in stage three, a third set of interviews sought to gain perspectives from an expert sample (Hartas 2010, 70) of architects who had been involved in educational work. The first of these was the director of a local firm specialising in educational buildings. The second was an educational consultant who worked for a large national firm with experience of both college (BCF) and school (BSF) building construction. The third interviewee with a background in architecture had extensive experience, having been involved in both BSF and BCF initiatives; his current role was with the Royal Institute of British Architects. The questions asked of the architects aimed to gather views that might illuminate issues raised in the first two rounds of interviews. The repetition of atria in the new-build designs, the connection between design and (educational) function, the consultation process, the extensive use of glass and colleges' 'eco-friendly' features were all items addressed in the interviews.

The final, fourth stage involved taking photographs of the exterior of the colleges and of their atria and making field notes. The use of photographs (e.g. Hamilton 1999, Pink 2001) was thought helpful in providing visual comparisons – in this case of the colleges' key features.

Participant	Role & experience	Research tool(s)	Institution
Kristos	Experienced (Business Studies) teacher	Interview	Western College
Derek	Student (Literacy) teacher	Email exchange /interview	Western College
Malcolm	Manager (Motor-Vehicle)	Interview	Western College
Eve	Student (Literacy) teacher	Email exchange	Western College & Cherrytree College
Diana	Experienced Media Studies teacher	Email exchange / interview	Cherrytree College
Harpreet	Experienced (ESOL) teacher	Interview	Cherrytree College
Dhara	Experienced teacher educator / course leader	Email exchange / interview	Southern College
Lisa-Jay	Student teacher (Photography)	Interview	Southern College
Charlie	Senior curriculum manager	Interview	Municipal College
Enda	Experienced (Engineering) teacher	Email exchange /interview	Municipal College
Angus	Director of firm with educational project experience	Interview	Local architectural firm

Jackie	Educational Consultant with previous experience of BSF	Interview	Large, national architectural firm
Mark	Architect with previous experience of BSF & BCF	Interview	Royal Institute of British Architects
Researcher	Teacher educator and educational researcher	Observation notes, photographs	HEI

Table 1. Participant details

Sample and research constraints

Sensitivity about the impact of moving to new-build premises was a contextual feature in three of the four colleges in the sample. This stemmed from the withdrawal of free car parking (for staff) and a reduction in staffroom space. While this was not connected directly to the quality of the environments for teaching and learning, this made a formal institution-level approach to survey staff in any of the four colleges unfeasible.

Negative comments made by a small number of PGCE students in their reflective journals about the quality of the working environment in the new-build colleges where they were placed were the starting point of the study. The views expressed conflicted strongly with claims made in the BCF policy literature. These comments were not used in the study but rather, informed sampling and this small group formed a preliminary, opportunistic and critical sample of interviewees (Wellington 2000, 62). The second stage of interviews used a convenience sample of staff who were easily contactable, some of whom were known to the researcher through teacher education networks: some were mentors who had taken part in assessed observations alongside the researcher, some were students several years into their career. Within this second tranche, the views of a smaller group of managers and course leaders were also sought.

In terms of ethics, assurances of confidentiality and anonymity were an important pre-requisite to participation for interviewees in stages one and two.

Findings and analysis

In this section, I will provide a commentary on data from the study informed by Lefebvrian theory. The analysis will be divided into two sections. First I will discuss the data on the new-builds in terms of their provision of educational, 'lived' space. I will then develop an analysis of how the new-builds work on students and staff in an ideological way.

Teaching and learning

The participants who were teachers and student teachers of subjects with bespoke accommodation (e.g. Motor Vehicle, Painting and Decorating courses), regarded the

new-builds in a positive light because their teaching accommodation coupled working environments with additional pedagogic features. This bringing together of workplace and classroom into a hybrid educational/work space combined modern industrial equipment with integrated learning spaces. This space enabled students and teachers to move between working and learning environments easily linking theory and practice and thereby affirming a key principle of vocational pedagogy i.e. to provide a 'clear line of sight to work' (Commission on Adult Vocational Teaching and Learning 2013). This suggested that in these subject areas, the new-builds provided space in which conceived (the workshop/classroom design space), perceived (the practices associated with workshop / classroom) and lived space (the ways in which these spaces were experienced by staff and students) were coordinated in a coherent way.

These positive views, however, were confined to specialised curriculum areas. In contrast, the views of staff and student teachers of classroom-based subjects were overwhelmingly negative. These participants expressed a variety of concerns, some of which focused specifically on space, its use and availability. So called 'hot' (shared) desks were a common feature – symbolically communicating the interchangeability of staff; but other aspects of workspace outside classrooms also provoked comment.

In Cherrytree College, despite an extensive use of glass in the design of the building, paradoxically, teaching staff found themselves in offices with no windows or with windows at floor level that offered no viewpoint. There was also a sense among staff that the buildings did not differentiate between staff and students. Diana at Cherrytree College commented on this:

> At the old building there were designated toilets for staff but now toilets are for all. This can obviously cause some embarrassing/ uncomfortable situations. Even more so in the college gym as this is for students, staff and the general public! As you can imagine, my own membership there was short lived as sweating and potentially changing in front of students and even management was not attractive for me!

Lefebvre's concepts of 'dominated' as opposed to 'appropriated' space (1991, 164) may provide some insight into this levelling of the staff/student distinction. While it may be tempting to view this aspect of the design as egalitarian or promoting democratisation, it can also be seen to have an impact on 'ownership'. Clearly, Diana experiences the space as 'dominated', reducing her agency and sense of self. In this as in other criticisms, the overarching feel of homogenisation was prevalent. The absence of separate spaces underpinned some of the comments related to the acoustic properties of the buildings. Sound and noise levels were repeatedly signalled by teacher participants as problematic. Dhara, a teacher at Southern College, complained about an absence of 'quiet space' resulting in more work having to be taken home. This suggests that the hush of a library or staff room as an

educational workspace has been displaced by spaces that conceptualise teaching and learning work as always busy and noisy. Sound in this case contributes to dominance. The traditional pockets of appropriation, in which teaching staff (in this case) experience space as having a use-value in which creativity and agency become possible, have been lost. Instead, college space instrumentalises them as much as it instrumentalises students. Pervasive noise symbolically unifies staff and students within the space. It is primarily in this way that staff and students are equal.

In two of the colleges, the use of space reflected specific power relations. One example pertained to car parking: while senior staff had designated parking spaces, teachers were not catered for. Another example was where the height of new-build colleges (ranging from three floors to nine in the research sample) afforded an opportunity for a hierarchical organisation of space. In Municipal College that meant a penthouse suite for the chief executive (including separate shower and toilet facilities). In Southern College, the top floor was (initially) reserved for the A Level provision, the senior managers and a boardroom with floor to ceiling windows overlooking the town. The privileging of academic study and senior management roles suggest a design intention that replicates existing educational and social hierarchies.

While BCF policy documents emphasise the importance of 'cutting edge facilities', a strong strand of evidence in the data suggested that the basic environmental requirements for teaching were sometimes absent. This was borne out by teacher and student-teacher participants reporting on inadequacies in some of the classrooms. Futhermore, during an assessed observation of Eve, a Literacy student on placement at Western College, the researcher noted a number of issues arising from the class having to move rooms due to an ICT malfunction and the impact this had on a student identified as being on the autistic spectrum (see Box 1).

> The desks were in two rows and were fixed to the floor and therefore immovable. This meant that students had to be taught in rows. While pairwork was possible (though without much talking – see below) group work was out of the question. On first reading the (lesson) planner I wasn't sure why A___'s anxiety might be triggered by a room. After an hour I understood. The acoustics were appalling. The room was narrow and long and the sound bounced between the concrete walls making even a low buzz of discussion too noisy for working… (T)here were no windows that could open. This meant that the room got stuffy very quickly and you were forced to open the door to let fresh air in.
>
> During the session, you wanted to use a video / youtube clip. Unfortunately, the lighting in the room was operated by motion sensor.

That meant that you were unable to turn it off. For that reason, the video you showed was barely visible.

Box 1. Observation notes

All of the colleges featured so-called 'smart' technology that aimed to achieve high levels of energy efficiency. Building Research Establishment Environmental Assessment Methodology (BREEAM) was mentioned by Angus, one of the architects who was interviewd as strongly influencing the eco-friendly design of new-build colleges. The notes in Box 1 illustrate how there can be a tension between the energy efficiency of the college environment and the requirements of a space that is suitable for teaching and learning. Motion sensors and the lack of a light switch effectively disabled the use of video. Movable furniture that facilitates task-orientated talk and groupwork is also a basic prerequisite of many classrooms. The two other aspects: ventilation and acoustics are also fundamental. These are examples of conceived space shaping perceived space and governing (and disrupting) teachers and students' lived space.

Another aspect of the design of the colleges in the sample produces a tension between the practical considerations of teaching and learning and what can be viewed as the ideological role of these buildings. The exterior of many of the new college buildings is dominated by glass. According to the website of one of the architectural firms responsible for construction, these glass façades 'showcas(e) the College's... functions' (Broadway Malyan, undated) to the surrounding area.

Figure 3. Glazed exteriors – tokens of the 'dazzling wonders' promised by neoliberalism

The glazing can be theorized through the idea of market allure that aims to draw potential students in. Sitting as half of the sample colleges do in socio-economically deprived areas, this suggests they can be seen as providing students from the area with a glimpse of 'the New Life in the Golden City' (Lefebvre 2002, 78), a new life accessible through an alignment of individual dreams and the neoliberal totems of skills and hard work. The 'dazzling wonders' (ibid 80) of success and achievement offering a stark contrast to their daily lives.

But the glazing had a more practical (and some might think predictable) impact as well. A common criticism of participants in relation to the glazing centred on their inability to regulate room temperature effectively. The data from participants suggest that this design aspect was overlooked:

> They couldn't get the temperature right as (the air conditioning) was supposed to be environmentally friendly... (I)t didn't work. So everyone had to have their coat on because it was freezing or it was roasting. (Harpreet, Cherrytree College)

> The temperature varies drastically on the same floor. Our staffroom is boiling hot and some classes are freezing…. (It) has undoubtedly had an impact on teaching and learning. (Dhara, Southern College)

> One side of the building can be kept cool. The other can't... In the summer (some classrooms) become sweltering hot. In my office there's no air con - on this whole side of the building. Form takes precedence over function. (Charlie, Municipal College)

These passages suggest that outward-facing appearance – the colleges' focus on self-representation within the marketplace – has taken precedence over basic principles of human comfort, prerequisite for all learning and teaching. Jackie provided a perspective from the architectural experts within the sample:

> while I went to a very good university, well it didn't look as slick as some of them do now. (Colleges) need to up their game. A student will look at the course, look at the course content, look at who's lecturing and things but also look at the facilities and that's part of the offer.

Mark, another of the architects, provided additional insights:

> what architects were encouraged to do was to reduce energy costs and reduce carbon emissions, and create truly sustainable buildings. Now, to do that some of the measures are about motion-controlled lighting, various insulation measures that might mean that windows are permanently closed.

While this view presents some of the functional problems of the new-builds as originating in a struggle to reconcile the competing discourses of marketisation and eco-friendliness, other features that were criticized by interviewees for their negative

impact on teaching and learning, were specifically designed. A recurrent strand in the data related to so-called 'social learning spaces'. These open-plan spaces that integrate social areas, computer terminals and studying facilities are becoming prevalent in FE environments despite a lack of any research evidence linking them to 'positive academic outcomes' for students (Matthews et al. 2011, 115). Resonating with the symbolic meaning of the colleges' glazed exteriors, the social learning spaces connect to 'the illusion of transparency' that Lefebvre sees as attaching to space providing a veneer of 'innocence' and 'neutrality' (Lefebvre 1992, 27-9). This aspect can also be seen as connecting to the prevalence of competence-based courses that are assessed through use of a series of 'transparent' learning outcomes. From an architectural perspective, Jackie talked about a 'blurring of zones and products' and explained how decisions around including social learning spaces were often related to:

> … curriculum changes, because at (name of college), the type of course that they are running, that might have that more vocational bias. There is group assessment. It's not all just about the individual.

Here is a powerful example of two components of Lefebvre's triad (the conceived and perceived space) interacting and impacting decisively on the lived space. What is interesting here is how perceived space (spatial practice) is here being informed not by practitioners but instead by others with no background in teaching.

Mark echoed Jackie's comments, seeing the design as underpinned by a particular view of the way learning had changed:

> What we all know in the real world is that you don't get by in most careers by talking to people in the immediate vicinity, you need a broad range of ideas from colleagues and friends…. So having those forum spaces encourages that at an early age. It's different groups intermingling, learning, so that the kid that's studying physics might pick something up from the kid studying English.

The views from the architect participants contrasted with those of the teachers. Student-teacher Derek commented:

> The Western College learning deck was probably not well enough thought through, because as well as the open environment, there was the fact that classes happened there whilst other students could wander in and use a computer in the same environment, this was from either of two doors. Not ideal. The acoustics… were poor and I really had to raise my voice to be heard.

The learning deck was an open-sided 'forum space' overlooking the atrium which had both IT facilities for students and an electronic whiteboard. Derek's comments provide evidence that it failed to meet the functional requirements of teaching and learning. But they also suggest that the lived space of these new-builds is orientated towards a view of FE students as a collective rather than as individuals. In that

sense, FE as an abstract space orientated towards the (mass) production of economically necessary skills can be said to dominate.

The significance of this blurring between social spaces and learning spaces was sharpened in the sample as in two of the colleges, participants reported a shortage of classrooms after the move to new premises. This led to spaces conceived of as social, being used for teaching. For Southern College, a move from three old premises into one new one had resulted in managers introducing a hybrid version of social learning, what student-teacher, Lisa-Jay, called 'fluid learning':

> There's fluid learning… that's like open learning: being able to go wherever you want and there are spaces and it makes it easy for students to drift in and out, to do things at their own pace. It's something we've had to adapt to as teachers. They've tried to present it as a positive thing. That it's more enjoyable for students; that they can learn in their own way. But it's not working. There needs to be some sort of control. Because students just come in and out and it ends up being disruptive.

There is pragmatism in the 'fluid learning' concept as Southern College managers struggle to cope with a shortage of teaching accommodation. In this example, there is a clear disruption of perceived space as the norms associated with classroom learning are no longer stable. Also, at Southern College, Dhara reported how when teaching in the social learning space, teachers 'wore microphones to actually deliver the session…. I observe(d) a session up there and it was like being in a busy railway station.' Both participants were resistant to the suggestion that the new architectural space should shape their practice as teachers, seeing it instead as undermining.

In three of the four colleges, these social learning spaces merged into the atria that formed the main entrance of each college. These spaces, often furnished with computer terminals with internet connection, were typically near to refectories and student thoroughfares but in at least one case, also featured a whiteboard. The atria that dominated three of the four colleges are to my mind one of the most significant aspects of these new-build colleges. They can be viewed as having a significance that moves beyond the practical and that crosses into the realm of the ideological as the next section will illustrate.

Ideological readings of BCF: the atria
Prior to the finance being made available through the BCF initiative, there were early signs of the impact of marketisation in college estates. Foyerism developed in colleges after incorporation and involved the cosmetic enhancement of college entrance areas. These new foyers were primarily intended to present an appropriate and outward-facing image to the public. The market doctrine of the importance of impression management (Ball 1999) was at play in this. The BCF initiative expanded

on the foyer theme in some cases to create large atria. Mark, an architect participant, explained:

> There's always a hub or a forum or some sort of big open area….. I suppose, it's partly a reflection of changes in technology. People need good areas where there's wifi and connectivity. And, more prosaically, lots of plugs.

The new-builds in the sample were all superficially distinctive and individual but beneath this 'flagship' (Dyer, undated) distinctiveness, there was a deeper uniformity. Their exterior and interior forms echoed other familiar public buildings: the multiplex cinema, the arts complex, the shopping mall, the hospital, the convention centre. Focusing on the role of developers, the architect, Angus, explained that apart from 'an additional 15% funding specifically to cater for the designs of atriums', many of the BCF colleges had similar features that extended beyond the inclusion of atria:

> (T)hese big (building development) organisations…. have driven their own agenda for quite a long time from an architectural point of view and some of the big names have got their history in shopping malls, in offices… so if you were to look at twenty of the colleges (architectural firm) has done, there is a tremendous similarity. Now that similarity is not necessarily bad and it's not wrong to have something done the same because if a classroom model works from a light, heat and natural ventilation and acoustic point of view, why wouldn't you want to repeat that?...

According to Angus, this standardisation originates in the dominance of a small number of building development firms. For these firms, 'the drive was a business model and not an educational model'. As he suggests, if the overall model is successful, then a formulaic approach can be advantageous. On the other hand, if there are issues with the formula, then there is a risk of mistakes being replicated. This might also account for the encroachment of non-educational perspectives dominating in the 'conceived space' underpinning BCF.

This uniformity also invites critique that see BCF as an expression of neoliberal production of FE space. If the social learning spaces are BCF's most significant and innovatory contribution in terms of pedagogical space, then the atria are perhaps the most stand-out ideological innovation. In three of the four colleges in the sample there are atria with ceilings as high as the college itself, sitting immediately behind each college's glazed façade. With staircases that radiate outwards as from this hub to create a strong impression of business and transit, these atria are strongly reminiscent of modern shopping malls, a commercial theme that is added to by the inclusion of cafeterias, hair salons and restaurants.

The atria provide a sense of transparency, making students visible to each other as they come and go. On the surface, they appear to be spaces of appropriation, but these are dominated spaces of identity consolidation in which the gap between study and leisure time is smoothed over, creating belonging and order on the colleges'

terms. Rather like an end-of-year, whole-school photograph that provides for students and staff a sense of identity and participation but also symbolic positioning, the atria function as a backdrop or 'scene' (Lefebvre 1992, 36) in which FE, the *doing of FE* and the *being in FE* (perhaps summed up in the phrase 'going to college') is mapped across the everyday.

Figure 4. Atria: creating belonging and order

It's also significant that atrial space collocates education and commerce. Like shopping malls, these atria suggest the smooth space / time of post-industrial societies which is generated and occupied by capitalist relations while having an appearance of being liberatory (Deleuze and Guattari 2013). Perhaps unsurprisingly, shopping malls are the specialism of the architectural firm responsible for one of the new-build colleges looked at in this study.

Concluding comments

The data collected for this study present strong evidence that despite the claims of policy rhetoric about the benefits of BCF for teaching and learning, the reality was more complex. Teachers in the study felt their needs and views were overlooked. On a practical level, one reason for this ties in with a lack of consultation. In his interview, the third architect, Mark, commented that consultation in BCF builds mainly involved principals and college governing bodies. While in schools such consultation would inevitably include serving teachers, in FE, a trend in leadership and governance that privileges employer voices means that teachers' perspectives are marginalised (in one of the colleges in the sample, the Principal had no educational background). Importantly, Mark also identified how the absence of a

consultation process designed to feedback and remediate problems after a year of use (so-called 'snagging'), may have created significant problems:

> I don't think that's unique to BSF or BCF. Almost every building, when you look at it on paper, you think *Oh yeah that's good. That'll work.* When you move into it, it's only in the first six to twelve months that you get to understand how it's actually going to work. The problem with architecture and new buildings is that humans get in the way - in the nicest possible sense.

The hierarchical relationship between conceived, perceived and lived space is foregrounded here. Mark identifies how considerations about lived space should feed back into conceived but, how often, it doesn't. In the case of BCF, this results in a privileging of the views of architects, developers and others about how teaching and learning should be taking place in FE. Speaking about the schools built in the BSF initiative, Mark contrasted the development of good practice within BSF builds with the less cohesive BCF scheme. For him, a key ingredient in this was the coordinating role of the local authorities who ensured learning (on the part of architects etc) took place between builds, something structurally absent in the incorporated FE sector. The continuity that local authority involvement might have fostered was instead represented by the dominance of development firms and their formulaic designs.

But this failure to consult with teachers pales into insignificance compared to the reconfiguration of learning as primarily social and collective behaviour that is effected by the introduction of 'social learning spaces'. Maschelein and Simons (2007) see some new educational architecture as reflecting a view of the learner as an entrepreneurial individual mapping coordinates in her/his career trajectory. This conceptualisation largely does away with traditional classroom approaches to teaching and learning and, potentially, with it, the emancipatory potential of 'transformative' FE (Duckworth 2013, Duckworth and Smith 2017). Instead, it materialises 'fluid learning' in architectural form. It also recasts the teaching role into that of a life / career coach who helps students to navigate their course through a menu of assessments.

This spatial intervention into the way teaching and learning takes place nests within a bigger, architectural and ideological frame. The 'abstract space' of FE, articulated in and by these glazed façades feeds into and off ideological tropes of neoliberalism that subordinate the agency of students and staff, instrumentalising them for economic ends. As architectural expressions of the 'disenchantment of politics by economics', we can view the new-build colleges as deconstructing a communitarian view of FE and replacing this with a grandiloquence seemingly aimed at a global rather than a local stage. More than two decades of incorporation have resulted in the atomisation of the FE sector into competing regional college conglomerates. That

these are subject to arm's-length governance is illustrated by the current Area Review process which is resulting in a spate of mergers, takeovers and closures. Following Lefebvre, it is tempting to view this fragmentation as being held together by the 'abstract space' of the sector itself, making of it an ideological 'tool of domination (that) asphyxiates whatever is conceived within it and then strives to emerge' (Lefebvre 1992, 370). The BCF initiative can therefore be viewed as emanating from an era when neoliberal governance in education was reaching its apogee. To that extent then, a reading of BCF new-builds as a 'pure' architectural expression of the instrumentalist, neoliberal function of FE may be justified. Under this lens, extensively glazed colleges resemble vast incubators of 'accelerated productivity and profitability' (Latimer and Munro 2015, 418) and the 'social learning' hot-housed within their atria can be regarded as embodying an 'accelerationist' vision (Noys 2014) of the way vocational learning should take place.

It would be premature, however, to view the interaction between BCF architectural space and FE staff and students in too deterministic a way. Both classrooms and atria are spaces of representation, spaces where students congregate to enact the ideological trope of FE but in doing so, to bring themselves to the enactment. Here, we touch on the very heart of the core purposes and functions of FE as they have evolved. One view of FE is that it is a sector that caters for people whose experience of education is resistant to the imposition of a linear template of time-limited episodes. Instead, their journeys are often punctuated by unexpected life events, disruptions, false starts, wrong turns, volte-faces and may be informed throughout by resistance. To that extent, while this article has focused on how BCF's abstract space may work to absorb and eliminate this difference, there is also the potential that it can reconnect people with their own agency and potential. Lefebvre has been read as theorising a movement from the 'absolute space of nature', through the 'abstract space of capitalism' to the differential space of (utopian) socialism (Leary-Owhin 2015, 4). In this dialectic, differential space is created by the reappropriation by ordinary people of abstract space:

> abstract space carries within itself the seeds of a new kind of space. I shall call that new space 'differential space', because, inasmuch as abstract space tends towards homogeneity, towards the elimination of existing differences or peculiarities, a new space cannot be born (produced) unless it accentuates differences. (1992, 52)

FE colleges, with their diverse populations, offer a potential space for transformation. Personal and collective agency and imagination can appropriate the space from the dominant neoliberal motifs of economy, of skills, of the 'hard-working' member of society made visible to others in the bustling atrium. The atria have the same potential as any social space that encourages the gathering of large groups of diverse people with a collective identity of some kind. In that sense, they

constitute an empty frame in which the ideological experience of *being in FE* can take place. The atria contain these 'seeds' of differential space; they are capable of being flipped: the donut-like space could just a easily be re-filled with a communitarian vision of FE and a learning deck could act as a platform for a manifesto promoting a holistic, fully state-funded sector available to all, of any age to a gathering of students and staff in the atrium below.

This suggests that the interaction that 'social learning spaces' and atria afford de-stabilises any attempt at totalising social control. While the dissonant voices of the teachers in the study foreground the Ozymandian hollowness of the reductive 'vision' of FE that BCF represents, only time will tell if these buildings' emphasis on social learning and the inclusion of atria have other and more unpredictable consequences.

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