Cultivating Space in University Life
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THE FALL SEMESTER of 2021 marked the first time I set foot on the campus of the University of Western Ontario (in London, Ontario, Canada) in nearly a year and a half. Like many academics, my connection to campus life was abruptly severed in March 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic began to gather momentum across the globe. For the 2020-21 academic year, I was also on sabbatical in another Canadian city, which added to my feelings of disconnection and separation from the embodied experience of university life. However, the return to campus after my sabbatical ended did not fill me with dread or anxiety. On the contrary, I looked forward to being back on campus, seeing colleagues (albeit with masks) once again, engaging with students, and feeling part of a place-based community.

As I returned to campus, my initial hopes and expectations were generally fulfilled. It did feel good to see colleagues and students again, as well as engage in meaningful conversations. Moreover, the experience of teaching in-person classes with real people sitting in chairs (not talking heads on a computer screen), being attentive to body language and other visual cues, and facilitating discussions more easily (without the tendency to talk over each other in a platform like Zoom) was enlivening. As I told my students and colleagues at different points throughout the term, "Teaching is a physical act!" This insight helped me understand the importance of shared space (in the material, and not solely digital sense) in creating an effective learning environment.

However, as the semester continued, a familiar pattern began to reemerge. Hallways that once were host to chatty faculty members and graduate students slowly became eerily quiet. Faculty offices that were previously inhabited gradually became emptier. On the Friday mornings that I taught, walking the corri-

dor to my office before teaching my class gave me an empty and lonely feeling. One colleague joked to me that being on the floor of our building where all the faculty offices are located feels like a sad, emptied-out shopping mall in the age of online retail. In fact, he mentioned a real mall in London, Ontario ironically located just next to where I live. I let out a sarcastic laugh, but the image of desolate retail space stuck with me. As universities in North America increasingly act as corporations in the "business" of research and education,[1] are our campuses also becoming "dead" retail spaces?

To be fair, the context of the pandemic must obviously be taken into consideration. Certain faculty members and students are justifiably cautious and hesitant to be on campus for a variety of legitimate reasons. A general climate of fear also persists in society, such that the pandemic (particularly in its early stages) activated latent anxieties about mortality, illness, and death. In a culture in which the denial of death[2] (or at least of our inherent physical vulnerability) is a dominant feature of everyday life, this sense of palpable anxiety and fear in face of the pandemic is to be expected. But this retreat from being on campus, particularly for faculty members, started long before the pandemic. The pandemic has only accelerated this trend. Even with the end of the pandemic hopefully near, I remain doubtful that we will see any reversal of this trend. Empty corridors, vacant faculty offices, and the occasional sound of a lonely, networked printer vigorously churning out copies may continue to be the norm.

Yet, despite my rational and legitimate pessimism surrounding any flourishing of campus faculty life, a part of me still holds out hope for a renaissance of conviviality. "But why?" I ask myself. Because intuitively, deep down, I know that *space matters*.

Creating Inner Space

One night during the fall semester, my toddler son woke me up, as he often does, crying out for comfort and solace. After lying in bed with him for a long time until he fell back asleep, I checked the time and it was already 5:00 AM. I couldn't sleep again and headed downstairs. I sat in silence in my living room, trying to meditate and reciting a few Sanskrit prayers silently to myself. This morning was particularly quiet, with my wife and two children sleeping upstairs, darkness outside my window, and the sun still below the horizon. Sitting quietly in this darkened room, I suddenly felt a sense of space opening inside of me. Space in the sense of a great *spaciousness,* where I was not trying to do or be anything. I did not feel any urge to *fill* this space with thoughts, actions, to-do lists, etc. Simply experiencing this spaciousness was enough.

I realized how rarely I felt this spaciousness in my life. In addition, I understood how the physical space that surrounded me is connected to my own sense of inner spaciousness. In fact, the ancient spiritual art of *vāstu* (which could be described as the Indian counterpart to the Chinese *feng shui*) is concerned with how the physical spaces we inhabit affect the inner "space" within us. As an amateur student of vāstu, I was aware of basic principles such as the need to keep a certain amount of empty space in the center of any room for there to be an adequate flow of energy (*prāna* in Sanskrit).[3] A consequence of prāna flowing in a wholesome manner in our physical spaces is that the prāna inside of us can also flow better.[4] This basic idea connects to the larger concept in the Indian Vedic tradition of how the microcosm is linked to the macrocosm; in other words, whatever happens outside of us is also happening inside, and vice versa.[5] Hence, if I am not able to create adequate, wholesome spaciousness inside myself, how can I expect these qualities to effortlessly appear in the physical spaces that I occupy?

Seeking Spaciousness

With these insights from my meditation practice and study of vāstu, I wonder how to apply them not just in my life, but in the lives of my fellow faculty members and in the life of the university more broadly. As I write this essay, I am in the midst of serving on the Annual Performance Evaluation (APE) committee of my faculty. The major work of this committee is to read the performance files of all my colleagues, along with two other faculty members and our Dean. We individually assign "scores" to each faculty member for the categories of *research*, *teaching*, and *service;* at one point we discuss our scores as a committee and average the final scores for each faculty member. This evaluation is done every year, and scores are connected to merit-based pay and salary increases.

Reading these files is an exercise in seeing academic capitalism at work for me. At the end of the day, most of us faculty members are dutiful neoliberal subjects, busy documenting all the work that we have done—papers published, books published, talks given, media interviews, reconfiguring courses for emergency online teaching, and more. The image I have is one of busyness and disconnection from others, even as we yearn for recognition, validation, and acceptance from our peers. For many of us (especially during the pandemic), we are working in our private homes, chasing the life-draining goal of constant and endless productivity. Rather than embodying spaciousness, we are in our cut-off physical spaces, filling up whatever space there is inside us with endless "doing."

But how did it get this way? Do things need to stay this way? Alienation and disconnection have been a part of modern academic life for several decades, and building academic community has always been challenging, particularly given that competition and striving are inherently built into the academic environment.[6] "Community," if it is used at all in modern academic environments, often revolves around collaboration on research projects, seeking research support, and celebrating successful grant applications. Thus, community becomes equated with a need for constant achievement, rather than one rooted in genuine human connection, caring, and a shared sense of purpose.

Academic achievements can certainly be celebrated and great scholarship can as well be recognized. However, our compulsive desire for success and constant achievement (particularly for faculty who already have tenure) can easily veer towards the pathological. In fact, we may all be the *achievement subjects* that the philosopher Byung-Chul Han describes, constantly striving to do more and more while feeling less satisfied in the process.[7] Thus, the problems I am describing are larger than academia and affect wider society.

However, the fact that our collective faculty life is in such a tattered condition gnaws at me. Perhaps we need to cultivate spaciousness and revel in the emptiness of being and non-doing. This focus runs counter to the dominant culture of academia—for instance, creating space inside oneself is not something one can put down as an achievement on a performance evaluation file. Whether we cultivate a contemplative practice, acknowledge the need for deeper and slower scholarship, dedicate ourselves to forming contemplative communities (e.g., faculty meditation groups), or simply just show up to campus honestly and fully, with an openness to one another and without the need to bury ourselves in busyness—all of this can create spaciousness. And by finding this spaciousness, we may be finally able to breathe life into our campus spaces.

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Notes

1. *Steal This University: The Rise of the Corporate University and an Academic Labor Movement*, eds. Benjamin Johnson, Patrick Kavanagh and Kevin Mattson (New York: Routledge, 2003).
2. Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997).
3. Robert Svoboda, *Vastu: Breathing Life into Space* (New York: Namarupa, 2013).
4. Ibid.
5. Robert Svodboda, *Ayurveda: Life, Health, and Longevity* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1992)
6. Parker J. Palmer, *To Know as We are Known: Education as a Spiritual Journey* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983).
7. Byung-Chul Han, *The Burnout Society* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Briefs, 2015).