

*Mediations in Cultural Spaces: Structure,
Sign, Body* edited by John Wall

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What is *space*? As anyone who has ever had to grapple with the concept of *space* will know, it defies definition. Its very nature has been the focus of scholarly debate for hundreds of years, with many different disciplines adding their own unique contribution to the discussion. *Mediations in Cultural Spaces: Structure, Sign, Body* is a collection of essays about the cultural representations of space. This is social space, often symbolic but it can also be practical, physical. The contributors come from a variety of backgrounds, including architecture, law, literature, sociology, history and philosophy. The result is a collection of twelve very different papers, divided into four main themes. It would be impossible to adequately review each essay here. Instead, what follows is a selection of some of the different approaches that have been taken by the contributors that demonstrate the depth and breadth of discussion on space.

Part 1: Concepts of Space begins the discussion by laying down the conceptual background of what space is. The section, and indeed the book, begins with a look at historical approaches to space. Emre Akbil's 'Ontological (Dis)embodiment of Space' cleverly calls on some of the greatest minds of Western thought to debate and discuss the very nature of *space*. Although separated by time and space, he brings together such luminaries as Isaac Newton, Gottfried Leibniz, Immanuel Kant, Henri Bergson and Martin Heidegger on stage for a hypothetical seminar. The essay cleverly demonstrates how in Western thought there is a dichotomous relation between us

and the space we inhabit, reflecting the mind/body dualism, not just in the arguments of his esteemed panel but also in the imaginary theatre room, an artificial structure protecting them from the elements.

The next paper, 'Rethinking Islamic-Anatolian Space' by Hürol and Numan, introduces the importance of culture on ideas of space, by looking at historical Islamic Anatolian architecture. In a complete departure from the previous essay and from Western thought, the Anatolian architecture demonstrates a dynamic relationship between environment, the social psychology of the people and religious belief. Instead of duality between opposites, there is balance.

Part 2: Cultures of Architectural Space, by its very title, suggests that architecture is the focus of the next set of essays, from the thirteenth century Persian university, the Raba-e Rashidi, where the focus is not on the building as an object but as a reflection of social practices and knowledge systems, to the innovative postmodernist designs of Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas.

Kristof Klonen's 'Inside! A Case Study in the Social Psychology of Prison Architecture' relates to his ethnographic study of a Belgium prison. It demonstrates how *space* is not passive, but can actively influence those that dwell within that space. The oppressive nature of the building design and lack of private space continues to influence the behaviour of those confined there, even after their release. The study is fascinating, the only criticism would be that the overall tone is slightly moralising when there is no need as the study speaks volumes itself.

Part 3: Songs of Space moves from the physical space of buildings to the space of the mind. It also contains what is probably the most original treatment of space in the book. 'Have You Heard

the One about the Cave Man and the Amplifier?’ by Rodney Sharkey is an examination of performance space. In this case, it is the live performances of the gothic musician, Nick Cave, over a period of twenty years in widely differing venues, from classical to post-modern. Sharkey concludes that, while textually and aurally the music remains the same, the performance reflects the space in which it is taking place.

Part 4: Invisible Cities brings the book to a close with a selection of essays on virtual space, including the symbolic construction of national spaces through advertising campaigns, and the persistence of sacred spaces in Turkey. The section concludes with ‘Cyberspace and Public Culture’. While others have decried the internet as the end of mass-media communication, Patrick O’Mahony argues that the internet is a new kind of public space. The public space he refers to is one of political identity. Whereas previously public memory was informed by mass media such as newspapers, one origin to many recipients, the internet allows many-to-many communications. He argues that electronic media has resulted in both greater personalisation and an expansion of public memory. He believes that its value comes from the concepts and practices of social space, which in turn allow the electronic media to contribute to the democratic changes of social space.

This is a solid attempt at bringing together diverse approaches to space and spatial representation from different disciplines. One minor criticism with the multidisciplinary approach of this book is that it is easy to get lost among the difficult subject-specific terminology employed by some of the writers, such as ‘they further both time-space distantiation and compression in the extensification and intensification of communication’ (p188). Having said that, this should not detract from what is otherwise a thought-provoking

addition to the debate. Finally, does this book answer the question, what is space? It seems to produce more questions than answers. It does, however, ably demonstrate the complexity of space. It can be historical, political, gendered, public, physical or abstract. It is not passive. We do not merely inhabit space, but interact with it. It is a product of cultural and social knowledge and practice; but it also, in turn, constructs these practices and knowledge. Space, in all its forms, is shown to be something that is far from empty.

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