Remaking the American College Campus

Essays

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McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers
Jefferson, North Carolina

Teachable Space

When the Spaces Where We Teach Become the Spaces That We Teach

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The grumbling started the first day of my summer journalism class: What are we doing here in this building? How long has this place been here? What's up with the air in here? This place sucks—I feel like I am about to choke. Well, I feel like I am about to puke. What is that smell? Carpet? Paint? Tile? I'm freezing. No way, dude—I'm burning up. Can we open a window, or turn up the A/C? Didn't you say this was a brand new building? Did y'all come in on the second floor? Did you see that rusty bridge? How can the bridge already be falling apart? And the makeshift "Stairs" sign? Did you see that? I'm glad it was there—how else would I have found the damn stairs? Why don't they have the stairs closer to the entrance? What's going on with that huge room upstairs—what's it for? Did anyone find another way out—or in? Whose building is this? Who is this Joe S. Mundy? Wouldn't he be ashamed to have this place named after him? Why are they making you teach here? Do we have to be here? What is this place, anyway?

While I am in class, I find my students' comments simply amusing, but on the drive up to class the second day of class, thinking about how things had gone the day before and thinking of the best way to get into a discussion of the assigned readings, I feel a flash of inspiration: Maybe there's something we are feeling about this building that will help us do the work of the class?

* * *

Among teachers, there is a certain mythology about something called a "teachable moment"—a situation that presents itself as a moment of clarity in which the goals of the course are suddenly and vividly thrown into relief and the work of teaching and learning flashes with intensity and purpose. I

have experienced teachable moments myself and have learned to both identify them and foster them in my classes. But this time what I had on my hands was not only a finite moment that was teachable but also a space that was teachable, a teachable space.

Thinking about how to transform the space where we are studying onto the space that we are studying, I decide to have the students do a 30-minute timed writing assignment to show what they are feeling in and about the building. It is a journalism class, after all, and they need to write. Clearly they are having a strong reaction. I am, too. Maybe I can channel all that negative energy into something productive for the class—get them working right away on writing scenes and doing effective description that shows rather than tells the reader what is going on. Maybe have them read their pieces aloud to each other and have them share their writing with each other right away to help introduce them into the mindset of writing for a public—especially since it is something they are not attached to in the same way they will be to their bigger assignments?

When I tell the students my plan and give them the prompt—"Show what this building feels like to someone who has never been inside it"—they simply grin. Maybe they are taken aback by the clear simplicity of the request. Certainly it feels to me to be a departure. My students usually kid me about my handouts, which are sometimes so complexly layered and so detailed in their descriptions of the framework and purpose of the assignment that they are longer than the writing assignments themselves.

Usually when I hand out an in-class writing assignment, I get a different response. It's an odd but strangely coherent mix of disbelief (as if to say, "You are joking, right?"), impudence (as if to say, "Sure—you and what army, Bob?"), and resistance (as if to say, "Do we have to?"). We usually banter back and forth for a few moments before I start to see a new look emerging. This one combines impatience (as if to say, "Stop talking about it and let's get it over with."), insolence (as if to say, "Is that the hardest thing you can come up with?"), and sly impishness (as if to say, "I've got something that will get your goat, Bob!"). I know that when I see the impishness emerge, they are ready to start writing. This time, though, the impishness is there from the beginning.

Once they are writing, I notice something else distinctive: unlike other writing assignments, where they are working to pull something out of their heads (or somewhere else), here they actively look around at the room. Some get up to look more closely at different objects on the wall and to get different perspectives on the room. Some even take a moment to walk out in the hall to make sure they are getting the colors, textures, smells, and feels right. Even if the pieces suck, I think, at least they are getting into the spirit of nonfiction narrative writing.

As they settle into their writing, I start writing, too. Although I tell them to write in scenes built from concrete sensory details, I write in fragments—writing for myself instead of to an audience, struggling even to articulate the questions at the heart of my feelings about the space:

> This building seems so empty—empty of furniture, empty of people, empty of indications about its purpose or function, and most of all, empty of any significance to me or to my students. Wasn't this building just built earlier this year? How is it that, six months later, they still haven't hung the miniblinds? How can it still smell like fresh paint and vinyl tile? It's like a brand new house where a family has moved all their stuff in the day before they all die in a car crash and the place has been preserved forever new. Surreal. On the other hand, how does a building that is only six months old already have a rusted bridge, a huge plastic garbage can to catch a roof leak, and a little coffee can to catch a leak at the water fountain?
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> Where am I anyway? Once you are inside the building (or even once you are outside it on the first floor, where your vision of the rest of the campus is obstructed by a tall wall of concrete paving stones), it is hard to see the rest of the campus and even harder to orient yourself in relation to it. The interior spaces, stairwells and hallways seem almost resolute in their refusal to indicate their function or their preferred reading paths. And where the rooms in some buildings are daunting because of their symbolic plentitude, the rooms here are daunting because of their resolute muteness, because of their incoherent stammering.
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> The classrooms themselves are equally placeless: you could be in a seminar room Anywhere, USA—Anywhere, Anywhere, really. Should a classroom have a sense of place? Should a building? Should it have a sense of purpose? Should it be able to communicate it?[1]
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> The building even seems to have its own weather phenomenon, somehow managing to be warmly humid and freezing cold at the same time. Is it part of the proclaimed "sustainability" of its design or some fluke? The neatly arranged and unused chairs, the huge dry erase board with no dry erase markers—it's like a conference room in search of a corporation. There are lots of windows, for sure, but what do they open into? Blue sky and concrete retaining walls.
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> I had a hunch going in to this term that not one of my students had even noticed the building was here much less set foot in it, and I was right. I think it looks sad, like it is unloved; I want to make it symbolic of something. But what? Who is this building? What is it? What is it for? Why do I feel so confused in here, so dis-oriented, so dis-placed? Is the building confused or am I? Am I asking it to do something it can't do? And what is that sense of déjà vu? What does this place remind me of?

I look at my watch. My god. Thirty-five minutes have gone by. Everyone is looking at me. They are still grinning.

Listening to the first student read her piece to the class, I am feeling good: her voice is clear and strong, her description of the place is vivid and engaging, and her writing is surprisingly thematically coherent. I am pleased to find that the other narratives are equally strong, and that each has done a better job than I have of sticking to the concrete details and familiar metaphors that show how the place feels. It's the strongest collection of on-the-fly writing I have ever seen in a class.

Not one of the narratives was neutral in tone, however. Indeed, all are negative. Some said the walls were piss yellow, some puke yellow. Some wrote that the building looked like a prison or asylum, with the adjunct professor offices lining the corridors looking more like cells or interrogation rooms than offices. More than one said it reminded them of a middle school or high school building, one going as far as titling their piece "Smells Like Middle School." Many wrestled with the odd mix of humid and cold air circulating in the building, making associations again to locker rooms.

Everyone said they were confused by the building in some way. Faced with the indeterminate space of the second floor, one imagined it might be a good place for indoor sports—"perhaps it is a place to play a little tag, a little roller hockey, maybe even a little disc golf." One student said navigating the building felt like playing "a choose-your-own-adventure game gone wrong."

Many simply hated the building. Some took it to the next step of hating the architects. One student summed up her piece by saying, "I can't believe I'm spending part of my summer here. I hope to Christ this is the only class I ever endure in this hellhole. If this is karma, I must have really done someone wrong—really wrong."

For many, their response to the building was articulated in contrast to their feelings about the rest of the campus, with several students making the connection between how "out of place" they felt in the building with the way the building itself feels out of place in relation to the rest of the campus.

Southwestern University is a small liberal arts college located in Georgetown, Texas, about 30 miles north of Austin. Southwestern was founded in 1840, making it the oldest institution of higher learning in Texas. Like many liberal arts colleges with long histories, the school emphasizes its connection to the past. At Southwestern, this emphasis on its history is connected to an emphasis on sustainability. With several LEED-certified buildings on campus and robust sustainability initiatives led by students, faculty and staff throughout campus, Southwestern is clearly committed to environmental sustainability. The two claims are connected: Southwestern's claims about tradition are not only a claim about heritage, but also a "built to last" claim for sustained relevance: we've been here for a while, and you can count on us being here for an even longer while into the future.

This dual commitment to tradition and sustainability is materialized in its campus buildings and grounds, which have for several decades now conformed to a well-defined aesthetic emphasizing traditional designs clad mostly in locally-sourced cream-colored limestone and surrounded by xeriscaped landscaping featuring naturalistic designs and plants indigenous to Central Texas. The limestone quickly changes color as it is exposed to the

air, so even relatively new limestone buildings look aged quickly, making them appear to have always been there. The effect is striking, making the place appear to have grown out of the ground, which materially reinforces Southwestern's claim to longevity and sustainability. People respond well to it, too. Indeed, I have taught at Southwestern for a number of years, and whenever I talk to someone in the area about where I work, they always say, "Oh, that's such a beautiful campus!" The students say this a lot, too.

The Mundy Building is the one exception to this. The building has many of the same features as the rest of the campus—locally-sourced materials, xeriscaped landscaping, energy efficient HVAC and lighting—but it seems thrown together in such a hurry that it seems downright weird. When the university president announced the building at a faculty meeting, he told us he was calling it the "Surge Building" because it was supposed to accommodate a surge of new faculty, their offices, and the classrooms they would need for teaching, but also because it would be built quickly.[2] The president visualized an open plan building able to adjust to many different uses. Indeed, I remember him telling us that he was naming the building after an alum named Joe Mundy because the building would be "modest, flexible, and dedicated to serving whatever needs the University would have, just like Joe Mundy."

* * *

When the students are done reading their pieces aloud, I ask them if that would have been different if I had set it up differently, if I had said something like, "I think this is the greatest classroom I have ever taught in. Let's take a moment to describe how it feels to someone who has not been fortunate enough to have experienced it."

"If you had done that," one of them says, "then we would have known you were crazy…."

After class, I wander around seeing the building through my students' eyes. Why do we all seem to be disoriented once we get in here? Why does it call up such negative associations? I decide to go back to my office a few buildings over, have lunch, and walk back into the building as if for the first time.[3]

When I walk up to Joe S. Mundy Hall coming from the center of campus, I see one clear entrance. It's easy to see, and easy to read as an entrance: a straight sidewalk with a tall white sign and green grass beside it leads up a slight incline into a flat metal bridge that empties into a glass door in a setback foyer at the bottom of the largest gable. The building is clearly made of corrugated metal, but it is softened by a ring of xeriscaping featuring native plants now common to the rest of this campus in the middle of drought-susceptible central Texas.

Approaching the bridge, though, my expectations begin to shift, and my certainty about the building goes along with it. The first thing I notice is that I realize that I should have wondered why there was a bridge going up to the door. The reason I notice this now is that when I get closer to the building, I notice that what appears to be one-story building from the sidewalk is actually a two-story building. The bridge empties into the second floor of the building, and the landscaping that appeared at first glance to be rimming the building is at the edge of the wall that sits on the side of the bridge closest to me, some twenty feet away from the building itself. I don't know it now, but this dynamic of being confused navigating shifting surfaces will be a feeling I return to again and again as I try to make sense of the building once I am inside it.

Getting closer to the bridge, I notice that it is one of those new Wheeler "instant patina" rusted steel bridges that are popping up in city parks and other naturalistic built environments. I wonder if that flaking rust will get on my shoes, whether I will track it into the building, whether the bridge will make it through the year.

Looking over the edge of the bridge, I see a canyon with the building on one side and a tall wall of dry-stacked white concrete pavestones on the other. At the bottom of the canyon appear to be two sidewalks running roughly parallel to each other and perpendicular to the bridge, like two small channels of a larger stream. I think two sidewalks running parallel are odd, but don't really give it much thought until later, when I go down into the canyon myself and realize that one of the sidewalks is actually a drainage spillway.

When I approach the door, I see that again it tells me that it is the Joe S. Mundy Building. The glare of the morning sun makes the glass reflect my own image back to me, but I can make out the contours of the interior—especially a tall object just inside the door. As I open the door, my eyes are immediately drawn to a tall wooden sign with a framed glass window—the kind you might see in a hotel lobby identifying which floors and rooms are being used for which event.

Taped on the outside of the window longways is a sheet of white office paper with the word "STAIRS" typed at the top in all caps and a red arrow drawn by hand underneath. I cannot help but be startled by it, really. Even as I try to look past it, my eyes come back to the sign and I shake my head. What the hell is that doing there?

The sign points to my right, so of course I look in that direction. All I see is a vast empty room with low ceilings and an unidentifiable shape. Scattered about haphazardly are folding chairs, a table, a podium, a miniblind, a large garbage can, and lots and lots of yawning open space that paradoxically feels claustrophobic. What am I supposed to do with this room?[4]

At the far end of the building, in the direction of the arrow, is a cluster of walls and a glowing red EXIT sign. Ah, you read my mind! Get me out of here! I feel like a moth chasing light, but I can't help myself: what business could I possibly have in the great unmarked foreground space? Besides, the sign said "STAIRS," and I am overcome by the anxiety of nothingness, so I give in to the magnetic pull of the red sign. To get there, though, I have to negotiate a large trash can.

Once there, I am met with a short narrow corridor that thankfully features another glowing EXIT sign. I hardly even notice the other doors in the hall as I reach for the door marked "Stairs."

I open the door, sigh, and peer in sheepishly. Oh my God. What is that color? Vertigo Yellow? Where else is there to go but down?

The lone door at the bottom suggests deliverance, but instead opens up into another dimly-lit narrow and short low-ceilinged hallway lined with brown doors that are themselves lined with glass slats. I imagine they are little peep holes used to check on the inmates, but I notice that the only ones with anything to look at have faculty names on them—names I've never even heard of before, even though I teach at a small liberal arts college with fewer than 125 full-time faculty.

After encountering a few oddities—a leaky water fountain and a hauntingly empty collection of lounge furniture—I finally arrive at Room 130. It sports the same glass-slat wood veneer door. The lights are off. The blinds are drawn. No one is visible inside. I take a breath and open the door.

Opening the door, I instantly feel the room coming out to pull me inside its paradox: slightly damp, slightly cold, slightly hot, full of vinyl and nylon off-gasses, it feels and smells like smog.

Because it is the same furniture I see all over campus, the furniture feels vaguely comforting, familiar. The tables are arranged in a horseshoe with chairs all facing the middle of the room. At the open end sits a table set apart; its one chair faces the center of the room as well. The room is roughly square. Two walls have windows, and two walls do not. Behind the lone table and chair is a huge dry erase board. On one end of the board is the door and on the other end is a TV/VCR/DVD cart. The windowed walls form a corner of the classroom and also of the building.

The walls without windows are blank except for a row of light switches and what appear to be two thermostats—each accompanied by a typed note tacked to the wall next to them. After spending a little more time in the building, I notice that these little signs are everywhere. It is hard not to see them as emblems of some sort—as little portals into the larger contradictions circulating in the building.

The sign on the wall next to a row of light switches opens with the message "Welcome to Our New Classrooms," and features a two-color representation of the "Conserve" logo on the top ("Conserve" is the system that the University has adopted recently to conserve energy in buildings and water outside; like these signs, the system as a whole combines elements of "sustainable" design and requests/demands for behavior modification among inhabitants). Below, the sign tells users that the "lighting for this classroom has been designed for maximum efficiency and use of natural light" and explains the wide range of switches and combinations of switches that one might use to customize the amount of light in the room. The sign is genial in tone and gives a helpful outline of your options in negotiating the system.

On the opposite wall, though, above the thermostats, is a different sign altogether. This sign not only lacks the appealing two-color logo, but also represents a discourse of control and futility. The first part of the note explains how the system works. These sentences are in lower case and are simple declarative sentences. The next section teases you, telling you that you can invoke "occupied mode" to temporarily override the default controls for the weekend and after hours for three hours. As the sign continues to describe what you can do within the system, though, the message gets increasingly insistent in telling you not to bother trying to make the system work for you. First, it shifts to all capitals, then it also underlines the capitals. The words match the tone: "THIS BUTTON WILL NOT INCREASE HEATING ABOVE 69 OR DECREASE COOLING BELOW 76. NO USER ADJUSTMENT IS PERMITTED ABOVE OR BELOW THESE VALUES AND ALL OTHER CONTROL BUTTONS ARE LOCKED OUT." To top it off, the sign sums up by essentially saying that even the controls that look like controls to you are not controls: "THE GREY INSTRUMENT MOUNTED ON THE WALL NEXT TO THE THERMOSTAT IS NOT PART OF THE AIR CONDITIONING SYSTEM AND SHOULD *NEVER* BE ADJUSTED." What a counterpoint to the underdetermined space upstairs!

Walking out of the classroom and around the other side of the hall, I finally locate a second entrance and exit on the first floor. The door opens up right underneath the bridge that delivered me to the second floor.

Across from the door is a lone bench dwarfed by the concrete wall and the bridge. In between the door and the bench are the concrete forms I thought were parallel sidewalks when I was looking down from above. The sidewalk is clearly enough a sidewalk, but oddly delivers its users to the bench instead of the door. Only by negotiating a right angle would anyone be able to get to the door from the sidewalk. The concave spillway parallel to the sidewalk is a more convenient route—at least for a while—but could make for treacherous footing.

As I am looking around, I see students leaving another class use the spillway to get to the place where the two forms converge, step over the gravel between them, and then continue on the sidewalk around the concrete wall

back to the rest of campus. I wonder what the designers thought students would do?

* * *

I am driving home for the day listening to Radiohead and thinking about the Mundy building when it hits me: The reason I have had a sense of déjà vu about this building ever since I entered it for the first time earlier this summer isn't that the space is familiar but that the feeling in the space is familiar: when I am in this building, I feel like I am reading a student's first draft for a journalism article!

When I read first drafts, I see a lot of stuff there—scenes, ideas, voices, textures, tones, narrative lines, etc.—but rarely see a clear sense of purpose, momentum, or force. Likewise, when I walk around and look at the Mundy Building, I sense a collection of shapes, masses, textures, smells, atmospheres, forms, etc., but I don't sense an overall coherence. I have trouble reconciling what the building looks and feels like from the outside and what it looks and feels like inside. I have trouble figuring out how it fits into its surroundings. The building sometimes hails me to get my attention, but mostly it seems indifferent to me and doesn't seem to know what to do with my attention once it has it. I can't figure out the pattern for when the building gives me freedom of movement and activity and when it controls and constrains my choices. I can't apprehend the aesthetic of the building, or its ethic. I can't locate myself in the building either.

Actually, the feeling I have in the Mundy Building is also the feeling I have when I manage to read my own first drafts critically: that feeling that whatever in the piece is working, there is almost always a sense that the piece of writing does not hold together (yet?) because it has not found its identity, its distinctive reason for being, or its way of being. With my own writing, though, I usually know whether I am consciously and purposely constructing a narrative that feels disorienting. When I read other people's work, I can't know that, so I search for clues that tell me that the piece of writing knows it is confusing. Knowing this helps me know how to orient my reading of the piece. The difference is, of course, that you cannot revise a building, at least in the same way that you can an essay.

The first time I went into the Mundy Building, I felt disoriented but couldn't decide if the building itself was confusing me or whether I was confusing the building. Once I started teaching there, I felt more and more confident that whatever part I was playing in making this a confusing space, the building itself is not only confusing but confused. It's not that I don't like being confused or surprised or even misled by a building. I love meandering through a building that has some kind of ambition over me, some design over me. I love a building that slowly takes shape as I negotiate its space, that

rewards me for being observant of both minute details and the big picture—especially if it leaves me a few choices about how I will negotiate it. What I don't like is finding myself wandering through a building where the longer I am in it the more confused I feel, where I find myself wondering whether the people who designed and built it are confused—where I can't help but think that the people who built it probably can't tell you why a wall is here or why an entrance is there or why the offices look the way they do or why the building feels the way it does or why the building makes you feel like running out of it screaming...

Especially in my journalism class, I push my students to seek out intriguing juxtapositions that purposely de-center readers to keep them engaged in the process of excavating the text, but I always do so by warning them of the consequent risk of de-centering readers so far that they slip through the narrative, victims of the centrifugal forces unleashed by the writer. I tell them that they don't have to hit their readers over the head with their ideas to communicate them, but they do need to show them clearly enough to keep readers reading long enough to see and feel the piece take shape. I tell them that reporting the story tells the writer what the story is, but representing that story to readers demands a different kind of thinking.

I use myself as an example: I tell them that when I write, I imagine readers who like a challenge but want guidance and who seek rewards for their interpretive work along the way. Likewise, I tell them that my best experiences as a reader have come when the writer stays way out ahead of me and keeps me guessing about where I am going to go and how I am going to get there and what I am going to be thinking and feeling and hoping and dreading while I am reading it. I don't need to know what their "intentions" are, but I do want to feel that they do have intentions, whatever they may be. I want to feel that they have an ambition to build a world for me—even if it is a disorienting world—and I want to trust that they know what they are doing.

More than that, though, I warn my students about unintentional sloppiness. I am into deliriously complex and contradictory cultural forms as much as the next postmodernist, but that doesn't mean I think anything goes—especially when I am grading papers.[5] I tell them that if they challenge readers' naturalized "common sense" expectations about time and space, then they should do so knowingly, not because they simply don't know how to tell a story. I tell them that fragmenting and intercutting the narrative should be more than a gimmick; it should be a strategy to make the phenomenological experience of reading the article part of the story itself. I sometimes confuse even myself when I try to articulate the distinction, but to me there is such a thing as purposeful chaos (however problematic that purpose might be) and accidental chaos.

What I try to figure out each time I start reading an apparently chaotic

piece of writing is: which kind of chaos is this? Most of the first drafts I see are accidentally chaotic. I take it as my job to show my students where this seems to be happening so that they can more consciously revise their writing to make it do what they want it to do for the readers they are trying to reach. Maybe this is why the most salient question on my mind when I am in the Mundy Building is about the source and quality of the disorientation I feel there. Clearly the space feels chaotic to me, but is it designed to be destabilizing, de-centering, or even experimental, or is the result of unintentional sloppiness?

* * *

It's the third day of class. After just two days in Mundy 130, we have moved to a special classroom today for a screening of Errol Morris's 1997 documentary film *Fast, Cheap & Out of Control*. It's a place called the Media Room, which is behind a closed door in The Cove, the short-order snack and coffee bar in the basement of the Campus Center. The room is intimate—maybe 20 by 25 feet. Matching black and tan couches and chairs line three of the walls. At the end of the couch closest the door is a wooden end table and a table lamp you might see in a hotel room. In front of the other couches are two wooden coffee tables. The wall at the other end of the room is filled with a 6 by 9 screen, an equipment cabinet, and speakers. A video projector hangs from the low ceiling, which itself is pierced by recessed lighting. There are no windows. The only light on at the moment is the table lamp.

The thirteen students in my journalism class are flopped out in black vinyl beanbag chairs on the floor in the center of the room and on the couches and chairs. I sit in an armchair I always set apart from the others at an angle in the corner of the room opposite the door. Most of the students have reoriented their bodies to face each other and the center of the room, but some still stare at the blank screen and only turn their heads when they want to speak. It feels like I am having them over to my house to watch a movie. Their body language is loose, relaxed, but not sleepy. Me, I have so much to say about *Fast, Cheap & Out of Control* and Mundy and space and narrative and disorientation and control and freedom and chaos that my legs are bouncing in my chair.

Every class I teach centers on dialogic, seminar-style discussions, so every class I teach is as much about process as product. I am usually pretty good at giving my students enough space in the discussion not only to surprise themselves as they discover what they think, but also to surprise me.

Today, though—no, the whole summer, really—everything feels different. This year the biggest thing on my mind this Summer II Term is not making space for my students to discover their voices. The biggest thing on my

mind this year is whether I will even be able to even finish the Summer II Term before my son—our second child—is born. His due date on the midwife's calendar is July 9. An ultrasound along the way predicted July 3 as the due date. Our daughter was born two weeks before her due date. Summer II goes from June 9 to July 15. Something has to give...

I decide that what has to give is the "give" that I usually structure into my courses—especially my summer courses, where I feel compelled to establish a more relaxed summertime feel. When I plan for regular semester courses, I work hard to find just the right classroom space to match the "feel" of each course. Same goes for how I teach: I am firm on goals but flexible on means, so I spend a lot of time and energy working on the structure of the syllabus, assignments, and schedule so that we can all know the context as clearly as possible and so that once the class starts I can know where we have space and time to push.

When it comes to thinking about my room selection for summer school, though, I always just go with the departmental default classroom—Olin 322, one of the Communication Studies seminar rooms in my building. I hate the room: tables in a giant horseshoe, me in the middle. Two small windows near the ceiling (gun turrets or impenetrable prison windows, the association is never good). The windows are so high that you have to crawl up on a table to adjust the dark mini blinds that cover them. To complete the panoptic vibe, the room is haunted by a video surveillance camera on the back wall—it's there to record speeches in the public speaking class—and a monitor standing off in the corner. I hate the room enough during the regular semesters, but I simply can't abide the room in the summer. When I feel sorry for myself that I am yet again teaching summer school to make ends meet, and when I feel sorry for my students that they are not out doing something more adventurous or ambitious than getting a class required for their majors "out of the way," as they say, I at least want to know where I am so I can know where I might be if I weren't there in the classroom...

Every summer, I have started each class in the default room and pledged to my students never to meet there again for the rest of the term. You might be wondering why I agree to teach in Olin 322 in the first place. Good question. I tell my students that I do it like this because I like to keep my journalism students moving from place to place to keep them on their toes—to keep their senses fresh to sharpen their perceptive and representational skills as reporters and writers. That isn't entirely bullshit—I do believe it, but why then don't I do it to my journalism students when I teach the class in the regular semester? I think a more honest answer might be: I do it because I can. In the regular semester, we run into the reality of scarcity, but in the summer, when there are few students and faculty around, we can just show up wherever we want to go whenever we want to be there. If I had the same freedom to

choose where we should have class each day based on what we are learning and how, I might just do it this way all year long.

This summer, though, everything had to be like clockwork. A friend of mine with kids once told me that having a child invites chaos into your life and having more than one child broadcasts the invitation. By the time that invitation is circulating the second time, you have a better sense of what to expect, but it's still largely beyond your control. And while I had gotten a lot of mileage out of the knowledge that I survived the first round (and really did much more than survive), I knew to expect that my expectations did not prepare me for what we experienced when my daughter was born three years before. And as I got closer and closer to the due date this time, something happened to me: I began to be haunted by a very specific feeling about something I couldn't know. I knew that no matter how much I tried to visualize our first birth experience and the child that would be arriving and what it would be like to live with her and who we would become as parents and how it would all work together, I turned out to be way off. I started to wonder if I could ever predict anything else with any confidence anymore. I knew my life was about to change in ways that I could not imagine, much less control, but I still desired control. So I reached for certainties elsewhere. I looked for tangible ways of limiting the variables that would shape my future. I looked for ways of simplifying my complex life. I looked for ways of getting my crazy summer journalism class under control.

I had it all worked out in my mind, like setting up a dollhouse. My first goal was to make sure that I would finish my journalism class before our due date. Moving everything from six to four weeks meant that there was no time to dilly-dally and contemplate the complexities of the endeavor or to follow ideas and conversations as they expanded to fill the space I made for them. Hell, there wouldn't even be time to suggest where those conversations might go if we were able to have them. This time I would create a class that was more self-contained, more predictable. This time I wouldn't do things the hard way like I always do. This time I would plan the work and work the plan.

A key element in the plan was finding a classroom space where we could stay put and be happy with it so we wouldn't waste time finding a new space to have class every day. I visualized a single flexible classroom that would be good for discussing readings, screening and discussing documentary films, and doing small group student writing workshops. The problem is that every classroom where I have taught in the past has not felt right for such a wide array of functions, and even when we have had to make do with the classroom where we regularly meet, we usually have gone outside or use the halls and lobbies of the buildings for the small group work.

In May, I went to the registrar to see if there were any seminar rooms

available. I spent an hour walking around campus following some leads. It was exciting, like a big day of house hunting: I entered each building with my little scribbled post-it note, found each room, walked around in it, sat in different chairs, and opened and closed blinds, trying each time to imagine what class would feel like for me and for my students. The one buried deep within the library is nice—lots of windows, one big table—but is too small. The one in the science building has no windows—worse than my default. Would it be better to be crammed in a room with a view or spread out in a dungeon? There were two likely candidates in the religion and philosophy building that could work—they're in an old building that's been given a new interior, so they have a nice tension in them. But they seemed inhabited already—the walls are covered in artwork and every corner is stacked with teaching materials. I felt like an intruder poaching someone else's space.

The last two rooms on my list are in a brand new building just completed the previous winter on the northeast side of campus: The Joe S. Mundy Hall. Certainly I wouldn't feel like I was poaching there. I had never even been in the building, so I was curious. I thought that it would be good to shake my students up a bit, and shake myself up a bit. Maybe having a class in an entirely new and unmarked place would substitute for the benefits of the classroom-in-motion? I decided to visit the Mundy Building last, so I would have my full choice in front of me when I saw the new space.

I wandered around the building, feeling ambivalent about the space but impatient with my inability to find "the perfect spot." I was also feeling an odd sense of déjà vu about the place. I knew I had never been in the building before, but something felt very familiar. I decided to set aside my doubts and hauntings in the hope that my students would feel more excited to be in a new space than uneasy with the space itself. Mundy, here we come.

* * *

Fast, Cheap & Out of Control is Errol Morris at his best: strong, surprising, intriguing juxtapositions of talking head interviews from four different people—a topiary gardener, a lion tamer, a robot specialist, and a mole-rat specialist—make up the bulk of the film, but they are spliced together as well as intercut with images from a circus, images of each of the main characters doing their thing, stock footage, and scenes from old movies. The soundtrack by Caleb Sampson carries its own story throughout the film, and matches Morris's careful orchestration between what we see and what we hear at every single moment in the film.

At first glance, this collage of different elements appears chaotic and random, but Morris quickly trains you to expect them and to find meaning in the collisions of form and content. Even the interviews themselves—the most conventional element from the genre of documentary—are never

offered as transparent windows onto character: the camera constantly calls attention to itself by swirling, tilting, canting, and finding extreme close-ups or lingering while the interviewee waits for the next question.

My students watch enough fictional films and fictional TV (and even reality TV) to read the filmic techniques Morris uses as purposely destabilizing codes. But they generally know "documentaries" to present themselves as either entirely objectified and naturalistic windows onto the world or as entirely subjective or personal mirrors into the self, so *Fast, Cheap & Out of Control* comes as a shock. This is exactly why I show it to them the day they turn in their first draft of their first major assignment for the class. Teaching the movie allows me to point to something tangible and say,

> You know how we have been talking about making conscious choices with your narratives, about finding the form that fits the subject matter you are covering, about pushing the limits of what constitutes journalism and nonfiction, about the difference between being a confusing writer and a surprising writer, about always working on multiple levels at once, about writing open narratives versus closed narratives, about making space in your narratives for readers and trusting readers to work with you to make meaning but not leaving them to fend for themselves, about striking a balance between offering up a chaotic mess and overdetermining your narrative and how difficult that balancing act is? Well, this film is a clinic.

Of course, I never say it so directly, or so breathlessly—at least not until today. Today, I am so excited to articulate the connections between *Fast, Cheap & Out of Control*, the Mundy Building, and writing pedagogy that I am not patient with the process of bringing them to where I am or with making space for them to take us off on "tangents," I just keep on pushing:

> I think the most interesting way to look at this film is to see it as an allegory of nonfiction narrative itself—especially the kind that we are doing in this class. We've identified the film's main idea—that these four people do not control nature so much as they study it enough to know how to channel natural processes to their own ends. Here's the point: Isn't that like the documentarian? Like the reporter? Unlike the fiction writer, we can't make this stuff up. If you aren't willing to be surprised by the people you interview and observe, why go into the field? But also unlike more traditional definitions of documentary or journalism, we don't just passively record "nature" or "reality." You have to be able to perceive it as accurately as possible, which itself is a challenge, but ultimately you also have to shape it into a story that meets the reader halfway—that knows reader expectations enough to know where to push them. Likewise, do you notice how undetermined your response to this film is? Some of you have said that you are not sure what to say about the film because you are not sure what it says. Fair enough. What would it be like to imagine that as a goal of the film instead of a shortcoming?

I notice along the way that they are now sitting up in their chairs and couches and beanbags. Most of the students have taken multiple classes with me and have never witnessed a riff like this before. I push on.

> What is cool about this movie is how Morris is able to create a strong narrative trajectory from apparently loosely coupled elements. Isn't the fun of it figuring it out—sorting through the different elements to chart your own path through it? Well, this term I'll be pushing you to develop reporting strategies that help you understand the worlds of the people you are writing about from the inside out. I want you to be able to think about your work like these people interviewed in *Fast, Cheap & Out of Control* do. I'll also be pushing you to experiment like Morris does with space, time, and composition to construct narratives that challenge readers to participate in the construction of meaning without leaving them to do all the work.

All eyes are on me. Even as I am lecturing them, though, I am noting the irony that I am telling them about showing versus telling instead of showing them. I decide to at least slow down to explore the irony before I throw Mundy into the mix: "So here I am overdetermining a conversation about the value of not overdetermining your narratives—about showing versus telling, about meeting readers halfway and making space in your narrative for readers to find their way. I was clear about my design over you, but I didn't make any space for you. Do you want some space?"

They bite. We spin off into an energetic and expansive dialogue not only about journalism, documentary, and control but also teaching, learning, and control. We agree that understanding the allegorical exploration of nonfiction narrative at work in *Fast, Cheap & Out of Control* depends on us knowing that Morris knows what he's doing. If you already know Morris's work, like I do, you come into it knowing that he knows enough about what he is doing to start to mess with what he is doing for effect, but his purposeful experimentation is clear even to most first-time viewers. They see a bizarre camera angle or a disorienting jump cut and they don't wonder: "Is that some kind of mistake? Is that the best they can do? Who let these guys make this film, anyway?" No, they think: "Man, that guy is really creative. Look at how he uses space to tell the story—how space becomes a character in the story." Maybe they ask themselves why he wants to disorient you or why he wants to use space and narrative conventions the way he does, and maybe you might not be able to answer the question, but it is a fundamentally different question than: "I wonder if anyone making this film noticed that the editing and camera angles are the way they are," or "I wonder if these guys know what they are doing?"

Then someone says, "It's like that crappy classroom we were in Wednesday and Friday. I definitely have those questions about the Mundy building. I mean, why would anyone purposely design something like that?"

"Yes," another says. "I think it is so out of control that it is confusing. The only thing that seems to be under control is the AC, and even it looks like it leaks! And the view—it's controlled. Maybe the building seems so weird because it is random in how it controls some things and leaves others totally open?"

"Exactly," I say. "This is what I was trying to say earlier, but using Mundy and *Fast, Cheap & Out of Control* together is a better way to show it. Maybe the confusion we feel in Mundy comes from the fact that signs of intentionality and 'knowingness' that are so central to *Fast, Cheap & Out of Control* are painfully missing with the Mundy Building. Maybe the building doesn't work for us because its disorientations (and even its orientations) seem sloppy and haphazard instead of purposely complex or contradictory or even conscious of its complex contradictions. Here we are beginning a class on consciousness of narrative design and consciousness of meeting readers halfway to take them where you want to go, and we are fighting against a building and a classroom that either does not seem to care about these things at all or is defiantly standing against them. Maybe the designers knew what they were doing when they were designing it, but it didn't come across to any of us when we inhabited the space."

I glance at my watch and see that we are already over time. Instead of stopping there and hoping that they will make the connection on their own, I say it to make sure: "But before we get too high and mighty about it, let's bring it back home: While we are getting all superior about how much Mundy sucks, try to imagine what readers will be thinking while we are all are reading those drafts you turned in today. How will we 'inhabit' the space you've created for them? Will it feel more like *Fast, Cheap & Out of Control* or like Mundy? Or will it feel like something else entirely? Well, tomorrow, when we do our critique workshops and you get direct feedback from me and from your colleagues in your workgroup, you'll know more. The question is, where should we meet?"

Even as I ask them, I know the answer. Class-in-motion, here we come...

Notes

1. Cultural geographers generally define place in relation to its binary opposite: space. In this pairing, space is open, empty, undifferentiated, and unmarked, while place is heavy space, palpably significant, with a sense of its unique identity in relation to other places and surrounding space. In short, place is invested and identified space; it is a space of belonging and meaning. The classic exploration of this distinction is Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977). See also John Brinckerhoff Jackson, *The Necessity for Ruins and Other Topics* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980); John Brinckerhoff Jackson, *A Sense of Place, a Sense of Time* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996); Edward Relph, *Place and Placenessness* (London: Pion/Sage, 2008); and Marc Augé, *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity*, 2d ed., trans. John Howe (London: Verso, 2009). For overviews of these approaches, see Tim Cresswell, *Place: A Short Introduction* (Malden, MA: Wiley/Blackwell, 2004); Phil Hubbard and Rob Kitchin, eds., *Key Thinkers on Space and Place* (London: Sage, 2010); and Robert T. Tally, Jr., *Spatiality* (London: Routledge, 2013). Three important contemporary counter-models to the space/place binary are Henri Lefebvre's pairing of natural "absolute space" and social "representational space," Deleuze and Guattari's pairing of "smooth" and "striated" space, and Edward Soja's collapsing of the two into the concept of "thirdspace," or "real-and-imagined space." All of these frameworks engage the same basic conceptual and communicative problem of distinguishing marked and unmarked space; the theories of Lefebvre, Deleuze and Guattari, and Soja make more room for the complex overlaying and interpenetration of the two forms than is conveyed in the too-clear distinction between space and place. See Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991); and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Captialism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), especially 474–500; Edward Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (London: Blackwell, 1996); and Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Theory* (London: Verso, 2011).

2. It is worth noting here that the term "Surge Building" preceded the massive troop mobilization in Iraq of the same name in 2007, so the name did not yet have militaristic connotations when the building was announced.

3. The critical engagement of the building that follows is informed by phenomenological approaches to analyzing the built environment, which emphasize particularized and embodied affective interactions with the materiality of buildings and landscapes. See Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (1958; Boston: Beacon Press, 1994); Donald W. Meinig, ed., *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes: Geographical Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979); John R. Stilgoe, *Outside Lies Magic: Regaining History and Awareness in Everyday Places* (London: Walker Books, 2009); Alain de Botton, *The Architecture of Happiness* (New York: Vintage, 2008); Joyce Davidson, Liz Bondi, and Mick Smith, eds., *Emotional Geographies* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2005); and Christine Berberich, Neil Campbell, and Robert Hudson, eds., *Affective Landscapes in Literature, Art and Everyday Life* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2015). For more detailed engagement with a range of similar visual/material/spatial methodologies, see Gillian Rose, *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching With Visual Materials*, 3d ed. (London: Sage, 2011); and Gillian Rose and Divya P. Tolia-Kelly, eds., *Visuality/Materiality: Images, Objects and Practices* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2012).

4. While designers design buildings for certain purposes and with certain "affordances" and constraints, their uses and meanings are determined in and through use by the actual people who inhabit and move through them within their everyday lives. See James Gibson, "The Theory of Affordances," in Robert Shaw and John Bransford, eds., *Perceiving, Acting, and Knowing: Toward an Ecological Psychology* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1977); Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); Karen A. Franck and Quentin Stevens, eds., *Loose Space: Possibility and Diversity in Urban Life* (London: Routledge, 2007); Ben Highmore, *Ordinary Lives: Studies in the Everyday* (London: Routledge, 2011); and Ben Highmore, ed., *The Design Culture Reader* (London: Routledge, 2009). Any analysis of campus architecture therefore should include an analysis of acts and practices of resisting, negotiating, and complying with the designs of the built environment, with particular attention to the way that users interact with and "make places their own," but also how these acts of "making do" are ignored, policed, and/or incorporated into institutional regulation practices once they are recognized.

5. The phrase "complexity and contradiction" comes from Robert Venturi, a proponent of postmodernist architecture and design principles prominent in the 1970s and 1980s. See Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (New York: MoMA Press, 1977); and Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven

Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form*, rev. ed. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1977). See also Charles Jencks, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1984). For more background on the theory and practice of contemporary architecture and design, see Charles Jencks, *The Story of Post-Modernism: Five Decades of the Ironic, Iconic, and Critical in Architecture* (Malden, MA: Wiley/Blackwell, 2011).

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