The secret life of dead spaces in the academic office

Damian Ruth

'We are beginning to see that organization does not exist *in* space and time'

(O'Doherty et al., 2013: 1431)

Introduction

Inspired by ethnographies in visual and material culture (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Miller, 2008; Whincup, 2004), I interviewed nine academics for about an hour each in which they described their offices and responded to questions. It soon became obvious that these spaces offered a rich source of data about identity and sense of purpose and well-being. Many of the things contained within were infused with meaning, and were what Heracleous and Jacobs (2008) call 'embodied metaphors'. However, one striking metaphor that emerged was curiously non-embodied, and that was 'dead' spaces that sometimes even occupants were not aware of.

A colleague describes a 'dead' corner in his office: 'Probably because my back's to it and I don't take much notice of it, it doesn't seem to exist'. I point out that 'it's got a box of tissues, a set of drawers, a telephone, your telephone books...'. 'That's not my telephone', he replies, 'that's a dead telephone in a dead corner and the tissues aren't there for weeping [...] those are my books, but no particular care has gone into the selection'. In another colleague's office, I point out a file holder, which seemed forgotten. She replied that it might contain 'folders from students [...] materials from courses now long past, dead, gone...'.

Dead.

The bluntness of the metaphor, the reference to dead spaces, was striking. This led me to consider other related metaphors: empty, absent, secret, hidden, forgotten and invisible. And yet, dead spaces also seemed to be connected with hoarding and obsolescence, with legacies and loss. A paradox emerged; these dead spaces had life, their silence was eloquent.

The point here is that spaces function.

> Space and its appurtenances [...] are decidedly not neutral with respect to power, values and other meanings. Organization spaces are not empty shells forming a backdrop to or stage-setting for the rest of human activity. (Yanow, 2010: 142)

What began to interest me was the ways in which even empty spaces which, by their very nature, do not present as observable, might reveal power, values and other meanings – not only at the individual level, but also at the organisational level. Gagliardi refers to Hall's (1959) claim about culture, and 'a universe of behavior [...] *hardly observable*, which operates without emerging into consciousness...' (Gagliardi, 1990: 12). The problem, suggests Gagliardi, is the emphasis on mental processes and cognition that leads to holes in current organisational analysis. The solution is to attend not only to 'logos' (beliefs) and 'ethos' (values) but also to 'pathos' (feeling). My thoughts wander from 'pathos' to 'eros' to 'thanatos'. Would it be useful, I began to wonder, to explore links between holes in current organisational analysis, a point revived again more recently by O'Doherty et al. (2013) and actual holes, gaps and dead spaces in academic offices?

What became apparent in the interviews was that death and secrets come in many forms and with many associations: hidden, put away, forgotten, out of sight, dumped, empty, finished with, useless. There can be absences in terms of sound, light and sight. There was an interplay between the external material circumstances and the personal felt experience of individuals. Absence can be a feeling of emptiness, and a refusal to use something, and leaving it empty can be a form of resistance. The title for addressing this theme is ironic, for the 'secret life' is not secret, and dead spaces may have life.

The theoretical contexts of this paper are space in organisations, the academic office, and specific consideration of 'dead' spaces. By illustrating my argument with comments from respondents/colleagues I develop the concept of 'the secret life of dead spaces' as a heuristic for analysing the intense yet ambiguous feelings that academics have about their work and which illuminate the dichotomies of presence/absence, public/private and even being or not-being in the institution. There is a constellation of spaces that relate to death, such as empty, absent, secret, hidden and invisible. There are connections with hoarding

and obsolescence, with legacies and loss. We are led to consider the ways in which academics are users of institutional space, or resident in their offices, or inhabitants of their 'habitus' in the context of the changing nature of universities and academic work. (I am indebted to one of the reviewers for this link.) This specific consideration of academic offices is used to contribute to the literature on spaces in the workplace and, specifically, the spatial turn in organisation studies.

Space and organisation

Whether we are aware of them or not, there are liminal, uneasy spaces in buildings that relate to the organisations that functions in them. Places of concourse such as corridors, stairwells and lifts are also places of chance meetings, welcome and unwanted; places of learning too, often of great liveliness, with more life than inside the lecture theatre (Hurdley, 2010). They are also places of unknown corners, secrets, and fear (Wasserman and Zimroni, 2012) and of chance meetings that become valuable (Iedema et al., 2010). One day, a ceiling panel in the corridor fell out and our digital lifelines were revealed. There is something uneasy about having the guts of our workplaces on show, hence the shock of the Georg Pompidou Centre when it was built. It would appear that there are such spaces within spaces in offices that can reveal the guts of more complex thoughts and feelings. But then, perhaps the whole office is such a site, a confluence of revelations.

It is not the only such site. One thinks of the railway carriage (Bailey, 2004), the beach (Preston-Whyte, 2004) and the hotel (Pritchard and Morgan, 2005). What Pritchard and Morgan (2005: 761) say of the hotel – 'a complex, culturally contested and ideologically-laden liminal place, where dominant discourses of space and wider hegemonic socio-cultural relations are resisted, contested or affirmed' – can also be said of the academic office. These authors all point out how ambiguous such spaces are, being sites of escape, erotic adventure, play, freedom and shifts in identity, as well places 'replete with darker images of threat and danger' (Preston-Whyte, 2004: 350). They all draw on Van Gennep's (1960) conceptulisation of rites of passage which has been extended from age associations to limbo, threshold, boundary, crossing and absence of norms. Van Gennep's rites of passage has explicit place reference: before the door, on the threshold, and in the house. These times and places are also connected to gifts and death (Hyde, 2006). The central idea is transition (Turner, 1974: 13), a gap between worlds 'where almost anything may happen'. In terms of the academic office, this sense of 'almost anything may happen' may be currently considered in terms of Gramsci's concept of 'interregnum', that space/time between the old

dying and new not yet born in which many morbid symptoms may arise. The academic office provides a prime site for examining the changing nature of the university, a kind of hologram of the university *and* a cabinet of curiosities. The curiosity cabinet emerged from the idea of a *wunderkammern* or *studioli*, places set aside for the storage and study of specimens (Adamson, 2014), which were succeeded by museums. Some observations offered by respondents suggest the office as an archaeological site, a site of stuff that is out of place, broken, no longer functional, or dead. And yet, paradoxically, the office affirms, like digital lifelines fallen out the ceiling, the entanglement of academics with one another (Ruth, 2015a).

The concept of space has a complex history and has been examined in sociology, anthropology and other social sciences (Wilwerding, 2013). According to Gieryn (2000: 456, cited in Wilwerding, 2013: 71), '[s]pace is what place becomes when the unique gathering of things, meanings and values are sucked out'. It is this particular view of space as something emptied that I wish to challenge. In fact, I shall go further and suggest that there is a kind of rhizome of these apparently empty, dead, forgotten spaces that are eloquent and particularly pertinent in higher education (Grellier, 2013). Higher education is a rite of passage and from the point of view of academics, cohorts of students are relatively ephemeral: most interactions between academics and students are short-lived. We shall see how this condition is 'rematerialised' in terms of dead stuff. My challenge is to respond to Van Marrewijk and Yanow (2010: 3) and explore organisation 'rematerialised' in terms of a space marked by non-materiality – by being dead, gone, empty.

Dale and Burrell are among many who have observed how the physical world affects us,

> how the physical world made social comes to constitute people through its very materiality. The spaces and places around us construct us as we construct them. (2008: 1)

If, as Lefebvre (1991) suggests, 'social space contains' and we consider the academic office as a social container, what can we say about the empty spaces, or dead spaces in them? What are these 'subspaces' and what do they contain? Shortt (2015: 636) examined those 'on the margin' spaces in hairdressing salons which highlighted Bachelard's (1994 [1954]) explorations of intimate spaces such as corners and secluded spaces in our everyday worlds. My exploration of how academics dwell in their offices led me to wonder, via dead or empty places, what, or who else, dwells in the 'empty' spaces of the office. Who or what is the academic, wittingly or unwittingly, hosting? A great deal, as we shall see.

If we step back for a moment and consider 'dead space', it is a surprisingly rich idea. There is the idea familiar to interior designers who work out how we can make good use of those dead spaces such as corners and stairwells. Thus, 'make use of a once dead space in your room and bring life to your working area' (www.lushome.com/deadspaces). Or,

> [m]aking the most of dead space is key to obtaining the most out of your kitchen [...] have you got a corner in some part of your house or apartment that is bare and empty, looking unloved and forlorn?' (www.houzz.com/use-the-dead-space).

'Unloved' space! Claims that dead space can be brought to life with just a little love and imagination abound. The point to be taken here is the plasticity of space, materially and conceptually.

In physiology, dead space is the volume of air which is inhaled that does not take part in the gas exchange. In other words, not all the air in each breath is available for the exchange of oxygen and carbon dioxide. There are benefits to this seemingly wasteful design for ventilation that includes dead space. Carbon dioxide is retained, making a bicarbonate-buffered blood and interstitium possible, inspired air is brought to body temperature, improving O_2 uptake and humidified, which improves the quality of airway mucus (West, 2011). Dead space, it appears, is useful.

Acoustic engineers create anechoic chambers to create acoustical 'dead' spaces, thereby improving the quality of sound in a space and providing privacy. But there are interesting qualities to silence. The longest that anyone has survived in the anechoic chamber at Orfield Laboratories in South Minneapolis is just 45 minutes. It's 99.99 per cent sound absorbent and holds the Guinness World Record for the world's quietest place, but stay there too long and you may start hallucinating. Steven Orfield explains that you 'hear your heart beating, sometimes you can hear your lungs, hear your stomach gurgling loudly [...] In the anechoic chamber, *you become the sound*' (The Daily Mail, 2014; emphasis added). And this is so disorientating that sitting down is a must, because we orient ourselves through the sounds we hear when we walk. Sound provides perceptual cues that allow us to balance and manoeuvre. The laboratories are used in product testing and people are asked to listen to product sounds based on semantic terms, like 'expensive' or 'low quality' and their feelings and associations are recorded. Silence, it seems, is not always golden, or experienced as such. Clearly, whilst dead space may have negative connotations, it also has life, usefulness and strange effects. We may extend our thinking about dead spaces in the way Latour (2006) considers objects, as a kind of translation, or as a medium like a table that translates qualities (Conrad and Richter, 2013: 120).

Certainly, and as we shall see, it is possible to have a range of complex responses to 'dead' space and such spaces can turn out to have interesting functions.

The academic office

The office has been studied from a functional point of view (Steele, 1973), in terms of dimensions and measures (Pfeffer, 1983), and as part of the physical environment in organisations (Davis, 1984). Davis cites Festinger et al. and Kotter who revealed the importance of relative location in buildings. There has also been a variety of ethnographic approaches to the academic office. Scheiberg (1990) used interviews and informal conversations with individuals from contrasting university units to develop a thematic analysis. Belk and Watson (1998) interviewed professors with different ranks, disciplines and genders, and provided detailed vignettes of each. Tian and Belk (2005) recruited participants from a new venture organisation to photograph valued objects in their workplace, followed by interviews. Cox et al. (2012) photographed one another's work spaces, and each interviewed and was re-interviewed by another member of the group, using the photographs as prompts. Kuntz et al. (2012) examined how changes in the built environment changed the professional practice and relationships of academics and produced a neo-liberal order.

Here, I combine a *focused* ethnography (Muecke, 1994) and an *institutional* ethnography (Smith, 2005) consisting of nine interviews conducted over several months. The interviews were professionally transcribed and sent to each interviewee so they could check and censor if they desired. A research assistant then independently coded the transcripts, which I used to check and elaborate my initial coding. Out of this, a more refined coding schema was developed and further analysed using NVivo. The focus was on discovering patterns and the approach may be described as a *collective* case study (Stake, 2005). In my interviews, I paid particular attention to how individuals had or had not personalised their work space (Scheiberg, 1990), and this possibly gave rise to colleagues realising that there were spaces in their offices that they hardly noticed. In the course of further writing, I discerned the theme of dead spaces. I then re-analysed the transcripts and picked up what seemed to me to be related phenomena, such as forgotten things, empty cabinets and hoarded stuff and ways in which lines of sight and invisibility had an organisational function. I realised that there were many comments suggesting intriguing relationships between spaces, organisation and the incumbent's sense of being in the organisation. In order to explore this angle, a larger framework for developing the concept of the secret life of dead spaces was required.
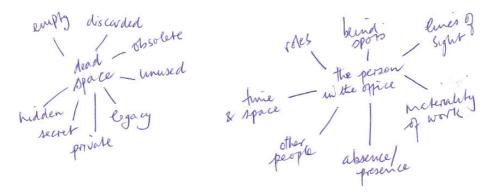
Academic offices are curious sites. They are repositories for the most intimate and the most public things, sanctuaries, data banks, memorials, 'rubbish' dumps, mini-libraries and storage places. On the one hand there is the study of the scholar – one thinks of St Jerome – or the study/library in the manor of the gentleman scholar – one thinks of large leather topped desks and walnut panelling. In what seems another extreme, there is the open plan office and the 'hotdesk', a kind of virtual, ephemeral and temporary office. Even more extreme is the virtual office on a mobile laptop, where the physical office, like so much else, has melted into thin air. (An academic at a European university told me about her office in a newly designed contemporary school building in which there was no place for books – books, in fact, were frowned upon – because they would interfere with the sleek glass 'walls' which rendered the academics continually observable.) The *academic* office has a curious identity in this array of possibilities, as indeed does the academic – see, for example, the comment above on academics as users of institutional space, resident in their offices, or inhabitants of their 'habitus'. Many academics speak of a study at home, and sometimes an office, but never of a study at work; 'study' and 'office' have quite different connotations. The academic office is replete with spaces that suggest tension between dwelling and transition, and public and private.

Academic offices contain different kinds of spaces. The evidence of the dead, the hidden, the secret, the forgotten, the private and similar phenomena resonate with denial and resistance on the part of institutional members. This reflects the irony or contradiction in academic work; the office is where researchers hide, conceal and deny as they explore, discover and expose. It is rarely where they teach but it is where the most personal contact between lecturers and students occur, and can be a site of intimacy and transitoriness. At the same time, complicating the issue, there is a kind of reciprocal transposition between the academic and the office, where the mind is in the office and office in the mind, and this composite entity functions as a refuge, sanctuary, repository, factory, bank or dump. The space *is* the mind of the occupant (Ruth, 2015b). One may ask if dead spaces are mirroring lacunae in the identity of the person, at least in that person's academic identity.

This relates to a particular ambivalence in the descriptions of certain spaces that I could not quite grasp until I read Jana Costas' problematisation of mobility, and her use of Sartre's metaphor of stickiness. She points out that the many social science metaphors of liquidity, fluidity, flows and nomads 'convey a kind of frictionless movement and floating' (Costas, 2013: 1468) which is misleading, for even the 'kinetic elite' experience tension, struggle and conflict. What I observed in academic offices was a kind of stickiness of non-spaces. One respondent spoke of 'legacies', but these were things which were in a sense dead. Could an un-

opened filing cabinet from a previous occupant qualify as a non-place (Auge, 1995) within the office? There was a kind of stickiness of emptiness and unwanted stuff.

These are the thoughts and questions that arose as I pondered the transcripts. As questions proliferated I began to construct two 'problematiques' without suggesting any neat correlations between the elements of each one. In the centre of one problematique is 'dead space', surrounded by its relatives, some more distant that others: gone, empty, discarded, obsolete, unused, hidden, secret, private, legacy. In the centre of the other is 'the person in the office' and the surrounding concepts here are: roles, blind spots, lines of sight, materiality of work, other people, time and space, absences/presence. Obviously I make no claim that these are exhaustive associations.

Figure 1. The problematiques

I began to see ways of understanding the point made by O'Doherty et al. that 'organization does not exist *in* space and time' (2013: 1431). It is the use of time and space that creates organisation. This reversal of the traditional organisation studies approach necessitates a broad understanding of what constitutes space, which I propose should include dead space.

We now turn to a close analysis of the ideas emerging from the comments of respondents. I begin with a focus on dead, gone, empty, discarded, obsolete, and then move on to private, hidden, secret, and finally address legacies. There is a certain arbitrariness about this approach. Some statements were illustrative of several themes, and single themes were illustrated by different statements. For discussion purposes I group them and proceed from one to another, but I invite the reader to consider metaphors like tapestry or rhizome as a framing device.

Dead, gone, empty...

Can we inherit deadness in the form of emptiness? I quoted respondents above on dead phones in dead corners, and on materials from courses 'now long past, dead, gone...' and on drawers unopened for years. In one office I remarked on two big four-drawer filing cabinets, and was told 'They're none of mine'. 'And nothing to do with you?', I asked. 'No, one of them was empty for me to fill and it's completely empty to this day [a period of almost a year]'.

Filing cabinets are quickly becoming obsolete, and maybe that is why they are often legacies of emptiness. They are a useful foil for considering the distinctions between happily taking over something, making do with what someone has left behind, putting up with someone else's rubbish or simply ignoring something. Use, or rather non-use, and emptiness are closely related to death. One respondent spoke of getting organised, and asked for filing racks which were in fact:

> Totally useless. I got them to organise things, you know, and – oh, those file things, so brilliant and so cool. 'Do you want one or two?' 'Give me three'. I'm organised, I'm gonna organise myself and I barely use them, and there's only just shit shoved into one of those, the other one is totally empty and I gave the other one away.

Oh, the constant effort to organise! And oh, how often do we confuse the material with the conceptual, and ourselves with our stuff! And yet, it is so and a tidy little industry is building on it – decluttering is the vogue. A lot of the effort put into organising comprises classifying things as dead or alive and putting things into empty spaces and making empty spaces. There is ambivalence at play, a sense of uneasy residual value connected to a fear of finality, of pronouncing a teaching role or a committee role or a period of worklife as definitively ended, dead:

> *Respondent (R)*: Well, up there is some sort of research projects and Masters and PhD students' files, my teaching files and up there – those three boxes are full of things I don't know what to do with, to do with teaching. This is [xyz] stuff I'm not sure whether to throw out or not cos I was on the [xyz] committee – actually that stuff over there is all [xyz] too. I don't know – I'll have to throw it out one day.
>
> *Interviewer (I)*: What stops you from throwing it out now?
>
> *R*: I'm not quite sure really, it's just – I probably wouldn't throw anything out probably because I spent so much time on it and I'm just reluctant to discard it.

Whilst an out-of-date textbook might as well be pulped, academics invest huge effort in creating and shaping courses. Why would they not gain the status of a

memento, or at least some kind of record? Good novels don't die. Why should well-designed courses? How may we understand this hanging on to old stuff and at the same time being dismissive of it, the ambivalence about the stuff of academia even whilst being committed to producing it? I suggest that it is because academic work is essentially conceptual and ephemeral. Whilst hardly on a daily time-span academics work one course at a time and one paper at a time with students that are qua students in transit. A lot of what we produce is in fact ephemeral. Furthermore, academics have an identity or develop a career (a relatively recent idea) premised on the life of the mind, even as they struggle with the material conditions thereof. Academic work has become increasingly materialised not because there is inherent value in materialising the conditions of academic work but as a result of auditing and compliance requirements. Hence the constant ambivalence and outright resistance, expressed through space.

Filing cabinets, emptiness and dead stuff seem to go together. Here is a commentary derived from a section of dialogue:

> It [filing cabinet] was there originally – somebody plonked it in my office, I didn't ask for it to be there and it's actually full of old files from somebody else. And some of them are actually personnel files and [laughter] [...] They're from the old [Department] and there's some quite personal things in there so I don't – try not to go in there too often – [laughter] I can't bring myself to throw them out because I think they're not mine to throw out but I don't know who to ask and then it will just get complicated so I just leave them, and don't open that top drawer. And behind the cabinet box files... Yes, with magazines...a collection of which I probably never looked at. That probably came from home because I got sick of them filling up my home office and so I brought them to work as another repository... We've got a box here! We've got empty files [laughter] padding for books, and I couldn't think what to do with those either, because they fill up my rubbish bin so they sort of sat there, they've been there for a long time as well... So it's possible that that box has been on that chair in that corner undisturbed for 9 months – that's quite feasible.

All this stuff from someone else! These empty cabinets, unasked for, 'plonked down'. And old personnel files. Is there always someone else in an academic's office? What ghosts lurk? And stuff from somewhere else, no longer looked at. The office as repository – or is it a mausoleum? A box undisturbed on the chair for 9 months, like a casket of ashes. There is more to what this colleague is talking about than simply indecision. One may connect this to Van Gennep's rites of passage in terms of liminal spaces; before the waste bin, in the waste bin, out the office. But even the waste bin can speak, as we shall see.

I referred above to a colleague who could not recall if he had opened two drawers in his desk in the two years that he had occupied the office. Drawers are spaces

that are easy to ignore. They are also ideal spaces for the suspension of decision. A colleague, asked about 'the drawers underneath your desk, do you use those much?' replied:

> Not a lot, expect for storage of stuff that I'm not quite sure where else to put and should probably be discarded. And, yes, an old phone book.

Drawers then can also hide from us the nature of what, besides decision-making, is being suspended. Thinking of the phone book in particular, and remembering another respondent's dead telephone, of course we note that it is now usually quicker to use the online directory and email, but still that sense of the past, the discarded and the obsolete, persists – we return to the idea of legacies below – hardly observable, under the presence of current appearances. However, it is not always unobservable, for what we may say about *under* the surface can also be quite visible on the surface. I offer a note on desks:

> *I*: To the right of your computer [...] we have plastic trays on top of the desk, sort of standard three-tier beige plastic tray and in front of it a couple of photographs, a cup, wallet, more books. Any commentary on that lot on your desk?
>
> *R*: No, although the beige tray is probably a wasted space so – they would only get cluttered with other things, so it prevents things from falling down the back of the desk where they might be lost in perpetuity.
>
> *I*: And I notice it's broken or not clipped in.
>
> *R*: No, it's broken.
>
> *I*: Of no consequence to you?
>
> *R*: No.

Here is a desktop with a prominent feature being something that is broken, and in terms of its original function, obsolete and discarded. It is not behind the person, or to the side, or behind the door: it is directly in line of sight, but probably no longer noticed. There was an odd piece of equipment on another colleague's desk. 'I've forgotten how it works', says the owner and laughs.

> No, it's not working today... Why do I keep it on my desk? I've no idea at all... I must have brought it in here to show somebody and never took it home again.

I note a note next to it – it is dated three years ago.

To make good on a promise about waste bins made above, here is an expression of the theme of dead, gone, empty, discarded, obsolete and absent:

> *I*: How often do you empty your yellow recycling waste box?
>
> *R*: I haven't since it was given to me.
>
> *I*: How many years ago was that?
>
> *R*: It must be three, mustn't it?

Private, hidden, secret...

A refusal to engage with the materiality of a space is an expression of a self in that space. This is a kind of 'use in reverse' of space. Protecting privacy can take the form of either not investing in a space or controlling the space. Resistance can be expressed through refusing to engage in the space as a whole. One colleague's office was ordered and sparse, with few personal things. Absenting one's self is a way of playing dead:

> *R*: I'm very private so I probably – there are probably a whole lot of things I could do to this [the office] to make it more me, but do I want more me here in this environment? I don't feel particularly valued as me here so why would I want more of me here. I'll keep me at home.
>
> I: But you're very valued as a colleague in work.
>
> *R*: Yeah, valued in some ways and not in others and I suppose it's less about value and more about fitting in, so I try to – there's a degree of camouflage and flying below radars and that sort of thing.
>
> *I*: Interesting – how people can use an aesthetic means to disguise and camouflage...
>
> *R*: So I just use an absence probably, yeah, whereas other people will send a message – I can think of a colleague's office down the corridor, I just probably abstain from showing very much of me in the space. It's a privacy thing; I think, yeah, protection.

The presence of emptiness as an eloquent expression of identity can cut in two ways. The colleague above has a rich, aesthetic, valued work life, which contrasts for example with the point made by Miller's (2008) ethnography of London's Stuart Street in which he described the flat of George who has nothing and therefore seems *to be* nothing with the house of The Clarkes who have so much and therefore seem *to be* so much.

Resistance can also be a refusal to engage with particular features of a space.

> *R*: They [these cupboards] came from information systems as well because I was head of department there so I got this big office with a table, chairs and these

things. I brought them out, I didn't want these [grey steel cabinets] but I didn't have any choice...and I initially said I wasn't going to put anything in them.

I: Was that as a protest?

R: As a protest [laughter].

In an interesting further twist of rebellion, the unwanted artefact is appropriated, or, if you like, resurrected to a new life, like a broken beige tray. The colleague below is referring to a floor-to-ceiling glass panel next to the door. The architectural logic was that this would allow light from the office windows into the corridor. What the architects seemed to have forgotten was that there would often be a sentient person in the office between the window and the corridor. And so, the inevitable happened, and notwithstanding the official injunction not to block these panels, they were blocked, with posters and others paraphernalia.

R: And I wanted them [shelves] across there too because I didn't want people to be able to look in here but I wasn't allowed that either.

I: You weren't allowed to block off this glass area...

R: You know we weren't. And why not?

The office incumbents wanted control over lines of sight, they wanted conscious control over knowing if the office was occupied or not, whether they were present or absent, and a common impulse was to use stuff they didn't want (cabinets, shelves) to block the line of sight making the use of the door the only way of knowing.

The relationships between private, personal, forgetting and hiding are subtle. When I pointed out a small rather chic suitcase in a colleague's office, she replied:

I brought that in, my daughter was going away for a weekend I think and she just wanted a small suitcase and so I brought in two small ones and I never took that one home. And I keep forgetting that it's there. Yeah, I don't actually see it unless I stand over by the window.

In another office the incumbent has a collection of shoes. 'I should have hidden them', said their owner, 'but I thought I'd just leave them there'. Why? 'Well, I don't know why the black ones are there to be perfectly honest, but the other ones are just walking shoes...they really probably need to be thrown out'. It is clear by now that all the ideas associated with dead space (see Figure 1) can be over-determined. We can see nearly all of them in the following exchange:

> R: In the filing cabinet is stuff in a... kind of way that is squirreled away – thinking that it might be relevant at some point. [opens filing cabinet] Yeah, so it's got some questionnaires and data in there...and some old stuff from papers that I was teaching quite a few years ago.
>
> I: An interesting corner there. When did you last use the fan?
>
> R: Not for a while. The fan's actually a remnant from when we shifted down from our previous floor so the fan was a legacy item.
>
> I: Yeah. And the bags? A few black bags...different kinds...
>
> R: Again, one of them for instance is the old courier type bags and then they changed over and got us these camel bags so the old ones just sat there. It's been superseded.

The metaphor of squirrelling away suggests value, not disregard and nor indecision. Hoarding is a kind of stickiness (Costas, 2013). We may move on to different areas of inquiry but many of us continue to be held captive by a picture of our potential and squirrel stuff away as evidence of this potential and at the same time we hang on to the obsolete, the remnants, the superseded, the legacies of a time now dead and gone.

Legacy

Can we inherit deadness in the form of emptiness? I quoted respondents above on dead phones in dead corners, and on materials from dead courses, on empty filing cabinets and drawers with contents not known even after years. We are unwilling heirs it seems, but heirs to what?

> R: Yes, the photocopy lid is immediate work and the big boxes are legacies – they're legacy systems, they should go from the time that I moved up from the E-floor to here, and I've got another one under the desk so they... No, not empty they're full of old possessions, like notes, old disks...
>
> I: Could you just bin them as they are?
>
> R: I actually believe that I could.
>
> I: So, yeah, bits and pieces, when did you move up here?
>
> R: [laughs] Well, good gosh, oh, lord, where are we now? Would it be three, four years ago?
>
> I: Have they been moved in the last three or four years?
>
> R: [laughs] They haven't moved from there. I have opened them occasionally.

> *I*: There's another one under your desk. Why is that distinguished from the other two?
>
> *R*: I ran out of room over there [laughter].

The reference to the yellow waste baskets above was offered as a kind of emblematic metaphor. I now present comments on a notice board. In a sense, the notice board is the opposite of the recycling waste basket. It is a site for what is valued. It is commonly a site of ephemera, mementoes, and what needs to be kept in line of sight. It is often the most public of places in an office, and at the same time the site of personal artefacts, sometimes even photographs of loved ones. It can also be a wonderful record of, and an illustration of the theme of this paper. I have cited instances of colleagues having things from time long past and other places. Here is a colleague responding to the invitation to 'tell us a bit about your notice board':

> *R*: This is a legacy from my old office. Actually it dates back even further if you look at those little prints up there, apparently my predecessor in the old office liked colour prints, and I said, ok, a little bit of colour here without being overboard, so… [laughs]
>
> *I*: I can't help laughing – we're looking at four very faded impressionist prints. Rather ivory white background on a hessian board – ivory white wall. I mean –
>
> *R*: [playful laughter] But do you realise that was the natural effect caused by sunlight. They might be increasing in value all the time.
>
> *I*: Yes, ok, so there's a bit of colour in the office and you thought, why not? Your predecessor had those?
>
> *R*: Yes.
>
> *I*: Your predecessor prior to 1997?
>
> *R*: Yes.
>
> *I*: Hang on a minute, that's really interesting. That is a set of four faded prints stuck against A5 sheets of paper which are in turned stapled onto the hessian. So those were – whatever you want to say – bequeathed unto you – you got them, you were in a different office then, down there – then this entire block gets refurbished, those go into storage, they come out of storage –
>
> *R*: No, they were just relocated to my B-Level office when we were relocated
>
> *I*: So when you came to this office that entire pin board came back, was put up there, and these pictures have not moved off that pin board. So it is feasible that those pictures have been stapled to that pin board for well, nigh, 13/14 years.
>
> *R*: Oh, definitely, 14 years plus.

> *I*: Do you have very affectionate memories of your predecessor?

> *R*: I don't know him! [laughter] Apparently he was a colourful character.

I can only ask again, who and what, wittingly or unwittingly, willingly or unwillingly are academics hosting in their offices? Tho' much is taken, much abides…

Conclusion

The intangibility of our thinking and the valorisation of tacit knowledge has been challenged by the material turn of analysis. Pointing out the materiality of work leads to productive insights, but there are complex reversals at play. If academic offices are containers and contain dead spaces, perhaps the dead spaces are also containers for holding the ineffable and the tacit and variations on the theme of absence that seems an integral part of academic life. It seems quite appropriate that academic resistance could comprise the development of a rhizomatic paraversity that operates below the surface of the neoliberal university (Rolfe, 2013). It is worth noting that Gary Rolfe drew on Bill Readings' (1984) *The university in ruins* and specifically on Readings' explication of 'excellence' as an empty signifier, that most powerful homogenising but vacuous clarion call. This is why I suggest that there is a rhizome of these apparently empty, dead, forgotten spaces that are eloquent and particularly pertinent in higher education (Grellier, 2013) and how certain voices in the academy are silenced. There is a great deal going on in these sites/offices that contain so much dead space, so much emptiness, obliviousness, obsolescence, secrecy, hiddenness, transitoriness. They are sites of resistance, contestation and affirmation, intimacy and denial. They are sites of a persistent interregnum, filled with stickiness, with mementoes that, even as mementoes, have died.

Is there, I wonder, a link to the question on Yiannis Gabriel's blog:

> Are any of today's academic journals 'alive'… Or have journals become mere trucks or vans, of different prestige to be sure, but mere vehicles transferring articles from producers to consumers under different badges and logos? (2013)

Are offices also just containers for the dead? Responses to Gabriel are suggestive:

> If you find any alive journals, Yiannis, let me know. I could benefit from this knowledge as I have quite a few papers which are now unwanted by many.

> In a sense, journals are dead. No one reads them. Just look at them and then cite them.

Journals seem to have something in common with courses that academics design and then consign to oblivion in boxes on top of empty filing cabinets.

There is another dimension to this sense of the dead, gone or absent, which is more like a simply 'not there' and which is connected to the ephemerality of academic work. In the many lamentations about neo-liberalism and the corporatisation of universities and its effect on academic labour, it has been pointed out that universities are now in the business of selling 'employability' (Chertkovskaya et al., 2013). In other words, by definition, the student is working for something that is absent, that is yet to be. This intensifies the transitoriness of student life and drains it of substantive current meaning. The student, and by extension the academic, is engaged in a preparatory liminal state that has no intrinsic substance or meaning. They are in a kind of limbo, an Gramscian interregnum, where, as noted above, the old is dying and the new is not yet born and many morbid symptoms arise.

By attending to the materiality of work and the materiality of organisational life we have discovered that academics struggle with dead spaces and emptiness and that there is a suggestive link between the presence of such lacunae and holes in organisational analysis. Like the spaces discovered by the interior decorator, we hope that with a bit of love and imagination, we will be brought to life. It's getting hard to breath. We are like the occupants of the anechoic chamber, afraid of becoming the dead space, a blank spot between the supplier and the consumer, and that is our terrible secret. We may, like the filing cabinets have become empty relics or dumping grounds. No longer embodied as sensory entities but more like digital objects that have melted into thin air, we still hope we exist – although we can't be absolutely certain – in the cloud. What does seem certain and worthy of further investigation is that there are ways in which the academic in his or her office is a dead space, no longer in line of sight/site.

references

Adamson, G. (2014) 'The labor of division: Cabinetmaking and the production of knowledge', in H.J. Cook, P.H. Smith and A.R.W. Meyers (eds.) *Ways of making and knowing: The material culture of empirical knowledge*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan.

Auge, M. (1995) *Non-places: Introduction to an anthropology of supermodernity*, trans. J. Howe. London: Verso.

Bachelard, G. (1994 / 1958) *Poetics of space: The classic look at how we experience intimate places*. Boston, MA.: Beacon.

Bailey, P. (2004) 'Adventures in space: Victorian railway erotics, or taking alienation for a ride', *Journal of Victorian Culture,* 9(1): 1-21.

Belk, R.W. and J.C. Watson (1998) 'Material culture and the extended or unextended self in our university offices', *Advances in Consumer Research,* 25: 305-310.

Chertkovskaya, E., P. Watt, S. Tramer and S. Spoelstra (2013) 'Giving notice to employability', *ephemera,* 13(4): 701-716.

Conrad, L. and N. Richter (2013) 'Materiality at work: A note on desks', *ephemera,* 13(1): 117-136.

Costas, J. (2013) 'Problematizing mobility: A metaphor of stickiness, non-places and the kinetic elite', *Organization Studies,* 34(10): 1467-1485.

Cox, A., T. Herrick and P. Keating (2012) 'Accommodations: staff identity and university space', *Teaching in Higher Education,* 17(6): 697-709.

Csikszentmihalyi, M. and E. Rochberg-Halton (1981) *The meaning of things: Domestic symbols and the self.* Cambridge: Cambrdige University Press.

Dale, K. and G. Burrell (2008) *The space of organization and the organization of space.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Davis, T.R.V. (1984) 'The influence of the physical environment in offices', *Academy of Management Review,* 9(2): 271-283.

Gabriel, Y. (2013) 'Are any academic journals still alive'. [http://www.yiannisgabriel.com/2013/12/are-any-academic-journals-still-alive.html].

Gagliardi, P. (1990) 'Artifacts as pathways and remains of organizational life', in P. Gagliardi (ed.) *Symbols and artifacts: Views of the corporate landscape.* New York: Aldine de Gruyter.

Grellier, J. (2013) 'Rhizomatic mapping: Spaces for learning in higher education', *Higher Education Research & Development,* 32: 83-95.

Hall, E.T. (1959) *The silent language.* New York: Doubleday.

Heracleous, L. and C.D. Jacobs (2008) 'Understanding organizations through embodied metaphors', *Organization Studies,* 29: 45-78.

Hurdley, R. (2010) 'The power of corridors: Connecting doors, mobilising materials, plotting openness', *The Sociological Review,* 58(1): 45-64.

Hyde, L. (2006) *The gift: How the creative spirit transforms the world.* New York: Random House.

Iedema, R., D. Long and K. Carroll (2010) 'Corridor communication, spatial design and patient safety: Enacting and managing complexities', in A.H. van Marrewijk and D. Yanow (eds.) *Organizational spaces: Rematerializing the workaday world*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishers.

Kuntz, A.M., Petrovic, J.E. and L. Ginocchio (2012) 'A changing sense of place: A case study of academic culture and the built environment', *Higher Education Policy*, 25(4): 433-451.

Latour, B. (2006) 'The powers of association', in L. John (ed.) *Power, action and belief: A new sociology of knowledge?* Keele: The Sociological Review.

Lefebvre, H. (1991) *The production of space*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Miller, D. (2008) *The comfort of things*. Cambridge: Polity.

Muecke, M. (1994) 'On the evaluation of ethnographies', in J.M. Morse (ed.) *Critical issues in qualitative research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

O'Doherty, D., C. De Cock, A. Rehn and K.L. Ashcraft (2013) 'New site/sights: Exploring the white spaces of organization', *Organization Studies*, 34(10): 1427-1444.

Pfeffer, J. (1983) 'Organizational demography', in L.L. Cummings and B.M. Staw (eds.) *Research in organizational behavior*. Greenwich. CT: JAI Press.

Preston-Whyte, R. (2004) 'The beach as a liminal space', in A. Lew, C.M. Hall and A. Williams (eds.) *A companion to tourism*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Pritchard, A. and M. Morgan (2005) 'Hotel Babylon? Exploring hotels as liminal sites of transition and transgression', *Tourism Management*, 27(5): 762-772.

Readings, B. (1996) *The university in ruins*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Rolfe, G. (2013) *The university in dissent: Scholarship in the corporate university*. London: Routledge.

Ruth, D.W. (2015a) 'The academic office: Constitutive entanglement and organizational matter', *Organisational Aesthetics*, 4(1): 32-45.

Ruth, D.W. (2015b) 'With the eyes of others: An ethnography of an academic office', *Ethnography and Education*, 11(3): 359-370.

Scheiberg, S.L. (1990) 'Emotions on display: The personal decoration of work space', *American Behavioral Scientist*, 33(3): 330-338.

Shortt, H. (2015) 'Liminality, space and the importance of "transitory dwelling places" at work', *Human Relations*, 68(4): 633-658.

Smith, D.E. (2005) *Institutional ethnography: A sociology for the people*. Toronto: AltaMira.

Stake, R.E. (2005) *The art of case study research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Steele, F. (1973) *Physical settings and organizational development*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

The Daily Mail (2014) 'We all crave it, but can you stand the silence?', 3 April. [http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-2124581/The-worlds-quietest-place-chamber-Orfield-Laboratories.html#ixzz3EAjuLqju].

Tian, K. and R. W. Belk (2005) 'Extended self and possessions in the workplace', *Journal of Consumer Research*, 32(2): 297-310.

Turner, V. (1974) *Dramas, fields and metaphors*. Ithica, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Van Gennep, A. (1960 [1908]) *The rites of passage*. Chicago: University Press of Chicago.

Van Marrewijk A.H. and D. Yanow (2010) 'Introduction: The spatial turn in organizational studies', in A.H. van Marrewijk and D. Yanow (eds.) *Organizational spaces: Rematerializing the workaday world*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishers.

Wasserman, V. and H. Zimroni (2012) 'In-between the organizational corridors: A spatial perspective on the "unmanageable"', paper presented at the 28th EGOS Colloquium on design, Helsinki, Finland, July 5-7.

West, J. B. (2011) *Respiratory physiology: The essentials* (9th ed.). Baltimore: Lippincott Williams & Wilkin.

Whincup, T. (2004) 'Imaging the intangible', in C. Knowles and P. Sweetman (eds.) *Picturing the social landscape*. London: Routledge.

Wilwerding J. (2013) 'Meanings of design and space: A metaphysical groundwork', in T. Vaikla-Poldma (ed.) *Meanings of designed spaces*. New York: Fairchild Books.

Yanow, D. (2010) 'Giving voice to space: Academic practices and the material world', in A.H. van Marrewijk and D. Yanow (eds.) *Organizational spaces: Rematerializing the workaday world*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

the author

Damian Ruth lectures different areas of management at Massey University, New Zealand. He draws on the arts, humanities and social sciences to research management development and education with a focus on using craft, art and design to develop strategic thinking. He has published more than 100 journal articles, conference papers and reports on the role of universities and higher education, and the scholarship of teaching and learning. He is also a poet, a designer and a maker of things, and has

inhabited offices in South Africa, Ireland, England, Canada and New Zealand. His favourite place is the beach.
Email: d.w.ruth@massey.ac.nz