

The Campus Sphere: An Examination of the Role of the Campus in the University of Essex Protests of 1968 and 1972

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Abstract

The University's employment of the student protests has become an integral part of both the life of students and the nature of research, encouraging new ways of thinking and interpretation. In a similar suit, historians have recently been looking at the changing nature of spaces and environments and their effects on lives in the past. This paper aims to examine the role of The University of Essex campus as an exacerbator of the student protests of the 60s and 70s through a microhistorical exploration of the Albert Sloman Archive.

Keywords: 1968 and 1972 Protests, University Campus, Protest, University of Essex, History

Article

For those University of Essex students unfamiliar with the origin of the phrase 'We Are Essex' emblazoned throughout the University brand, it derives from the student protests that occurred through 1960 and 1970 in resistance to the vice-chancellor, Albert Sloman, and his decision to suspend three students for interrupting a guest lecture. This paper ignores these motivations. Instead, it will suggest that the campus physically separated itself from the public, creating what can be referred to as a 'campus sphere', which caused political, ideological, and social isolation from

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the affairs of those outside. The protestors were then seen to be using the campus as a tool to forward the views of the wider community of students by further isolating the space and using the legitimacy of the crowd. Ultimately, what lay behind the unrest was the University architecture, which infused the day to day lives of students and encapsulated an atmosphere of challenge and expression through the physical architecture, which held within it a fundamental undertone of urban decay and social unrest that motivated the politics of the 60s and 70s.

The phrase 'Rebels with a cause' has become an integral message within the brand of the University, finding itself emblazoned on Essex merchandise, buildings, and prospectuses, and is core to the University's marketing efforts. The University has captured the history of protest within its vision, becoming an integral part of both the life of students and the nature of research, encouraging new ways of thinking and interpreting. In a similar suit, the recent popularity in studying the history of physical spaces has contributed many new approaches for social and cultural historians. In Courtney Campbell's (2016, p.1) examination of *Past and Present*, she notes how 'spatial history can serve as methodology, approach and object', which has led historians to explore aspects of space in new and innovative ways. This paper does not intend to break new grounds within the theories of social and cultural history. Instead, it utilises a microhistorical approach to indicate how the protestors 'construed the world, invested it with meaning, and infused it with emotion' (Darnton, 2009, p.3).

The foundations of this study are rooted, literally, in the University of Essex's foundations. There is an important psychological undertone related to the University architecture, which is known amongst architectural experts as 'Brutalism'. At its simplest, Brutalism encompasses buildings with unusual shapes, massive forms, and heavy looking materials (Waters, 2017), which tends to be concrete, and conceals 'a subtle gamut of textures and colours' (Calder, 2016, p.5). Many scholars, like Elain Harwood, understand Brutalist designers as driven by 'optimism and endeavour' (Harwood, 2015, p.xxxi), and similarly Barnabas Calder explores how Brutalism captured an 'unapologetic strength', and inspired the 'dazzling confidence of their designers in making their substantial mark' (Calder, 2016, p.3). This sense of energy and optimism underpinned a design philosophy that encapsulated themes of progression and forward thinking with limited resources, and a defiance of traditional conceptions. Brutalism encompasses a notion of political undertones

due to its use of concrete, a relatively cheap material used to build new blocks for bombed areas of London's East End, representing a 'social ideology' reminiscent of the Labour party's forwarding of social housing and acting towards a more 'utopian ideology' (Harwood, 2015, p.7). Either way, the scholarly consensus implies that Brutalism inspired a new sense of architectural optimism following the Second World War, and indicates that the students were constantly surrounded by bold, new, innovative and 'fierce' design that underpinned their day to day lives. Another, slightly different interpretation as to the Brutalist design choice is the idea that 'brutalist structures came to be associated with the blight of urban decay' (Chadwick, 2016, p.7). Brutalism therefore encapsulated elements of society that were socially contested, implying that students' lives were constantly surrounded by the ideas that inspired the building of Brutalist structures in the first place, serving as a constant reminder of the social and political challenges that symbolised the time.

In order to develop a conception of the power of the architecture, the implicit psychological connection between the architectural and emotional thoughts of those subjected to the environment must be understood. The most apt connection between the environment and the psychological mind-set comes from Yi-Fu Tuan, who wrote that 'human beings not only discern geometric patterns in nature and create abstract spaces in the mind, they also try to embody their feelings, images, thoughts in tangible material. The result is sculptural and architectural space,' (Tuan, 1977, p.17). She also wrote about how people develop 'strong feelings for space and spatial qualities' through 'kinaesthesia, sight, and touch' (Tuan, 1977, p.12), suggesting that the physicalities of an environment contribute to emotion, connection, and human actions within a space. This is reflected within the context of the University of Essex, whereby an edition of the *Times Educational Supplement* contemplated: 'has the Brutalism of the campus architecture helped to provoke demonstrations like these?' (Doe, 1974). This suggests that the protestors' mind-sets were underpinned by the very notion of the brutalist architecture. This implies that it is not an entirely original idea to suggest that the campus further enlivened the University protests, and that Brutalism was held to some account to have been a cause. By consolidating the conceptions of Brutalism with the theory of space presented by Tuan, there existed a psychological affiliation amongst students towards the environment which permeated the day to day life of the campus. Undertones of unapologetic strength, social decay, and 'something fierce' – the slogan attached to the University's architecture - were cemented within the collective psyche of the student body.

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As Peter Chadwick notes, there is also a more physical explanation for the function of Brutalism in the protests: 'as they decayed the buildings became targets for vandalism and graffiti' (Chadwick, 2016, p.7). While this approach is based in the idea of the longer-term decay of the buildings, the practical element of the flat shapes and large blank areas suggests architecture that is comparable to a canvas and a means of expression of ideas and beliefs. Using this analysis, Brutalism can be understood as a *means* of expression as well as a *cause* of expression. Archival evidence favours this interpretation, as newspapers tended to observe graffiti appearing throughout the campus, with one notable example (*Wyvern Newspapers*, 1968b) being 'where has all the knowledge gone? Longtime passing...' Brutalism instilled a mind-set with the constant presence of expression and enabled students of the protest to 'leave a mark' of the movement on the campus, thus utilising the physical surroundings of the campus as a means of expression.

Indeed, architectural factors have a strong behavioural influence within the University of Essex. Many scholars have discussed the importance of the physicality of space and its impact on human behaviour. One such idea comes from Richard Sennett, who has noted the paradox of space and behaviour, writing that 'people are more sociable, the more they have some tangible barriers between them, just as they need specific places in public whose sole purpose is to bring them together (...) Human beings need to have some distance from intimate observation by others to feel sociable' (Sennett, 1974, p.15). This is applicable to the University of Essex, which can represent an embodiment of not only this theory, but of this paradox. This was embodied within the original vision of the University, which rested on 'intimacy through small groups for teaching and living and through the architecture' (Sloman, 1964, p.16). This suggests that the seminar embodied the tangible barriers, the corners of the corridors and the right angles, which created intimate interactions between academics and students. These architectural elements opened out into huge squares that brought each corridor and every student together. Furthermore, Sloman's vision (Sloman, 1964, p.63) intended the 'whole centre of the University to be vital and alive with students and staff long into the evenings', which implies that architectural design was intended to affect student behaviour at all times of the day, and that the architecture encouraged a high degree of sociability. This recalls the communal areas of discussion about which Habermas (1989, p.59) wrote: the 'coffee houses', which were 'seedbeds of political unrest', used as a means to 'censure and defame the proceedings of the State'. When looking through the Wyvern collection, the squares were

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undoubtedly the space of expression that centred large meetings of students and were the epicentres of unrest. This phenomenon is particularly noted in (*Wyvern Newspapers*, 1969) the first days of the 'revolutionary festival' for which one of the University squares featured prominently.

The action of invading space is particularly important when distinguishing between a public and a private sphere, as it indicates students challenging the preconceived notions of public and private space as a means of protest. A poignant example of this breach of the private sphere came across in an article (*Wyvern Newspapers*, 1968a) that recorded students marching to the Lakeside House and demanding to speak with the Vice-Chancellor. With no luck, they 'presented the petition to a frightened Mrs Sloman and a guardian porter'. It is particularly notable that the article chose to mention Mrs Sloman, as it uses the closeness of women to the private sphere to emphasise the significance of the breach. Mrs Sloman is also rarely mentioned in terms of university management, which further emphasises a breach of a clearly separated private sphere. The notion of public and private space is best understood in terms of work by Don Slater (cited in Jenks, 1998, p.146), who notes the Bourgeois idealization of 'home as 'haven' from the public world' noting how the private became seen as 'virtually a sacred place which was filled with all the emotion, security, solidarity, continuity, substantive values and moral cohesion that had been squeezed out of the public world'. The protesters used this notion, deliberately ignoring the private sphere's quasi-religious significance to express a deeply felt political emotion.

In these instances, the breaching of space is performed not by individuals, but by groups that possess communal ideals of the campus as a place within the wider student community. Here we can return to the work of Yi-Fu Tuan (1977, p.12) who distinguishes between space and place from a perspective of values, noting that 'place is a special kind of object. It is a concretion of value, though not a valued thing that can be handled or carried about easily; it is an object in which one can dwell. Space... is given by the ability to move'. This underpins the idea that a place is somewhere in which one's fundamental ideals, motivations, beliefs, and basis for action are intertwined. Butz and Eyles (1997, p.4) identify the idea that 'place necessarily locates activities and has meaning as an area for social activities or for the expression of sentiments,' noting the value of the ability of expression, and the ability to use a place for the articulation of societal ideals. But they further note that 'places are often constituted by the people who live in them' (Butz and Eyles, 1997, p.4), which aids in our

interpretation of the differences in student and staff attitude. The simple action of having students *living* on campus rather than commuting in suggests that there was an increased likelihood for the development of a sense of place, and a more significant concretion of values within a 'special kind' of place, much more so than those who commuted in for daytime work. The student body therefore possessed the means by which to develop relationships between Habermas's key elements of 'communicative action, instrumental action and life world [which would] help clarify the ways that place, community and senses of place are integrated,' (Butz and Eyles, 1997, p.5) and therefore further help to develop a stronger sense of place. This is explicitly important to the University of Essex because it directly echoes Albert Sloman's (1964, p.67) original vision for the University. Sloman himself lectured on the subject of the integration of different aspects of one life, stating that 'just as we have tried to avoid the division between a student's working and social activities, so the teaching and living buildings are, as far as possible, integrated.' The values held within the students' home, work, and social lives therefore amalgamated, and underpinned many of the motivations within the University protests. Students therefore saw little if any distinction between these separate elements of their lives, and could be said to have developed a much stronger sense of place than the staff.

This notion of students living, and therefore developing a stronger sense of place, can be seen to have hastened the campus to become its own individual, ideologically and politically isolated sphere. Sloman (1964, p.69) predicted from the outset that this could occur, writing: 'For some years the University is bound to be more cut off from the community than if it were in a town, and it could easily become cloistered and introverted'. Sloman foresaw a geographic isolation, but also an implicit political or ideological isolation between the students and the University, and the public who did not interact with the campus. Archival sources provide evidence that Sloman's fear did indeed culminate in negative reactions to the protests from the more separate public, as one concerned local resident submitted a letter to the *Essex County Standard* (Long, 1974): 'Our task as local ratepayers is to support the good work being done at Wivenhoe park and to take pride in the University's academic reputation'. Certain other readers would claim that the University was viewed as a 'concrete jungle, a fit place for animals'. Additionally, this separation is observable from the student perspective, as in another newspaper (Venning, 1974) the student's union is reported to have placed a 'blacklist' on the University, with the intention of preventing further sixth form

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intake into the University. An edition of the *Colchester Express* (*Colchester Express* 1974) noted students' threats, such as: 'look for another job, we are going to close this university' and 'we would use all our resources to ensure that all students go elsewhere to study'. This halted essential financial lifelines and reinforced the values and beliefs of the community space, which emphasised the idea of the campus as 'a centre of felt value, centres of experience and aspirations of people' (Butz and Eyles, 1997, p.2). Therefore, the campus was doubly isolated. It forcibly chained the values of each individual student together in one common campus goal, and it then used this to create a distinct physical barrier to clearly separate itself as a campus from the outside public.

The University of Essex campus was a tool of the protestors through the protests of the 60s and 70s. The metaphorical isolation became physical with the use of pickets, preventing the normality of campus and binding each and every student together in one unified cause against the political and social systems imposed upon them. Spatial history also contributes to explaining the psychological motivations behind the atmosphere of the protests, as architectural experts acknowledge the meaning of strength and social degradation represented by the concrete of Brutalism, and how, if interpreted as a psychological manifestation of shapes and emotions, it can be seen as the manifestation of societal unrest that penetrated the mind-set of those living within its boundaries. A microhistorical approach has enabled a brief interpretation of the events of the University of Essex protests and shown how they contribute to the wider literature in social and cultural history.

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