

Scrutiny and Consensus in the Palace of Westminster

44

Bridget Maclachlan
University College London, UK

Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between power structures and spatial configuration in the United Kingdom Houses of Parliament. The probability of power and decision-making having a spatial dimension is developed through a literature study on settings, group behavior, political and social science. It is proposed that the spatial layout of the parliamentary chamber could influence how information is relayed and ultimately on decision-making processes. In the case of the Palace of Westminster, an attempt is made to imbue two of the functions of a democratic parliament, that is, scrutiny and consensus with spatial characteristics. The main finding of this study is that the House of Commons accommodates greater scrutiny of government while still allowing the Members to be spatially equal. In contrast the House of Lords is more spatially configured for ceremony than for scrutiny. There are two spatial mechanisms at work in the chambers, namely configuration and visibility. Spatial configuration generates bonds between Members affording them opportunity to interchange their positions and an equal opportunity to participate in the chamber. Visibility on the other hand overrides this equality and creates a power hierarchy between those that occupy the central spaces and those that are on the periphery. These mechanisms aid in spatially differentiating between two functions of a democratic government, that of scrutiny and consensus. The differences however are minimal as scrutiny and consensus have similar spatial preferences, but for different purposes. Scrutiny requires a spatial layout wherein encounters are maximized for confrontation, while consensus depends upon a power hierarchy wherein encounters are limited so as to reduce confrontation.

The ability to make decisions is often taken for granted yet it is, according to Laswell, a characteristic of power. The more important the decisions that people make, the more likely they are to affect others. Power is therefore not just the ability to make decisions but a relationship of control either political or physical over another person. It is clear that leaders have power as their actions can be seen or felt, but it is not clear what role space plays in the execution of power. Dovey and Markus have different views in this regard. Dovey a spatial analyst believes that spatial design can only sustain or add to a particular behaviour but cannot create or cause it. His view is that architecture and building design structure the space within which everyday life takes place. He is of the opinion that it is people who oppress people not forms or places, though he does make an exception in that “*because buildings and places frame life, they become at certain moments as the tools of the media of oppression and emancipation.*” (Dovey: 1999)

Keywords

power structures,
spatial configurations,
visibility,
scrutiny and
consensus

Bridget Maclachlan
The Bartlett School
of Graduate Studies,
University College
London, 1-19
Torrington Place,
Gower Street,
London, Wc1 6BT, UK
tel: +44 (0) 20 7813
4364
fax: +44 (0) 20 7813
4363
arbbmm@hotmail.com

44.1

Markus, a writer who analyses peoples' relations through space, in contrast believes that power can be distributed through space, forming bonds of domination or equality between people. Power can be interpreted in the context of the United Kingdom Houses of Parliament by the political terms scrutiny and consensus. Members of parliament possess these two powers in order to help them make informed decisions in Parliament. Scrutiny is about questioning and examining the decisions made by the governing body, while consensus is about parties working together to reach an agreement their decisions ultimately expressed through voting. This transfer of information between Members and Members, or between Members and civil servants, should provide Members with adequate information in order to scrutinise government effectively and make collective decisions. It is then, through these bonds, that information is relayed.

Marcus also draws a parallel between power and space, stating that the differential power between users of a space can be distinguished in the amount of space allocated, in the elaboration of furniture, in how entrances and circulation routes are constructed and in how one is seen or what one sees in a space. (Markus: 1995, 17)

Similarly, a spatial parallel can also be extracted from Laswell's comparison between a democratic and a despotic government, where he generates the idea of control and informality that can be imbued with spatial meaning. Laswell defines a democratic government as one in which leaders are united in a shared power for general participation in the making of collective decisions, where as a despotic government is characterised by ritual. A democracy also tends to adopt an informal style of speech, writing, verbal and written communications and architecture. As examples, he refers to the accessibility and simplicity of the White House in contrast to the Kremlin. (Laswell: 1965,3-19)

Goodsell, in his analysis of the design and the layout of council chambers in the United States, takes these spatial characteristics and others into consideration. Goodsell's method involves describing, drawing and measuring the composition of the space, the design of semi-fixed features, looking at how objects are displayed as well as the decoration within the chamber. He does this to determine the relationship between the governor and the governed. His conclusions are drawn from a study of seventy-five council chambers that are divided into three periods, namely traditional, modern and contemporary. From this sample, he develops three types of authority that of imposed confronting and joined. An example of one of these periods and the characteristics thereof, is the traditional chamber built between 1865 and 1920. This period is characterised by limited access to the podium for the governed or by placing the Speaker's podium in an intimidating position. This type of authority is imposed, as the public is marginalised to the edges and is not encouraged to participate in the process of government. Goodsell also looks at what Goffman calls "props;" those objects that have historical significance and without which the proceedings could not begin. Though this method highlights certain power differences in the chambers of the parliamentary building it cannot explain completely how the parliamentary process works it would therefore be necessary to look further than the chamber so as to include the context of the whole building. (Goodsell: 1988)

However, this does not mean that the chamber has no role to play in the functioning of parliament, rather that the proceedings that take place therein are part of a much larger system of rules and encounters. Goffman, a psychologist who analyses the micro relations between individuals and groups of people uses the theatre as an analogy in developing the idea that

one acquires a back stage or a front stage persona depending on whether one is visible to an audience or not. The back stage is seen as the relaxed space where one is not under public scrutiny while the front stage is where one allows or controls the public gaze. The space in which one assumes a public role is known as the setting, the performance begins once one enters the setting and ends when one leaves. Various pieces of equipment and props that give credibility to the role that is to be played out within its confines, are arranged within this space. The role that is to be played out in this setting is not only the creation of an individual; people can form teams to achieve a particular goal within the setting. (Goffman, 1990)

Edelman, a political writer, also realizes the importance of the political setting¹ in conditioning political acts and moulding personalities, as well as the fact that the audience and the setting have a major role to play in how the performer acts out his role. He is of the opinion that, the design of a setting in political performances is dependant on the degree to which large audiences need to be impressed; the need to legitimise acts, to achieve agreement and the need for an official to establish or reinforce himself. Edelman distinguishes political stages, such as the debating chamber by their massiveness, ornateness and formality. (Edelman, 1964, 95-113)

44.3

The Debating Chambers

The political setting in this case study is the debating chamber where Members of Parliament meet formally to scrutinise government. It is also here that Members deliver a 'performance' that is visible to their fellow Members, the audience and to a television audience.

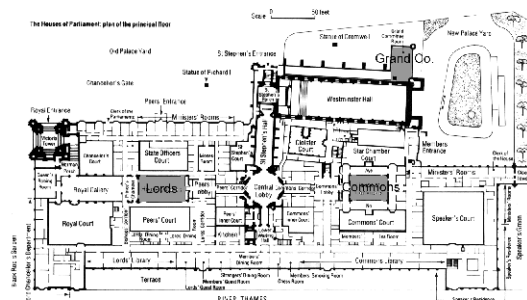


Figure 1.

The Palace of Westminster (*see figure 1*) has two principal debating chambers, one in the House of Commons and the other in the House of Lords. In both of these chambers, the Members sit in an oppositional layout and are literally a sword fighting distance apart. There is a third chamber, the Grand Committee Room, which has a semi-circular layout, in which backbenchers are given an opportunity to question Ministers. The debates therein are deemed uncontentious and no votes are taken.

In Goodsell's analysis he relied upon detecting differences between the size, shape and arrangement of furniture in the chambers of different historical periods as well as establishing different degrees of access and ease of use by the public to a rostrum to air their views, so as to draw conclusions about relations between the governed and governors. In applying his methodology to the debating chambers of the United Kingdom Houses of Parliament, the relationship between the public and the Members is more apparent than between the opposing Members. The governing party's position cannot be differentiated from that of the opposing party's as equal space and furniture type is allotted to them. This could be because

of parliamentary procedure where the Members speak from where they sit; in other words, there are no desks or rostrums. Members may physically be at a stand off to one another yet; in terms of furniture decoration or other spatial qualities, there is no sense of who is more dominant. Rather the impression is that they are on an equal footing. In terms of the political theory, this is how their relationship could be interpreted.²

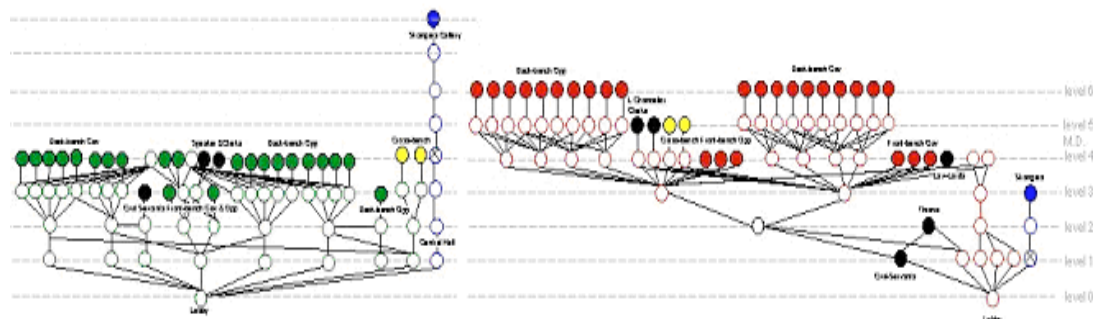
The emphasis is therefore placed on the arrangement of spaces and what that means to the inhabitants and the visitors or strangers viewing in the galleries. In analysing the strangers' route one becomes aware that all their movements are either controlled or under surveillance. They are segregated from the principal route to the chamber and separated from the floor of the house as well as in full view of the Speaker of the House and the Members below. It is simply the case of one being either part of the proceedings on the floor of the house or not. Those that are not part of it are raised off it in the galleries or boxes.

In the House of Lords, the Lords and Bishops all sit on red upholstered benches that are in stark contrast to the visible decadence of the Throne. The Throne serves as a reminder of the third body responsible for governance, if only in a formal sense, the Sovereign.³ As in the House of Commons, the public is not part of the proceeding. Their route though less circuitous is physically controlled by a police officer. The security measures for gaining access to the gallery are less stringent making it obvious that what happens in this chamber is of less importance than in the Commons.

In the Grand Committee Room, Members have no specific seat or area allocated to them. They sit behind desks and speak from behind this desk rather than at a rostrum and are separated from the public and press by a low movable barrier. Members sit parallel to one another rather than facing one another and have to turn in order to address one another properly. The Speaker and the clerks are the only people raised off the floor of the chamber. The conclusion drawn from the inspection of the three chambers is that the power of decision-making is limited to those that occupy the 'floor' of the House. Elaborate furniture may bestow honour on the one who has the right to sit on it but it does not mean that they have any say in the political process within the chamber.

If the spatial layout of the Grand Committee Room is representative of consensus then spatially it is about reducing the void where confrontation could take place between the parties and creating physical boundaries of furniture between users. In the other two chambers consensus is reached by voting outside of the chamber in the division lobby. This then leaves the inside primarily for scrutiny. Scrutiny is then spatially characterised by an undifferentiated physical setting with both parties having similar spatial layouts with limited symbolic objects and decor. A void acts as a symbol of the contention between the opposing parties.

Figure 2.



In analysing the spatial configuration of the chambers more observations can be made about the spatial nature of scrutiny and consensus. The justified graphs (*see figure 2*) of the House of Commons and the House of Lords are similar in that the division of the houses into two configurational groups is acknowledged in the graph and that the majority of seats are not distinguished from one another. However, the linkage of Members in each House is different. In the House of Commons, the rings connecting Members are deep and pass through the Speaker of the House's domain, while in the House of Lords the rings are shallow restricting informal access between the two sides. Therefore, in the House of Commons more 'backstage' political transactions can take place while interaction in the House of Lords is restricted by its layout. The Lords Members are also deeper than in the House of Commons indicating a more ceremonial or symbolic role. The relative formality of the chamber of the House of Lords is also reflected in the fact that the shallower parts are associated with its ceremonial function (Throne) while the deeper parts are those reserved for government scrutiny. Ceremony appears to be given precedence spatially over scrutiny in the Lords. In both the House of Lords and the House of Commons chambers strangers have a sequence like route separate from the ringy Members route. Similarly, the clerks and civil servants in both houses are allocated spatially differentiated areas that are not part of the ringy Members network.

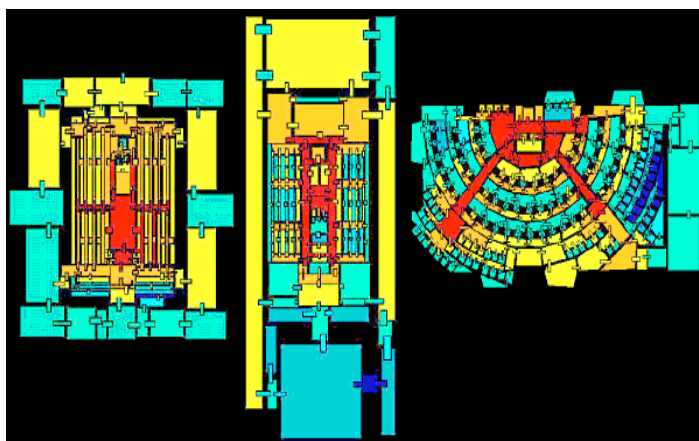


Figure 3.

In the pesh analysis (*see figure 3*) of the House of Commons chamber, Civil Servants, Opposition and Government frontbenchers are slightly better integrated, with backbenchers of both parties having equal integration. The most integrated space is the floor of the house while the Speaker and some of the backbenchers seats close to the entrance occupy the more segregated spaces. There is very little difference spatially between Members of government and of opposition and there is little difference between a junior Member and one holding a high office. Just as the depth from the lobby showed no distinction among members in the justified graphs, so here there is little difference in integration between the different roles and statuses in the Commons. One could almost say that the distinction of power and status that one is accorded as a result of office is eliminated within the configuration of the setting. There is an equality of opportunity for access to one another and the floor of the house. This aids in the formation of bonds, while visibility on the other hand enforces a centre-periphery power relationship between Ministers who are closer to the action than the backbenchers behind them. Spatially everyone is afforded equal opportunity to participate.

In the Lords chamber the civil servants, the Throne and the Lord Chancellor are in the most integrated positions while the Peers Lobby, and some of the Member's benches occupy the most segregated spaces. The Peers positions vary in integration making their positions and roles spatially unequal and their positions fixed with little opportunity for access to one another.

The Members in the Grand Committee Room are similarly integrated but the routes connecting them are not well integrated. Therefore, there is little opportunity for interaction between Members though they are still spatially equal, making it appear that all are given equal opportunity to participate. The Deputy Speaker occupies the prime position as mediator while the press and public are in the most segregated spaces.

Power and Bonds in the Chambers

Each chamber seems to have its own logic. In the Commons chamber those that are shallow and well integrated such as Ministers and Shadow Ministers, are placed in a very accessible position to be available for close scrutiny. The civil servants are shallow and easily accessible in the chamber to be within reach to provide information to aid the Minister if necessary. Backbenchers and Crossbenchers are in the deepest space where they have an opportunity to participate in decision-making but not always the means. In other words, a visible and temporal hierarchy prevails, in that those that occupy the front bench are closer to the action on the floor of the house and as Ministers have access to participate in the decision making process as they are given a forum to articulate their policies during Question Time. This seems plausible considering that the decisions they make have far reaching implications for the country. In contrast the backbenchers speech is programmed according to the time allotted or to the importance of their contribution to the debate. The time tabling of business in the chamber therefore does not allow all backbenchers the opportunity to speak. As the views they express are more than likely to be shared by the rest of their party each Member can therefore be seen as belonging to a collective body. At the same time, Ministers are shallow in the chamber, in a position where they have a limited choice of routes to or from their seats. This places them in a position for examination, so that they can be accountable for their decisions.

In the Lords chamber ceremonial spaces are shallow and well integrated yet they have little impact on the decision making process. The bonds between Members are limited by the fact that they cannot interchange their seats and the attempt to achieve some means of consensus is difficult in a situation where not all Members are spatially equal.

The Grand Committee Room is spatially similar to the House of Lords' chamber in that encounters are limited between Members and ceremonial spaces are far more spatially integrated than the Members positions. Both of these chambers then reduce the opportunity for interaction and scrutiny. However, this does not necessarily imply that the same idea of consensus exist formally within the House of Lords as well. What is suggested is that the relationship between the formal procedural expectations of Peers to scrutinise policy may be at odds with spatial logic of the chamber.

Therefore in the operation of power, consensus can be enforced formally by a dominant power or majority control. However the House of Commons raises the possibility that consensus can be generated spatially in that spatially, consensuality works by constructing a field of encounters so that all may have an equal opportunity to participate in the chamber.

When the function of the chamber is to scrutinise, then the routes connecting all spaces to the floor of the Houses will be similarly integrated. Scrutiny works by maximizing encounters for confrontation where all positions are spatially equal.

Endnotes

- 1 Setting is the space in which a performer assumes his role in front of an audience, for example a stage, a courtroom or in this case a debating chamber.
- 2 In the Palace of Westminster, it is the idea of the sovereignty of Parliament that means that no one can question an act of parliament no matter how stupid it may be. There is no constitution in the United Kingdom to safeguard against government-transgressing people's rights. It is however, the party in power's desire to be re-elected which can minimise this risk. Therefore, in essence it is not in a sense parliament that wields political power it is the government of the day. Though if one were to see the opposition as government in waiting one can see why there has not been any objections to control of government as they too when in power want to be able to pass their legislation through parliament. (Silk: 1999, 39-44)
- 3 The sovereign's powers are not exercised in anything other than name. The Queen is bound to act in accordance with the wishes of the Prime Minister. (Silk: 1999, 17)

References

- Dovey, Kim, 1999, "*Framing Places mediating power in built form*", Routledge, London.
- Edelman, M, 1964, "*The Symbolic Use of Politics*", University of Illinois Press, Urbana 95-113.
- Goffman, Erving, 1990, "*The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*", Penguin Books, London.
- Goodman, Paul, 1962, "*Utopian Essays and Practical Proposals*" Vintage Books New York 156-181.
- Goodsell, Charles, 1988, "*The Social Meaning of Civic Space Studying Political Authority through Architecture*", University Press of Kansas, United States of America.
- Laswell, H, 1965, "*The Language of Politics*", MIT Press 3-19.
- Markus, T, 1995, '*What Do Buildings Have To Do With Power?*' Architectural Design, Maggie Toy, volume 65 March-April, VCH Publishers (UK) Ltd, London.
- Port, M.H, 1978, "*The Houses of Parliament*", Yale University press, London.
- Silk & Walters, 1999, "*How Parliament Works*", 4th edition, Addison Wesley Longman, New York.