

Assessment 1 - "Geo-graphy" Writing Assignment  
GEOG 10AC  
Prof. Clancy Wilmott

*Part 1: Describing a situation*

On the Southeast side of campus, nestled between Bancroft Way and numerous academic buildings, sits a curious piece of urban architecture. Outside Berkeley Law, near the Class of 1914 Fountain, are a collection of concentric circles formed by neat rows of large concrete blocks. These rows gradually ascend, mimicking the stepped seating of a traditional amphitheater. In each row, every meter or so, a thick metal bar protrudes through the concrete, separating the blocks into individual seating arrangements.

This arrangement of concrete seating can be described as a formal space, which abides by a structured layout and is subject to a number of aesthetic and functional considerations as defined by the campus' urban planners and architects. This space also functions as an open and public space. In the dynamic academic environment of the Berkeley campus, students, faculty and visitors alike can often be seen engaging with this space in various ways. Many students are seen sitting upright, their backs against the walls, with laptops and books spread out on the concrete ledges. In other parts of this space, students and faculty gather and engage in animated discussions or casual conversations, while others seek quiet moments of solitude among this urban landscape.

Despite its seemingly innocuous facade, this piece of urban furniture presents a complex spatial situation, reflecting the interplay between the built environment and the way in which people interact with it. The metal bars are not mere decorative elements, but rather serve as functional deterrents. Their purpose, though not explicitly stated, is clear: to deter certain activities or behaviors undesirable in this public space. By protruding through the concrete at regular intervals, the metal bars are physical obstructions which make it uncomfortable, if not impossible, to lie down horizontally. This dissuades people from reclining for extended periods of time, limiting the space to primarily short-term usage. The raised bars also make it difficult for skateboarders and cyclists to do tricks and maneuvers, which is a common occurrence on the Berkeley campus.

Examining the structure's materials also provides insights into the ways in which we interact with this space. The durable concrete blocks, while resilient to the elements, reflect an architectural choice to prioritize functionality and longevity. The metal bars, with their deliberate design and strategic placement, showcase a conscious effort to shape human interactions and behavior with this space. These material and design choices made by campus urban planners and- architects are important to consider in understanding the values and intentions behind the creation and use of urban spaces.

The concrete amphitheater, with its unwelcoming metal bars, is a striking example of hostile architecture on the Berkeley campus, reflecting a conscious decision to prioritize certain uses of a public space while discouraging others. Though it exists as an open public space, this concrete seating arrangement sends a powerful message about who is not welcome in this shared urban environment, ultimately shaping the way we interact with this space.

## *Part 2: Adding concepts and critiques*

On the Southeast side of campus, nestled between Bancroft Way and numerous academic buildings, sits a curious piece of urban architecture. Outside Berkeley Law, are a collection of concentric circles formed by neat rows of large concrete blocks. These rows gradually ascend, mimicking the stepped seating of a traditional amphitheater. In each row, every meter or so, a thick metal bar protrudes through the concrete, separating the blocks into individual seating arrangements.

This arrangement of concrete seating can be described as a formal space, which abides by a structured layout and is subject to a number of aesthetic and functional considerations as defined by the campus' urban planners and architects. This space also functions as an open and public space, frequented by students, faculty, staff and visitors alike.

Despite its seemingly innocuous facade, this piece of urban furniture presents a complex spatial situation, reflecting the interplay between the built environment and the way in which people interact with it. The metal bars are not mere decorative elements, but rather serve as functional deterrents, to deter certain activities or behaviors undesirable in this public space. The metal bars are physical obstructions which make it uncomfortable, if not impossible, to lie down horizontally. This dissuades people from reclining for extended periods of time, limiting the space to primarily short-term usage. This is a striking example of hostile architecture, which refers to intentional design of spaces to deter certain behaviors or groups of people, often to exclude and discourage marginalized groups from using those spaces. In this case, this seating targets vulnerable populations, such as unhoused individuals, who may seek shelter and rest in public spaces.

In an article titled "Urban Geography III: Universities and their spaces", published in the *Progress in Human Geography* journal, Donald McNeill explores the role of universities in producing and shaping urban spaces, as well as influencing spatial injustice. He writes:

"An important role for human geography is its ability to describe and explain the politics of how they [universities] are sited within cities, how they are constituted relationally and how they place and sort actors and objects within their territories."

McNeill argues that universities engage in spatial sorting of individuals, by actively organizing space on their campuses, which in turn affects how different groups of people interact with each other and their surrounding environment. Based on the arguments presented in McNeill's article, the hostile architecture on the Berkeley campus is a striking example of spatial sorting. Spatial sorting refers to the deliberate allocation and organization of spaces in a way which affects how individuals or groups interact with these spaces. The concrete seating also reflects broader societal issues, contributing to the intentional exclusion of unhoused individuals from public spaces. This design choice aligns with McNeill's argument that universities, as influential urban institutions, actively organize space.

This situation and McNeill's article provide valuable insights into the ways in which spaces are imbued with social and political significance, and how universities play a key role in shaping that relationship. This serves as a solemn reminder of the implications of urban architectural design decisions and the importance of considering space as political.

### *Part 3: Critical analysis of a situation*

On the southeastern fringes of the UC Berkeley campus, a striking architectural configuration unfolds steps away from the bustling Southside. At one of the university's principal entrances, just outside Berkeley Law, are a collection of concentric circles formed by neat rows of large concrete blocks. These rows gradually ascend, mimicking the stepped seating of a traditional amphitheater. In each row, every meter or so, a thick metal bar protrudes through the concrete, separating the blocks into individual seating arrangements. Despite its seemingly innocuous facade, this piece of urban furniture presents a complex spatial situation, reflecting the interplay between the built environment and the way in which people interact with it. The metal bars are not mere decorative elements, but rather serve as functional deterrents, to deter activities or behaviors undesirable in this space. The metal bars are physical obstructions which make it uncomfortable, if not impossible, to lie down horizontally, dissuading people from reclining for extended periods of time. This is a striking example of hostile architecture, the intentional design of spaces to deter certain behaviors or groups of people, often to exclude and discourage marginalized groups from using those spaces. This seating targets vulnerable populations, such as unhoused individuals, who may seek shelter and rest in public spaces.

This example of hostile architecture is inherently political. In the article "Politicising space and place", Massey highlights that the ways in which we define space are imbued in social and political significance. Massey writes:

"[...] the boundaries which we draw in space, the 'places' we define (indeed all spatial definitions), the decisions about which mobilities to allow and which not, and about how open, or how closed, our places are to be ... all these things, rather than being based on some eternal principles, are in fact expressions of, and exercises in, social power." (117)

The hostile architecture on the UC Berkeley campus is a striking example of Massey's concept of spatial power dynamics, and it is a stark exercise of social power, reflecting the broader social and political dynamic which shape urban landscapes.

Massey's perspective prompts us to consider the greater socio-political context in which these spatial decisions are made. In this case, UC Berkeley's role as a dominant institution within the city of Berkeley amplifies its influence to its surrounding environment. This is furthered by Donald McNeill's argument in his article titled "Urban Geography III: Universities and their spaces", published in the *Progress in Human Geography* journal. McNeill argues that universities play an important role in producing and shaping urban spaces, as well as influencing spatial injustice. He writes:

"An important role for human geography is its ability to describe and explain the politics of how they [universities] are sited within cities, how they are constituted relationally and how they place and sort actors and objects within their territories." (1)

McNeill describes that universities engage in spatial sorting of individuals, by actively organizing space on their campuses, which in turn affects how different groups of people interact with each other and the environment. Spatial sorting refers to the deliberate allocation and organization of spaces in a way which affects how individuals or groups interact with these spaces, and is a direct exercise of social power.

In exploring the university's role in shaping spaces, we can aptly consider the concrete seating a university space rather than a public space, as university spaces are owned and controlled by institutions. UC Berkeley has authority over the design, maintenance and regulation of spaces, and can shape them to align with their values, principles, and goals, exerting their power and influence to a broader spatial and social environment. Beyond the metal and concrete, this architectural feature serves as a threshold between UC Berkeley as an academic institution and the city of Berkeley, a college town that shares a unique relationship with its university.

McNeill's argument about universities in college towns like Berkeley sheds light on the important role institutions play in governing many aspects of everyday and community life in a college town. The university is the dominant employer, real estate holder, health-care provider, and even policing agent. UC Berkeley has a substantial real-estate footprint on the city of Berkeley, and the campus' expansion has a significant impact on the availability of housing in the area which has social and economic ramifications for Berkeley residents. One potential effect of UC Berkeley's real-estate policies is the wide prevalence of homelessness in the city of Berkeley. While UC Berkeley has the responsibility to provide a safe and conducive academic environment for students and faculty, we see the extent to which it extends its jurisdiction to addressing homelessness in Berkeley: the hostile architecture symbolizes how unwelcome a marginalized population of unhoused individuals is to use the campus space.

This dynamic becomes even more apparent when considering the broader spatial situation and symbolisms within the university landscape. Berkeley Law is a symbol of excellence in legal education, progressive legal values, and principles of academic freedom and social justice. Etched on the concrete facade of Berkeley Law is Benjamin Cardozo's quote "[...] You will study the precepts of justice, for these are the truths that through you shall come to their hour of triumph [...]". However, despite this noble academic mission and commitment to justice, the presence of hostile architecture at an entrance to campus, beside Berkeley Law, sends a conflicting message. Located at one of the campus' main entrances to Southside, this symbolic boundary excludes the college town and its residents from the academic rigor and intellectual pursuits of the university.

In examining the concrete seating on the UC Berkeley campus, we unravel a complex web of spatial politics, power dynamics and societal values. Doreen Massey's perspective reminds us that spatial definitions, like hostile architecture, are not mere boundaries, but exercises of social power. Ultimately, this is a powerful symbol of the intersection of urban life, academia, and social responsibility. It challenges us to consider how institutions such as UC Berkeley wield their influence socially and spatially and the implications these choices hold for social justice and inclusivity within the urban landscape.

### *Bibliography*

- Massey, D. (1996). Politicising space and place. *Scottish Geographical Magazine*, 112(2), 117–123. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14702549608554458>
- McNeill, D. (2023). Urban Geography III: Universities and their spaces. *Progress in Human Geography*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/03091325231188375>