Seeing versus moving:
A review of Julienne Hanson’s ‘The architecture of justice’ (1996)

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This essay reviews Hanson’s article on English law court buildings. It provides a summary of the work and highlights the main contributions made, before moving on to discuss a few issues raised in Hanson’s research. It is argued that, besides many discoveries, a major methodological contribution of the research is a combination of the descriptive and the analytical, and of the quantitative with the qualitative, in several specific ways. It is further observed that the work has raised several critical issues that invite discussion and research. These include the significance or insignificance of iconography and the mask, the use of dualities, the interrelation between visual and syntactic cores, and the bifurcation of visibility and permeability. Speculations are made in response to these issues, with a central attention paid to the relations between visibility and permeability. The discussion centers on the separation between the visual field and that of permeable movement, and the rise of such separation in the emergence of modern institutions. It is speculated that the visual field unfolded as the plan of permeable spaces was increasingly disciplined and closed in by walls or boundaries, the courtroom being an example. The essay ends with a methodological call for more attention to be paid to the relations between the field of seeing and that of movement.

Architecture of justice

If Julienne Hanson has maintained a parallel focus in her research on cities and buildings, then ‘The architecture of justice’ (1996) is a landmark piece on buildings as it provides one of the most thorough analyses on modern institutions in Hanson’s research production. For this reason it is important to read the article closely, to identify its specific contributions and discuss the issues it raises for further research.

The subtitle of the article is ‘Iconography and space configuration in the English law court building’. The article deals with the law court building in England across the twentieth century from before to after the Second World War. It identifies a semantic reading of the law court building, and then moves on to a spatial and syntactic analysis of these buildings. It discovers a spatial reality that challenges the semantic appreciation of the forms and styles of the courtroom design. The article starts with a careful description of this semantic reading of the formal design of the courtroom. It identifies a rhetoric interpretation of the design that focuses on formal layout, style and ornamentation – the ‘iconography’ of the courtroom. Hanson identifies a reading of this iconography; namely, that the courtroom has evolved from a more authoritarian to a more egalitarian, participatory and democratic type, reflecting a legal regime that has evolved towards a more liberal practice. At this point, she introduces a few crucial dichotomies: court ‘room’ and court ‘house’; local and global; iconography and spatial configuration; semantic reading and syntactic analysis. With this, Hanson turns to the second part of the essay for a global, spatial and syntactic analysis, to challenge the local, formal and rhetoric reading. Here, she conducts an analysis that is in fact not only spatial but also historical. With careful historical observation, and a spatial syntactic description (using graphs, taxonomy and computation of integration values), Hanson discovers a persistent pattern of
segregation across time – the courthouses remain internally segregated despite the formal treatment of the courtroom that had made them look integrated, participatory and liberal. The law court building is ‘anything but liberal’ and remains so over time.

Hanson makes specific observations at this point:

1. The courtroom provides a meeting point for the different groups of people (the suspect, officials and jury), which allows visual and audible contact but no corporeal interaction between them – this means that there is visual integration but absolute segregation in permeability;

2. The separation and segregation of these social groups remain systematically so across the whole courthouse, with minimal contact points in the shallowest area of the building;

3. The systematic segregation of the groups is historically persistent, already adopted by the earliest examples;

4. In the examples studied of courthouses in twentieth century England, the integration core of the whole spatial system, for permeable movement, is found not in the courtroom but in the backstage circulation space, in the un-programmed corridors, where some social actors such as clerks, judges and magistrates can interact and where the ‘realpolitik’ of the judicial process takes place.

What Hanson has uncovered is ‘a fixed and continuous judicial structure’ which has changed little over time; the courthouse remains a space of systematic segregation for the different social groups, mainly the suspect, people officiating the trial, the jury and the public representing society at large. The practice of segregation has remained and grown even stronger over time (Hanson, 1996, p.57).

Hanson has attempted to answer why this is the case. The rationale found is manifold: security for all involved; the long held importance of preventing ‘contamination’ across social groups; and class maintenance (judges and magistrates do not want to associate with the public) (ibid., p.57-58).

The essay concludes with two observations, on ‘rites’ and the ‘virtual’. The courthouse is a site for a ‘rite of passage’ for all three of the social groups, but especially the suspect who may be reincorporated into society or excluded into a system of confinement, the prison. This leads to the observation highlighted twice by Hanson in the paper that the law court and the prison emerged together as two distinctive institutions in the judicial and penal practice of the modern state (ibid., p.51 and p.58). Regarding the rise of ‘virtual’ courtrooms, Hanson reminds the reader that although there is the courtroom that functions ‘virtually’ with no need for physical interaction in the room, the integrating core of the whole courthouse is in the backstage corridors where legal conflicts are resolved in the interests of the wider society. In this sense, a localised law court or ‘a spatial realisation of the architecture of justice’ is needed (ibid., p.59).

Contributions: Spatial structures in history
This article has made several important breakthroughs. It has employed a spatial syntactic analysis to demystify the semantic reading of the courtroom design; it has uncovered a persistent pattern of segregation in judicial practice in the law court building in England, in relation to the earliest practices; it has discovered a hidden ‘core’ of the building, in the backstage, where informal and real politics of negotiation take place for a resolution that may benefit society at large.

Methodologically, the article suggests a model of work that combines rich descriptions with analytical and quantified research. This is achieved in several ways, each including the incorporation of a
qualitative aspect into the analytical and quantified study. The first is *history*, or rich historical scholarship, intertwined with abstract spatial analysis. This requires the simultaneous use of different skills, methods and perspectives, as well as the meticulous synthesis of diverse materials, and an experience-based insight to guide the collection and the analysis. The second is a rich *textual description* of a certain setting or process in relation to an abstract analysis. The contrast of a rich textual description and the structural analysis that follows, alongside the skilful synthesis of the two, is exceptional in Hanson’s article. Hanson’s early work on English novels comes into the picture (Hanson, 1976). Indeed, throughout Hanson’s publication career one witnesses a persistent, if at times implicit interest in the rich quality of human experience in various settings (houses, institutions, streets and cities). This historical and anthropological focus contrasts with the quantitative analytical studies of spatial structure, and thus they effectively complement each other. The third element employed for a synthesis of the analytical and the non-analytical is a *narrative balance* between historical anthropological descriptions and the structural analysis of spatial structure. This is particularly evident in the patient and dense accumulation of descriptions of law court buildings towards the middle of the article, for a syntactic deconstruction to be launched thereafter. The accumulation builds a momentum that makes the analysis more powerful, evoking greater tensions and contrasting viewpoints.

By bringing historiography, textual description and narrative balance into the abstract, analytical and quantified investigation of spatial structures, the result is rich with dynamic tensions as it reveals the analytical power of syntactic research at a level much closer to the empirical, the experienced and the felt. It demonstrates the great productiveness of a work that combines the analytical with the non-analytical, and the qualitative with the quantitative – something not available if one works with the analytical or the non-analytical only. In any case, such a synthesis should be much encouraged, as the generative tensions can be very productive.

**Critical issues: The split between seeing and moving**

This article also generates many interesting issues that can be considered for new research. A few of these are listed below, with preliminary reflections.

**Dualities:** In the middle point of the article, a series of dualities are established so that the research can move from semantics and iconography to spatial structure in each of the pairs (Hanson, 1996, p.54): room and house; local and global; semantics and syntax; rhetoric and essence; form and space; local iconography and global spatial configuration; apparent historical change and hidden persistence. The dualities are clear and enable the research to shift to the hidden and syntactic reality in the overall spatial configuration. Hanson has already covered both semantics and spatial structure, yet the work emphasises the ‘second’ side, the syntactic configuration, and leaves the first side, the iconographic and the semantic, aside, as already deconstructed and no longer important. The generative tension brought about by Hanson’s synthetic methodology, however, has not been entirely exhausted; that is, the work is not entirely completed yet, as the interrelations between local semantics and global syntax have not been fully exposed. If we are to progress further in our research on law court buildings, we need to engage with each side separately as well as in relation to each other in order to better understand how semantics is embedded or juxtaposed to the syntactic structure, as they may be already always related in reality. We need to further Hanson’s synthetic project and explore the interrelations between views, symbols and syntactic meaning in a net of relations.
Iconography and the mask: Hanson has provided a rich description of the iconography of the courtroom design across three types of historical spans: the traditional, intermediate and contemporary. The subsequent deconstruction is powerful, but somehow dissolves all the anthropological qualities of the ‘rite of passage’ (the trial and the process before and after). A related question is the use of the pair, ‘mask’ versus ‘truth’: there is a mask of form that covers up a world of truth in spatial configuration (ibid., p.54). As previously stated, the dichotomy is useful in establishing a clear distinction between formal relations and the ways in which the law court building works as spatial practice. However, the idea of the mask could be re-examined in further research. Perhaps the form, with all its rhetoric and surface dimensions that constitute a mask, has its own ‘truth’— in the historical formation of an ideology, built with forms, signs and emblems. Perhaps the mask does not just cover a layer of reality, but constitutes its own reality, historically and in ideological discourse, in an ‘empire of signs’. Perhaps the world of signs is related to and even located in a net of relations inside the syntactic structure. Perhaps both the mask and the hidden spatial truth are levels of realities interrelated in a world where form and space, semantics and structure cannot be separated from each other.

Two cores: Another major pairing or dichotomy is the visual core in the courtroom, set against the integration core of the whole spatial configuration in the backstage circulation spaces. The article has revealed the integration core in the backstage, which is certainly a breakthrough in light of the conventional focus on the courtroom. But, once again, the next step could focus on both cores and examine them together, as they are already connected in the realm of spatial structure. Hanson’s project can be furthered by treating the two cores as related, and as potentially equally powerful, in constituting a full picture of the workings of the law court, where, as it were, the war is waged on two fronts, at two sites, each relating to the other.

The split between seeing and moving: There are two related conditions that stand at the heart of the law court building as uncovered by Hanson’s article: 1) the systematic separation of different social groups in the law court building; and 2) the fracture dramatised in the courtroom where the bodies remain separated, yet the eyes can see and the ears can hear across the space among the social groups – a total split of the visible and the permeable. These two conditions – especially the latter, as a culmination or extension of the former – are the greatest intrigues or enigmas of the whole story of the law court. Why is there such a dramatic and total split? Hanson’s explanation centers on the separation between social groups (and the reasons given are threefold: security, prevention of ‘contamination’ and class distancing – see p.57-58). However, future research may consider not just the separation of human bodies, but also the extreme bifurcation into corporeal distance and visual integration: the split between the realm of the body and that of the eye.

There are two explanations we may take into account for an understanding of such a bifurcation. The first is the social historical transformation of the nineteenth century, whereby modern institutional buildings emerged as part of the overall rise of a disciplinary society and stronger state apparatus for control (Foucault, 1977; Evans, 1982; and Markus, 1993). Buildings were becoming more instrumental in controlling the social body; the law court and the prison could be considered as two of the most extreme cases in which the use of walls and barriers were manipulated or engineered for their maximum effect in controlling bodies, their lives and movement. Since the law court is a twin sister of the prison (Hanson, 1996, p.51 and p.58), and the prison is one of the ‘longest models’ 1, with excessive or ‘violent’ means of controlling the life of the body as to where it can stay, move and see

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1 This proposition requires in-depth analysis. Hillier and Penn argue that the archetypal long model is the law court building. However, it is possible to argue that the prison is also one of the longest models, based on the extreme separation of the social category of prisoners and a quite extensive programme of control. For the observation on the law court building as the archetypal long model, see Bill Hillier and Allan Penn (1991).
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(Foucault, 1977; Evans, 1982), it is therefore not surprising that a strict and artificial break between seeing and moving in the courtroom to serve the judicial process was witnessed in the emergence of this typology in the nineteenth century. It may be entirely ‘rational’ to allow the groups to see and talk to each other in public, in full visibility of each other and with no permeability allowed, so as to prevent unwanted interaction and socialisation across the groups in the courtroom. The building was engineered to fulfil this ‘rational’ requirement in its most rigorous and instrumental way. It is therefore not surprising to witness this rather precise and firm split between seeing and moving.

Looking at other factors that influence permeability and visibility relations, it is important to clarify that these relations do not arise from reasons that are simply ‘political’, in the narrow sense of power relations. They are related to three different orders of things, in relation to modernity: politics, technology and demographic scale. They are: the state apparatus of disciplinary control; the impact of modern building structures and materials on the interior of buildings and their tectonics; and modern ways of production and social reproduction at a great demographic scale. The arrival of the Industrial Revolution brought about methods of construction and materials that enabled the use of large building spans, and increased the capacity of building tectonics to accommodate visual interconnections among spaces, events and people - and in this way manipulate and discipline. The resulting architectural freedom did not lead to a freer social realm, but a social terrain where visibility and permeability could be more precisely manipulated for a disciplinary society at a greater scale. Today, we are witnessing further growth of the scale of modernity in ‘globalisation’, and a further split between seeing and moving with the proliferation of materials and technologies such as structural glass and digital screens.

The use of modern tectonics leads to the second explanation: the evolution of the plan that captures the pervasive rising separation between the visual and corporeal fields in various modern building types or institutions from the nineteenth century onwards. Robin Evans’ article ‘Figures, Doors and Passages’ (1978) provides an interesting insight here. Evans refers to this split twice in the article through the illustration of two different cases. The first one is related to a ‘natural’ or universal aspect: Evans attempts to explain why the richly elaborate frescos and domes of villas were not included in the paintings and novels that described social and domestic life in these buildings. What Evans discovered was a gap between the visual field that could stretch to the dome and the fresco at a great distance, and the embodied social life located on the ground close by. For this, he provides an enigmatic phrase: ‘what the eye can feast on, the hand cannot touch’ (1978, p.271). Here he seems to refer to a universal condition: that the visual and the corporeal fields are already different in their natural operations. The eye can see far, and synchronise relations that the body can experience only through time and movement. In the second case, Evans refers to a ‘historical’ rise of the split that emerges with the increased rationalisation of the plan in the nineteenth century, especially the compartmentalisation and the rise of the corridor plan (ibid., p.273). Evans noticed a trend that as the walls were closing in for compartmentalisation, the visual field began to stretch and unfold, up, down and further away, through various openings in a rich layout, especially the circulation spaces. Evans’ example was Soane’s house at Lincoln’s Inn Fields (Sir John Soane’s Museum). We can add to the list not only arcades and atriums, but also many modern institutional or typological complexes such as hospitals, factories, prisons, libraries etc. Whether the building is a ‘long’ or ‘short model’
(highly controlled or less controlled), the tendency remains: to discipline the plan and to extend the eye. The historical development seems clear: as rationalisation intensifies and as the corridor plan arises, a visual field gains a greater spectrum or extension. The split of visibility and permeability in the modern courtroom is part of this process of the rising control that compartmentalised the plan, and rationalised the layout of social space for the efficient management of the social body.

The role of seeing with moving in the study of modern institutional buildings: The visual field appears in Hanson’s article a few times in different ways: it captures the iconography; it centers on the courtroom and thus ‘hides’ the backstage; and it unfolds between different social groups in the room in contrast to corporeal separation for these social actors. This visual field is well described in a model that synthesises the historical and the analytical; yet, paradoxically, it is also underemphasised in favour of a permeable spatial configuration across the whole building. It has thus produced interesting discoveries regarding the larger spatial structure and its integration core that is situated in the backstage. However, this discovery has conflicting implications. Future research may build on this aspect and reconsider the importance of the visual, putting this dimension methodologically and interpretively on an equal footing with the permeable spatial structure so as to study the overlapping and the splitting of these two fields. Methodologically, this is already outlined in Hanson’s article here and in her other writings such as ‘Deconstructing architects’ houses’ (1994), where formal geometries captured by the eye and spatial configurations experienced by moving bodies are both emphasised.4

Given the reflections provided above, it seems particularly important to study the visual field and the permeable spatial configuration together, so as to observe how they interact in various institutional settings. In fact, if we cross compare research on buildings or building complexes that have used ‘space syntax’ methods, we see a tendency to move towards a closer integration of the visual field and permeable structure, and the formal with the spatial. This tendency is clear in a series of research publications that use space syntax from the early 1990s onwards. An extensive and comprehensive coverage of all these publications is beyond the scope of this paper, but the following merit attention: Thomas A. Markus (1993), Julienne Hanson (1998), Kim Dovey (1999), Jianfei Zhu (2004), John Peponis et al. (1997), Sophia Psarra (2009), John Peponis & Tahar Bellal (2010), and Daniel Koch (2012). In this increasing concern for the visual and permeable, and formal and spatial, as two different realms working together, Hanson (1998), Peponis et al. (1997), and Psarra (2009) demonstrate a strong interest in the close connection of these two fields, in that visual lines and visual maps (isovists) are actively used along with the analysis of a cell matrix of permeable spatial structure in their research.

To conclude, Hanson’s article has unpacked important dualities in the English law court building – iconography and spatial structure - and has cast light on aspects of these dualities that were less known or entirely unknown before; that is, the overall layout and the syntactic spatial configuration with its integrating core. Although Hanson’s approach pays attention to both sides of the dual opposites, she has mainly emphasised the second side - the syntactic structure. If research that combines the semantic with the syntactic, the formal with the spatial, and the visual with the permeable is to move on, we should further Hanson’s methodological project of synthesising descriptions. This is made possible by assigning equal significance to both sides of these dualities and studying their differences and interconnections; they are both part of the social system that produces and resonates in buildings, and the architectural systems formed by the build-

Notes: 4 Also in Hanson, 1998, Chapter Eight, p.242-268.
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The local, formal and visual, and the ‘mask’ of iconography, in relation to the syntactic spatial structure, may reveal rich stories and truths for an understanding of the historical and ideological movement of liberalisation from the 1960s to the 1990s in the design of law courts, despite the persistence of spatial structures and syntactic cores.

References


Hanson, J. (1998), Decoding Homes and Houses, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.


