

# The Embodied Competence of Institutions. Parliamentary Space and the UK Parliament

Sophia Psarra

## *Abstract*

This paper explores the connection between the spatial configuration of the UK Houses of Parliament, how the building is perceived by parliament Members, and political culture. It conceptualizes spatial competence as the knowledge that enables and limits users in employing the possibilities space offers for socio-political interaction; and spatial performance as the realization of these possibilities for the exercise of power and negotiation through rules of behaviour and spatial practice. A qualitative approach based on interviews with parliamentarians and a quantitative study of spatial morphology are combined, demonstrating the agency of space in generating a spatial culture of informal interactions akin to the political practices of negotiation and adaptation that define British politics and the institutions of its larger constitutional order. Describing and visualizing the spatial characteristics supporting these institutions is critical for understanding how the upcoming Restoration and Renewal Programme (R&R) of the UK Houses of Parliament can be about restoration as well as renewal.

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Faced with the first wave of the pandemic, parliaments around the world, the most analogue of democratic institutions, shifted to a hybrid format.

### *Introduction*

Developments related to the rise of inequalities, the 2008 economic crisis and more recently the Coronavirus pandemic have undermined confidence in the authority and competence of our institutions. Yet, simply taking the health crisis as an example, the production of vaccines just twenty months after an unknown virus was reported in December 2019 demonstrated the power of scientific progress in the war against pathogens. At the same time, this Covid period foregrounded the potency of another area deeply rooted in scientific investigation. The digital revolution has made possible to almost seamlessly take our work and social life into the virtual world, rapidly adjusting and developing new kinds of competence. The ability to assemble a team of world specialists to conduct a medical operation in real time, where many of the specialists are thousands of miles away, presents a remarkable advancement in medical operations in society. At the time we were conducting our lives virtually on earth, the US and China were physically exploring Mars from remote earth bases.

As with previous technological advances, these great leaps in socio-technical competence have exposed deep social inequalities and risks to our democracies. Faced with the first wave of the pandemic, parliaments around the world, the most analogue of democratic institutions, shifted to a hybrid format, with physical participation of a limited number of Members and virtual input by the majority of elected representatives. Studying the impact of the health crisis on parliaments in Europe, Cartier et al (2020) found that as legislatures were placed in “an artificial coma” (ibid.: 8), they temporarily relinquished part of parliamentary sovereignty. These changes are a matter of physical presence in space, as well as the strength of the governing party, coalition and opposition. But as the authors suggest, “the dematerialisation of parliamentary deliberation may have led to a form of devaluation of the assemblies’ activities’ (ibid.: 10). A report by the Hansard Society made a similar case for the UK, arguing that the shift in the balance of power between parliament and executive lead to an erosion of parliamentary control over the government (Fox et al., 2021). For example, over 400 Coronavirus-related Statutory Instruments (SIs) were laid before the UK

Parliament in the first year of the pandemic. “All were subject to little or no scrutiny, a situation described as ‘totally unsatisfactory’ by the Commons Speaker” (ibid.).<sup>1</sup>

The ways in which politicians interact with each other in legislatures has a serious impact on the competence of parliament to hold the executive to account (Crewe, 2021; 2015; Norton, 2019). Yet it is at times of crisis that the possibility for political assembly may be most curtailed. The threat to democratic oversight raises a pressing need to understand the embodied spatial competence of deliberative assemblies. It also advances a question about how they are to recover from the weakened situation they found themselves during this crisis. This knowledge gap has immediate significance for the UK Parliament in the light of the comprehensive upgrading of the parliamentary building complex (Fig. 1) through the Restoration and Renewal Programme (R&R) that will shape the future of the UK Houses of Parliament (Palace of Westminster) for the next hundred years.<sup>2</sup>

Focusing on the Palace of Westminster, this paper explores the role of space as an agent of mediation between the embodied spatial competence and political life. What spatial properties and practices constitute spatial competence in the UK parliament? How can we explore spatial competence and political performance in institutions through an integrated study? What can spatial competence at Westminster tell us about the future of the institution?

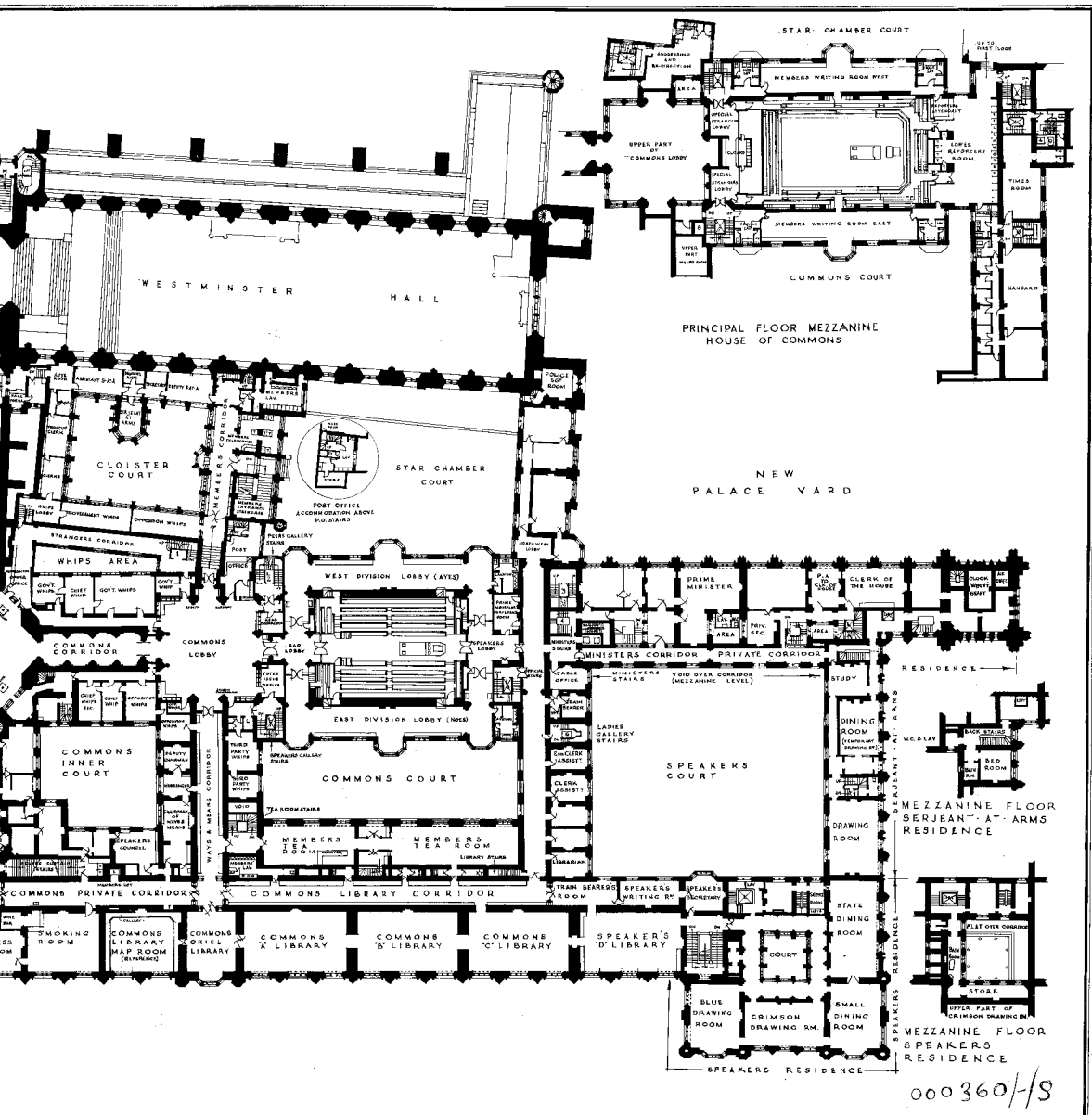
It is widely known that the spatial effects of parliament buildings cannot be explained on purely functional grounds (Manow, 2010). As Goodsell explains, these effects are not about controlling how people behave, but affecting “their thoughts and actions in preliminary, subtle and interactive ways” (1998: 288). Previous studies confirm that the Palace of Westminster has a powerful impact over those who work within the building (Meakin, 2020). But values and cultural ideologies are also embedded into the spatial organisation of institutions defining boundaries between social categories (Markus, Cameron, 2002). This is clear in institutions which use architecture as a disciplining mechanism, embedding aspects of power and control through spatial practices (Foucault, 1977). It is surprising that the central locus of political culture in

1 – [Online]. Available at: <https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2020-09-30/debates/8160262B-DA85-4D6C-B7FF-86717C8261B2/Speaker%E2%80%99S-Statement>. [Accessed: 29 July 2022].

2 – Restoration and Renewal Programme [Online]. Available at: <https://www.restorationandrenewal.uk/> [Accessed 19 November 2021].

It is at times of crisis that the possibility for political assembly may be most curtailed. The threat to democratic oversight raises a pressing need to understand the embodied spatial competence of deliberative assemblies.





DATE AMENDED	INITIALS
J.S.K.	SEPTEMBER 1923

# Principal Floor Plan



Ministry of Works  
Maintenance  
Division S.W.1.

The paper argues that perceptions of the Palace of Westminster point to the key role of space and “actors” present in space in holding the government to account.

modern Western societies has scarcely been considered with respect to the configuration of parliaments as spatial artefacts of agency in their own right. This paper develops in three parts. The first part concerns a theoretical discussion, drawing an analogy between language and space to define the concept of spatial competence in institutional settings. The second part addresses perceptions of the Palace of Westminster by a group of MPs and Peers. The third part explores the spatial structure of the parliament building, looking at how it orders spatial categories of power, control, knowledge and social interactions. The paper argues that perceptions of the Palace of Westminster point to the key role of space and “actors” present in space in holding the government to account. These perceptions correspond to the spatial organisation of the building which reveals a highly interconnected network of spaces. The rich spatial interconnections and the possibilities for interaction they afford generate a political culture akin to what parliamentarians perceive and sources of literature explain as a process of endless social encounters (Crewe, 2015). With regards to the representational function of the Palace of Westminster in the minds of its users, its legacy can affect the possibilities for spatial and political innovation in the light of the R&R project. The challenge the UK Parliament faces therefore, is how to draw from its own experience as a resilient and innovative institution adapting to social and political changes in the future.

#### *Competence and performance*

In the area of linguistics, competence is defined as the knowledge of grammatical and syntactic rules that enables speakers to produce and understand an infinite number of sentences in their language (Chomsky, 1965). Making an analogy between the individual’s linguistic competence and the designer’s morphological repertoire, Henry Glassie explains that the designer’s competence proceeds from a set of geometrical ideas, “spiralling from the abstract to the concrete, from useless ideas to livable configurations” (1979: 19). Bound to a list of rules of grammar and syntax, linguistic competence is strongly related to performance or use, the production of actual utterances in language. If the ability to compose is competence, a

second ability of the mind is to relate the composition to its context. The result of this interrelation is the person's actual performance. For Bruno Latour, it is the capacity to grasp the broader processes of performances that transforms performance to competence (Latour, 2014). Glassie's structuralist approach is different from Latour's constructionist perspective. However, both agree that competence is linked to performance, implying a straight connection between states of knowledge (competence) and states of practice (performance).

The absence of a codified constitution in the UK puts greater pressure on parliamentary procedure (Blackburn, 2017) and the spaces within which it occurs in comparison to other countries. Competence and performance in the UK Houses of Parliament is intrinsically linked with the spatial settings as works of mediation between knowledge of the building, rules of behaviour and spatial practice. But how exactly this mediation happens is neither readily known nor easily represented. Writing about the work MPs do in the House of Commons, anthropologist Emma Crewe explains that arriving in the Palace of Westminster new MPs "have no office, no staff and little idea of how to do the job" (2015: 41). The procedures of parliament take years to learn, but as some realise that Clerks can be their greatest asset, they visit the Table Office near the back of the Chamber, "where a small team of these brainy procedural-priests are on hand to advise about the best tactics for what they wish to achieve" (ibid.: 43). Political competence, or knowledge of how to negotiate power and "navigate complex, dynamic socio-political worlds" (ibid.: 27) in the complex spaces and corridors of Westminster, seems to be mediated by spatial competence, that is, knowing how cultural patterns are embedded in the building.

If buildings are instances of the transmission of culture through artefacts (Hillier, 1996), parliament buildings must be among the strongest examples of how social knowledge, embedded in their space can be transmitted through generations. This concerns knowledge of the building and rules of behaviour that are tacit, taken for granted and repeated over time. Taking inspiration from Glassie's analogy between spatial artefacts and language, this paper addresses the embodied spatial competence and performance

Political competence, in the complex spaces and corridors of Westminster, seems to be mediated by spatial competence, that is, knowing how cultural patterns are embedded in the building.

**3 – Failures of transparency and accountability and ‘wasteful, nugatory’ spending,** 29 June 2022. [Online]. Available at: <https://committees.parliament.uk/committee/127/public-accounts-committee/news/171771/failures-of-transparency-and-accountability-and-wasteful-nugatory-spending/> [Accessed 30 July 2022].

**4 – The interviews** were filmed and presented through two videos (3 min and 11 min) in the *Parliament Buildings Conference I, The Bartlett School of Architecture* and UCL European Institute. 12/13 November 2020 <https://www.parliamentbuildings.org.uk/video/3-minute-cut-film-inside-the-parliament-the-architecture-of-democracy/> <https://www.parliamentbuildings.org.uk/video/inside-parliament-the-architecture-of-democracy/>.

in the Palace of Westminster, that is, the connections between the building, rules of behaviour and political life, between perceptions of the building and the building itself, and between the individual and the institution.

#### *Parliamentarians and their perceptions*

Even a superficial look into the history of the Palace shows that it was shaped by ferocious debates over time. A debate over architectural styles – Classical or Gothic – in the 19<sup>th</sup> century marked the reconstruction of the building after the fire in 1834. Charles Barry, who won the Westminster competition, used a classical plan but dressed the building in Gothic appearance and details, skilfully crafted by August W.N. Pugin (Bradley & Pevsner, 2003). After the destruction of the Commons Chamber at WWII, Parliament entered a debate over restoring its original shape or adopting a semi-circular or horseshoe arrangement. The decision to rebuild the Chamber in its original form was endorsed by Winston Churchill’s views that the layout of the old Chamber was responsible for Britain’s two-party system, which is the essence of its parliamentary democracy. His well-known utterance “we shape our buildings and afterwards they shape us” implied that there is some sort of relationship between political practices and the building’s form. As the Palace is currently at significant risk from fire and malfunctioning, it faces yet another debate over the upcoming R&R Programme. Significant delays in making decisions over the R&R raise concerns about safety, accountability and transparency.<sup>3</sup> The starting point of this study was a series of pilot interviews with parliamentarians, aiming to understand what sort of place the Palace of Westminster is in the mind of its users. Questions ranged from what participants felt when they first visited the building to the impact of the seating arrangements on parliamentary debate; from the capacity of the building to foster informal interactions to its relevance to diverse communities; and from the impact of videoconferencing in deliberative debate to how participants envision the future of the Palace in light of the R&R Programme. Interviews were conducted from July to September 2020 at a time of hybrid Parliament, questioning eight parliamentarians. Two were current, two were former MPs and six were Peers. Three were females and five were males.<sup>4</sup>

### *Power and identity*

Parliamentarians variously referred to the building as “majestic and beautiful”, an “inspiring place”, “a piece of Gothic history”, as one particular interviewee put it. A female member of the House of Commons admitted that after years, she still feels “a sense of awe when [she] walks in [...] it never leaves you, the building is designed to make you stand back and admire it.” Another participant pointed out that “you feel the weight of history greeting you as you arrive [...] you begin to think about all the famous figures that trod these same floors.” The Palace may be “hugely complicated, taking years to learn one’s way around it,” but its history and international status inspire a sense of duty for one to try and make a mark. All responses confirmed the impact of the historical legacy of the Palace of Westminster on parliamentarians, as reported by a growing number of studies (Judge, 1989; Walker, 2012; Meakin, 2020).

While the building arouses strong feelings of emotional attachment (Meakin, 2020), there is a sharp awareness of the distance between the ideals it expresses and the day-to-day political life in parliament. As one member of the House of Lords explained, the Palace is “not as gilded in practice as seen from the outside”. Another member of the Lords and former MP stated that to those arriving for first time, the Palace inspires complex and contradictory feelings:

When you first arrive, you’re intimidated a little bit by it, but then you get a bit used to it and you feel rather proud about being there [...] whilst at the same time for backbench MPs, especially backbench MPs in opposition, you have very little power. So the place is designed to make you feel important whilst at the same time, you don’t actually have very much authority to do anything [...] and I’ve often wondered if that’s deliberate design to make MPs feel powerful, but render them powerless. I suspect it’s a bit of an accident of history, but it is nonetheless very convenient for any government.

The capacity of the building to inspire its users came under further questioning when participants were asked whether it embodies contemporary ideas about democracy.

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5 – Takayanagi, Mari, Unwin, Melanie and Seaward, Paul (eds) (2018), *Voice and Vote: Celebrating 100 Years of Votes for Women*. London: History of Parliament Trust/St James' House.

[The building] conveys an early Victorian pastiche of a democracy which [...] was wished to trace back to the middle ages. So in a sense the decoration is highly political in terms of the message that it seeks to convey, just as in parts of the world law courts look like Roman temples, because someone wished to convey the impression that there was an unbroken line of Jurisprudence going back to Justinian. So the House of Lords, to lesser extent the House of Commons, is constructed as a medieval environment to demonstrate the unbroken strength of our institutions for hundreds of years.

For a female MP the modern design of the Senedd (Welsh Parliament), expresses a more welcoming, and by implication, a more diverse building than the Westminster Palace. Political scientist Sarah Childs explains that much in the House of Commons has changed over the last century, which now contains women and Members of different ethnic origin. “Yet, the House remains unrepresentative and its working practices continue to reflect the traditions and preferences of Members who have historically populated it” (2015: 1). In terms of iconography, the building is “dominated by a Victorian historical narrative decorated with scenes from which women are entirely absent except as Queens” (Takayanagi, 2020). These limitations of the building in terms of diversity of expression were best captured by a member of the House of Lords:

It is a wonderful historical insight into the mindset of those years but to my mind it has very little to do with modern democracy. There are historical scenes including scenes depicted that are essential to our democracy including the ceiling of Magna Carta, but the figures in the scenes who are active are almost invariable male, those represented tend to be either royal or aristocratic or married to royals in the case of the six wives of Henry VIII who have a place in one of our lobbies. The balance that needs to be addressed cannot be easily achieved by adding statues or paintings of women of colour, although attempts have been made to do exactly this.<sup>5</sup>

#### *Formal and informal communications*

Various authors have drawn a distinction between formal communications, principally in the chambers and committee rooms, and informal ones (Crewe, 2015; Norton, 2018). We discussed these two types

of interaction with parliamentarians to see whether spaces in parliament have particular types of affordances regarding how to get information, meet certain kinds of people, effectively communicate a message or getting things done. A characteristic example is informal private conversations held through the formal system of voting where Members vote by walking through the Division Lobby. As one participant explained,

[...] it is the one moment when you will be able to get hold of a minister in a Department and seek their help informally over a constituency matter [...] especially if you're a back-bencher and your party is in government. It's the one chance you will ever have of getting hold of a government minister and bending their ear.

The interviews made clear that there is a range of activities in the tea rooms, bars, dining rooms, lobbies, corridors, sporting facilities and even hair salons. Such spaces are considered key to providing opportunities for intra-party and cross-party informal discourse, for mobilising political support (Norton, 2018).

So there's a cafeteria which is for staff as well as Members, [...] there is a formal dining room [...] where you can have visitors [...] and then we have a little space called the bishops bar [...] and that's [the] sort of place where you can very much talk to colleagues, quite often though [that] becomes a place where there'll be a little group of labour Members, talking with a group of conservatives and a little group of liberal democrats [...]. On one occasion I ended up talking to people from right across the political spectrum because we've all gone through the same division lobby on a particular issue.

The perceptions parliamentarians have of formal interactions divide between the view that the Commons Chamber expresses an adversarial style of debate, and the view that the difference between the Commons Chamber and the hemi-circular arrangement in other parliament buildings is due to the difference between political systems (adversarial or consensual). Another explanation of the relationship between seating arrangements and debating styles is the impetus of communication, which in the Commons Chamber is

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oriented towards having an argument, whereas in the horseshoe-shaped rooms of Select Committees is to reach consensus. A third reason, as one interviewee stated, is “historical accident” setting “a path dependence that is difficult to reverse.” Finally, a simple refutation of the view that behaviour follows form and vice versa was offered by the difference of atmosphere and mode of communication in the Lords’ and the Commons Chambers. Sober reflection in the Lords was contrasted with spontaneity in the Commons in spite of the similarity of their seating arrangements (with some cross benches added to the Lords).

#### *Virtual Parliament and Parliamentary scrutiny*

For some parliamentarians, the committees worked better in a virtual mode, as it was easier to get witnesses to attend and to assemble all Peers and Members. However, most participants agreed that “it is harder to exercise parliamentary scrutiny if you are in a computer screen” or to create the intimacy in the chamber. As one former MP stressed, “you can maintain social capital and maintain existing relations virtually, but it is quite hard to build them afresh, it is quite hard to initiate new things in a virtual parliament.” The hybrid proceedings were seen as “a patching into debates and discussions online, where the spontaneity goes, everything is pre-planned and slotted in.”

There is no behind the scenes interaction. There is no social meeting. There’s no serendipity of bumping into someone in the corridor. The whole process is ultimately diminished because of that. Now at the time of a pandemic obviously it’s the sort of thing you have to do in order to keep people safe, but it shouldn’t be claimed that it’s anything remotely like the real thing...

As deliberation in the chamber is rules-based, moving away from meeting physically during the health crisis may require new rules raising the question of how these are to be created (Norton, 2021). Limiting the capacity of the legislature to meet and deliberate limits the practice of questioning and pressing ministers, enhancing the position of the executive (idem). One member of the Lords explained that,

[...] it is precisely the difficulty you have in a virtual parlia-

ment or a hybrid parliament, of not being able to just have those corridor chats with people [...]. Thus, in terms of being able to scrutinize the government the hybrid parliament [...] [is] no substitute for the normal engagement, because if you're in the chamber and you ask a question, if the question is really to the point and gets to the heart of an issue, you will hear other Members in the chamber either saying "hear, hear", or say, making their views felt, you know that. But so does the minister, they will have a sense of what a feeling of the mood of the Houses is. [With] the hybrid procedure proceedings, you don't have that in quite the same way.

The virtual and hybrid parliament during the health crisis therefore, deprived parliamentarians from processes of interaction which take place formally in chambers and committee rooms, and informally in the lobbies, corridors tea rooms and dining rooms, significantly limiting their capacity to facilitate the legislature fulfilling its core functions. Never before had physical proximity, collective availability, formal and informal interactions in space highlighted the spatial competence of parliament in sustaining critical scrutiny of the executive.

#### *The restoration and renewal project (R&R)*

Some Members expressed the views that although the public can enter the building and meet their MP at the Central Lobby, what is really needed in light of the R&R programme is to try and "open up" the building so as to create the idea that the parliament is "owned by the people". One example brought up by one interviewee, was the Parliament House in Canberra where a very large building is blended into the landscape and one enters it as if into the land it stands for. Citizens could initially walk on top to produce a potent legitimating image although that access is now denied (Dovey, 1999). A similar condition expressing the citizens "ownership" of Parliament, also no longer possible, is in Norman Foster's renovation of the Reichstag. Visitors can reach a glass dome at the top level, offering elevated views into the chamber, which is now curtailed to avoid breach of confidentiality for parliamentarians,<sup>6</sup> and two ramps spiralling up to a viewing platform offering spectacular views of Berlin. A former MP suggested a radical departure for Westminster:

**6 - Interview with Franziska Branter, Member of the Green Party in Bundestag, Germany.**

**Limiting the capacity of the legislature to meet and deliberate limits the practice of questioning and pressing ministers, enhancing the position of the executive.**

If the graph from a space is shallow, requiring fewer changes of direction to reach all possible destinations, we say it is integrated. If it is deep, we call it segregated. We can describe each space numerically in terms of how it relates to all others.

[...] Increasingly I lean towards the idea of leaving it as a Palace Museum [...] use all the spaces that are much more custom built for a contemporary parliament. I think we have a system that has grown up because of that space and I think it is very hard to change that space from what it is. We just need to build a new space.

With a clear reference to other potential changes to be brought up by the R&R Programme, parliamentarians seldom articulated a view as radical as the aforementioned one, proposing instead enhanced sense of openness for the public as discussed above, improvements to accessibility, IT services and making the best of a historic structure. The main reasons for not envisioning significant physical changes was the historical legacy of the Palace and the length of its political traditions, thus reducing the R&R Programme to a heritage project. From the emotional attachment of Members, discussed at the start of the interview, to the historical depth of political paradigms, the strong hold of the building on its users came full circle, restraining the possibility for political and architectural innovation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

On the whole, the interviews highlighted two things: first, political competence seems to be intrinsically related with spatial competence as a set of tacit rules eliciting certain behaviour and traditions embedded in space. Second, exalted and humbled by the legacy of the building and these traditions, parliamentarians prove remarkably reluctant to forget the physical configuration that nurtured it (Hollis, 2013).

*The Spatial Artefact as an Instance of Political Culture*  
To interrogate these questions further this study analyses the physical configuration of the Palace, using an approach developed at the Bartlett UCL (Hillier, Hanson, 1984). This approach is mainly built on two ideas: first, that space is an intrinsic aspect of human activity, and second, that spatial configuration is about interrelationships of the spaces that make a layout as a whole. We can make this visually clear by taking three different layouts and drawing graphs (in which each circle is a room and each linking line a door) (Fig. 2). The graphs show that in spite of similar geometries the pattern of space looks different for each layout. If the graph from a space is shallow, requiring fewer changes of direction to reach all possible destinations,

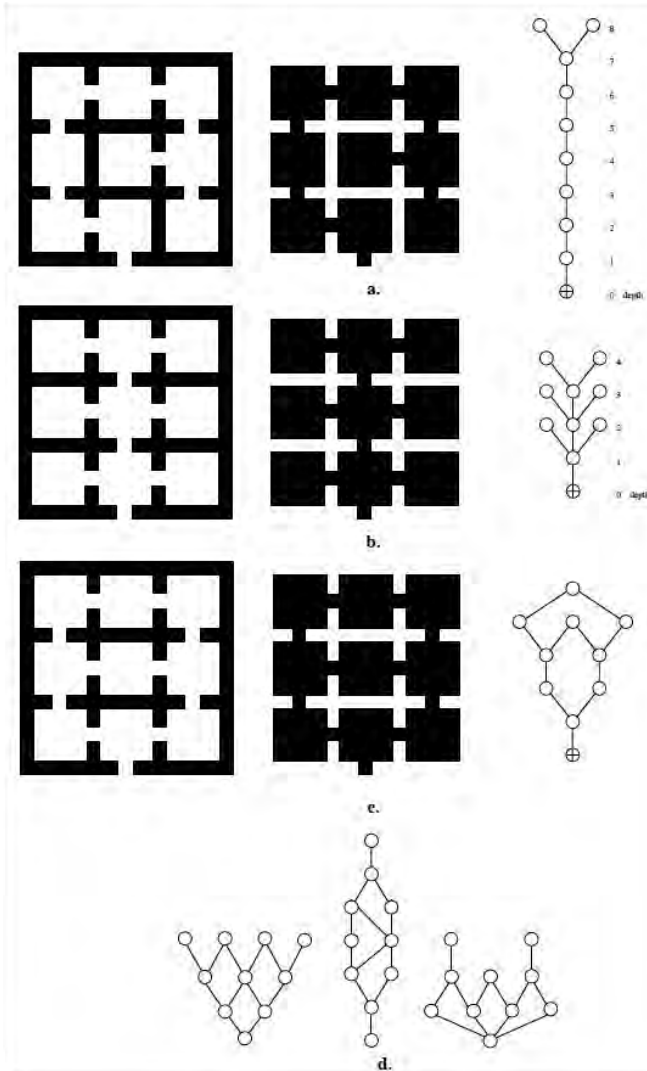


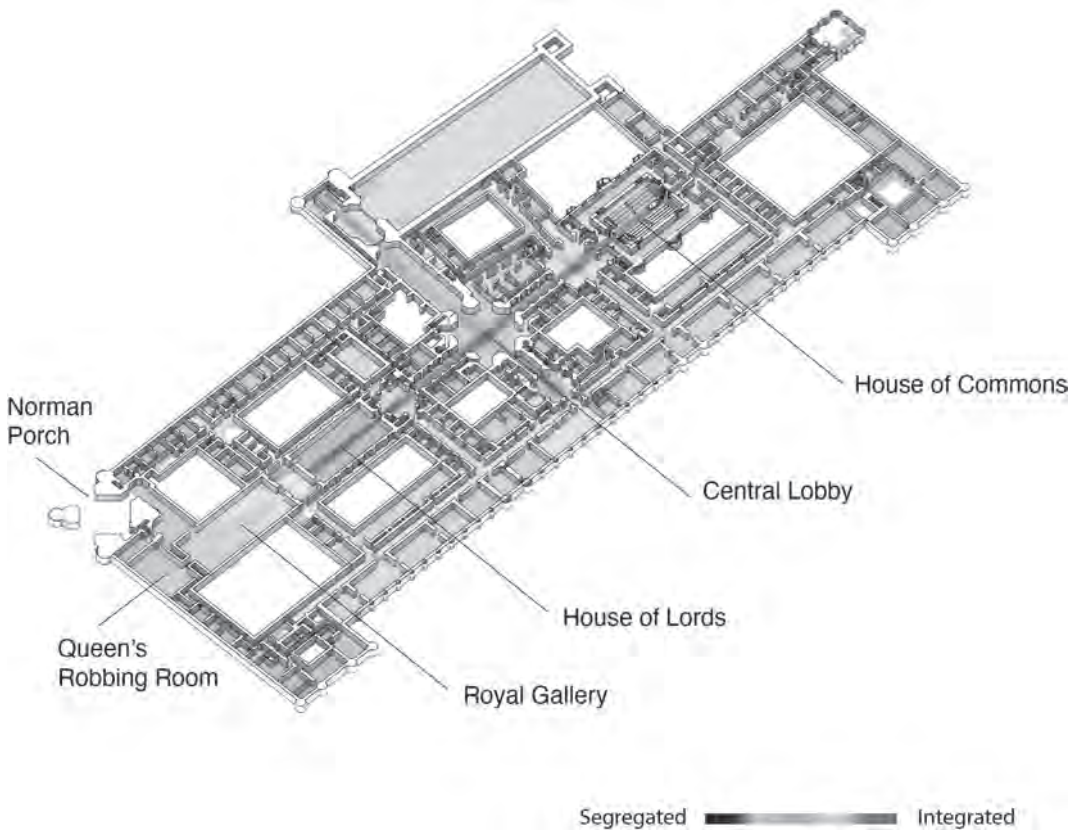
Fig. 2 - Three layouts and their graphs with the outside space at the root of the graph. Source: Hillier, B. (1996) *Space is the Machine: A Configurational Theory of Architecture*. © Space Syntax Limited.

we say it is integrated. If it is deep, we call it segregated. We can describe each space numerically in terms of how it relates to all others. We use dark grey tones to express high levels of integration and lighter tones to indicate segregation. In this paper these methods are combined with customized computational scripts to capture spatial relationships in greater levels of detail.

The analysis shows that the House of Lords is connected with the House of Commons through a highly integrated axial link extending along the length of the building. A second axial link, perpendicular to the first one, joins the Central Lobby with the Westminster Hall and the outside (Fig. 3). The Central Lobby is the

Fig. 3 - Integration analysis of the UK Houses of Parliament, ground floor. Integration values range from dark (high) to light (low). Source: Psarra, S. Maldonado, G (2020). 'The Palace of Westminster and the Reichstag Building: Spatial Form and Political Culture'. *Parliament Buildings Conference II, 12/13 November 2020*. © Sophia Psarra and Gustavo Maldonado

most integrated space, intersecting Members of the parliament with each other and with the public. This captures our intuitive grasp of this space, when we visit the building, as the crossroads between different groups, between the House of Commons and the House of Lords, and between Parliament and the world of the citizens. The public may not be led to an elevated position to express they own the parliament, but are placed at the heart of the configuration as “privileged” guests in the building. Moreover, the Central Lobby is often seen in the background on the news as broadcasters are allowed to film there, making it widely visible both nationally and globally. In contrast to the Central Lobby, the Norman Porch, Robing Room, Royal Gallery and Prince’s Chamber are segregated, expressing the symbolic requirements of constitutional Monarchy, and the ritual of the State Opening of the Parliament in which the monarch appears in the Lords Chamber flowing a deep sequence of segregated spaces. These findings suggest that the constitutional configuration of



the British Parliament as three powers – the Crown, the Parliament and the Public – is inscribed in the physical configuration and the patterns of movement (Psarra & Maldonado, 2020).

There are further marked differences between spaces based on their interconnections. In Fig. 4.1 we see different types of spaces: dead-end spaces (dark); a space leading in a single sequence to a dead-end with the same way back (medium dark); spaces in a ring of circulation offering an alternative way back (medium light); and spaces in the intersection of one or more rings (light). Extensive research of different building types reveals that integration and spaces on intersecting rings of circulation (d-spaces/dark) are closely related with high rates of movement by people who move between specific familiar and unfamiliar locations, explaining why certain spaces are highly populated while others remain quiet, distant or private (Hillier 1996). Research findings also show that spatial integration and d-spaces help shape informal interactions between different categories of users.

Fig. 4.1 - Graph showing different typologies of space. Dark: d-spaces; medium dark: c-spaces; medium light: b-spaces; light: a-spaces Source: Hillier, B. (1996) *Space is the Machine: A Configurational Theory of Architecture*. © Space Syntax Limited

Fig. 4.2 - Graph of the UK Houses of Parliament (justified from the outside). Source: Psarra, S. Maldonado, G (2020). 'The Palace of Westminster and the Reichstag Building: Spatial Form and Political Culture'. *Parliament Buildings Conference I*, 12/13 November 2020. Available at: <https://www.parliamentbuildings.org.uk/abstracts/spatial-form-and-parliament-organisation/> © Sophia Psarra and Gustavo Maldonado

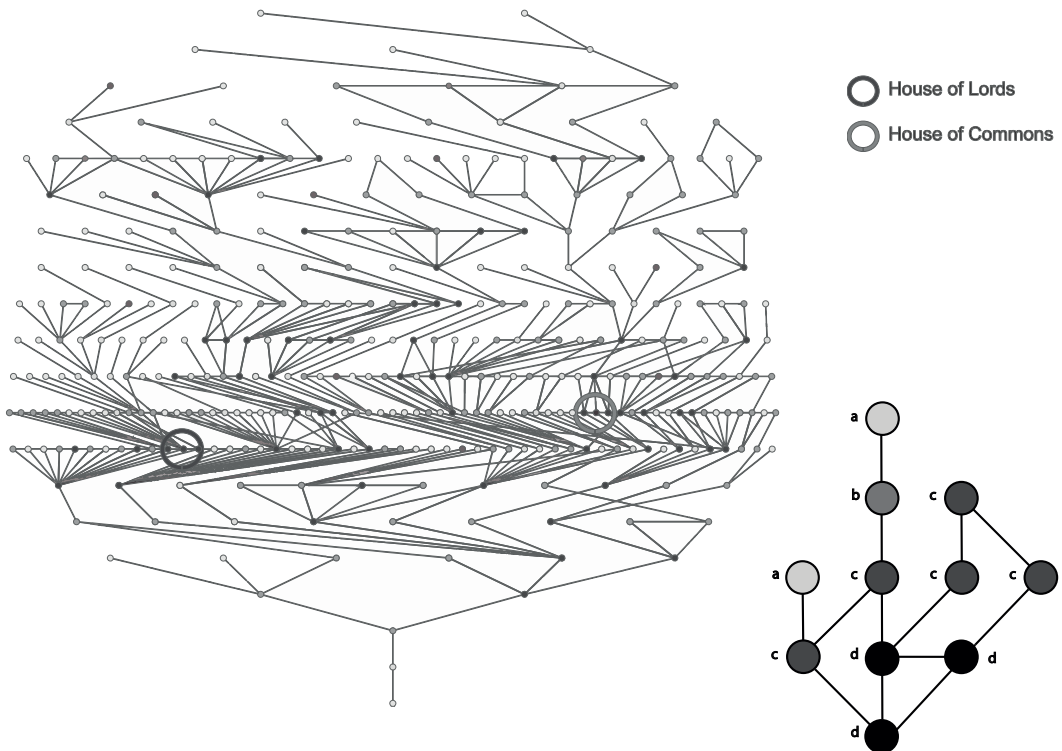
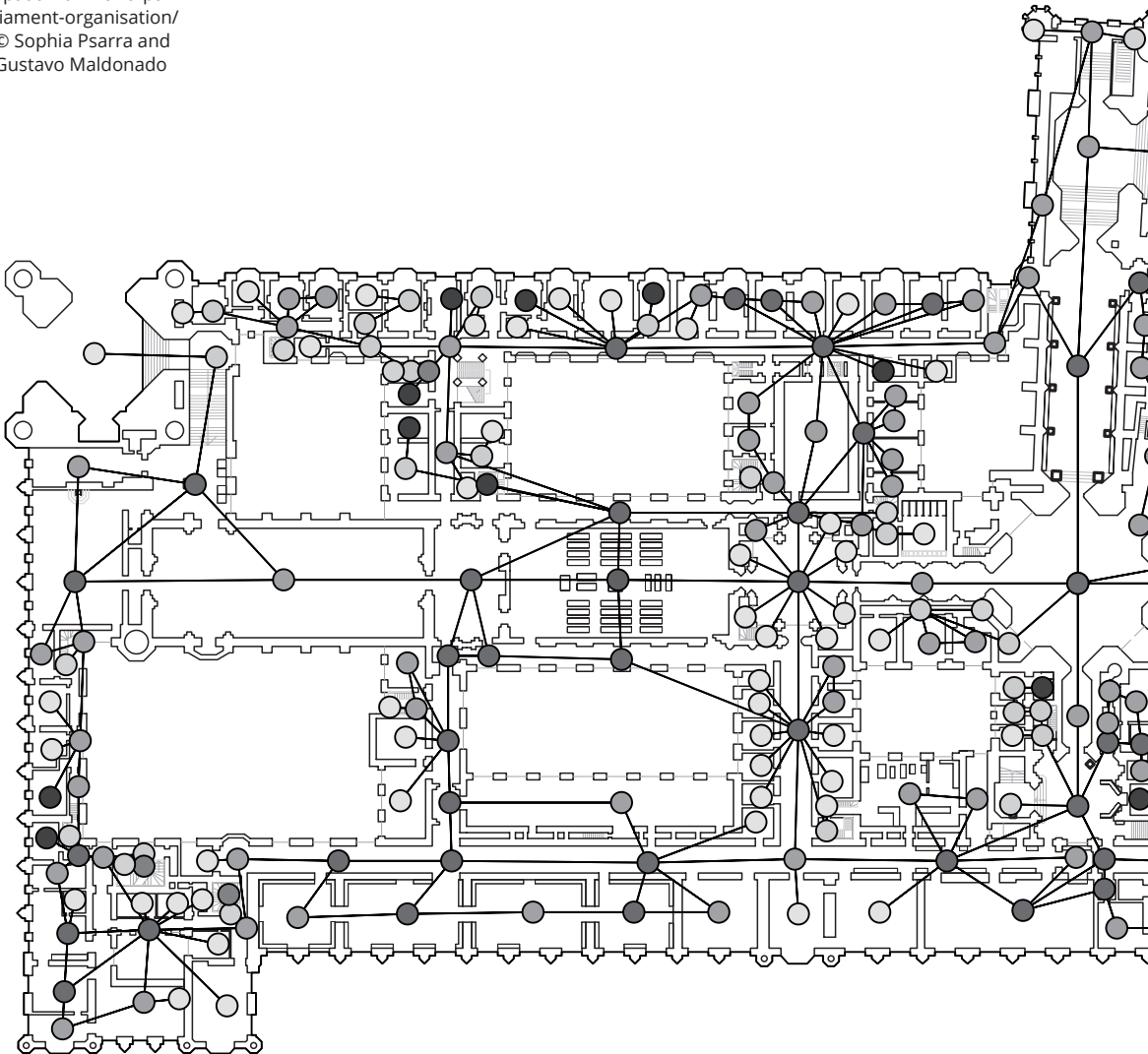


Fig. 5 - Graph of the ground floor of the UK Houses of Parliament, showing typology of spaces. Source: Psarra, S. Maldonado, G (2020). 'The Palace of Westminster and the Reichstag Building: Spatial Form and Political Culture'. *Parliament Buildings Conference I*, 12/13 November 2020. Available at: <https://www.parliamentbuildings.org.uk/abstracts/spatial-form-and-parliament-organisation/> © Sophia Psarra and Gustavo Maldonado

Further, there is evidence that stakeholders with key organisational roles tend to position themselves in spatially controlling locations (idem). The graph of the UK Parliament has a complex structure, showing the interconnected areas of the parliamentarians and the clear separation and difference from the world of the public (Fig. 4.2). The Whips – the MPs responsible for party discipline – have controlling positions on local rings of circulation that are situated off larger rings passing through the Chamber and the Central Lobby. In the House of Lords we see a higher number of c-spaces – those in a single sequence – than in the Commons.



Spaces linked in sequence tend to accommodate spatial practices that unfold in succession, revealing the ritualistic nature of the Lords area. The most significant example of ritualistic behaviour is the State Opening of Parliament mentioned above.

On the whole, the UK Parliament has a high number of d-spaces, constructing a network of overlapping rings of circulation and interfacing people who use local functional subcomplexes with those from other parts of the complex, maximising the probability for incidental informal encounters generated by these spaces (Fig. 5). Informal encounters are central to the emergence of a global generative spatial culture of

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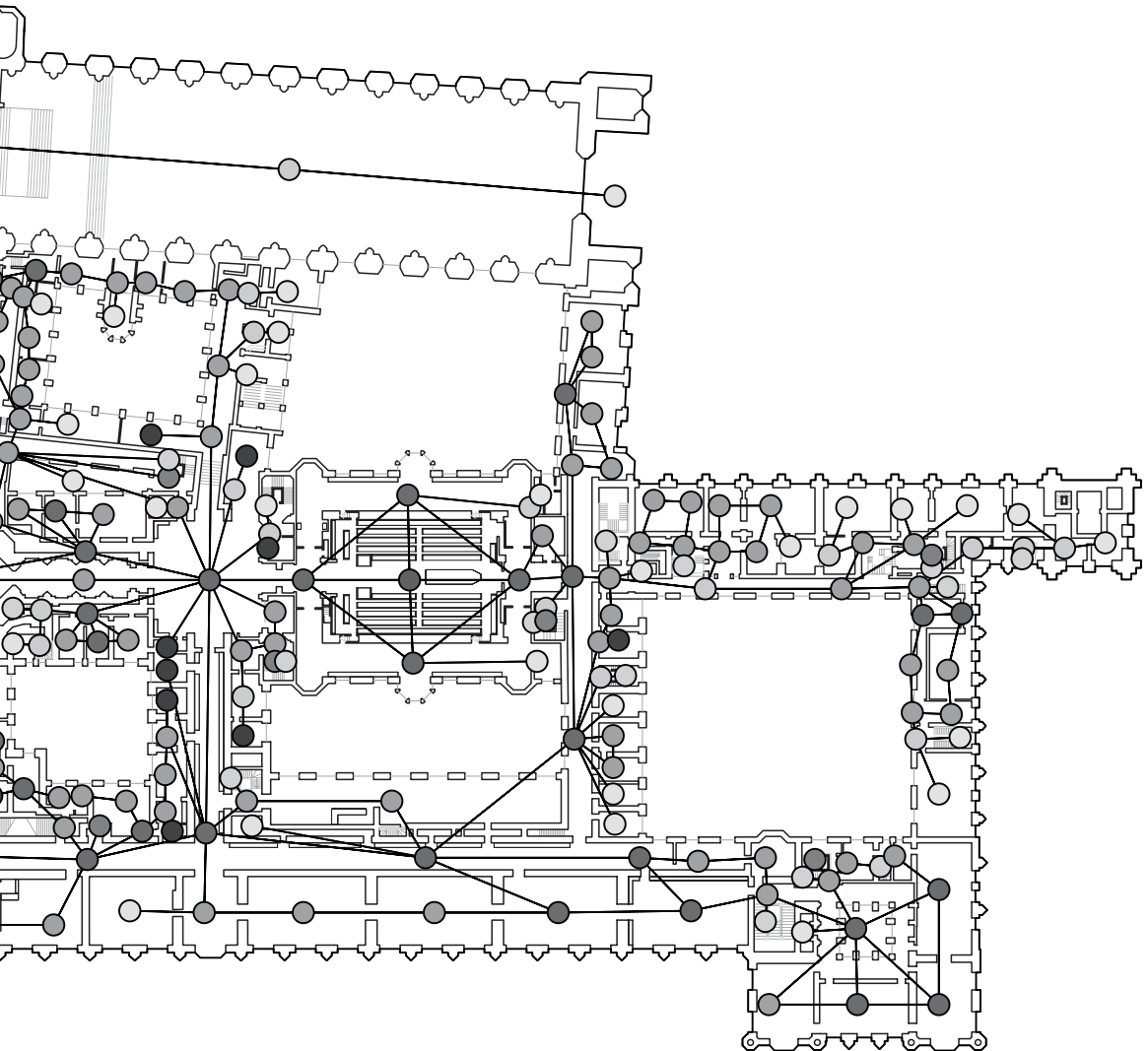
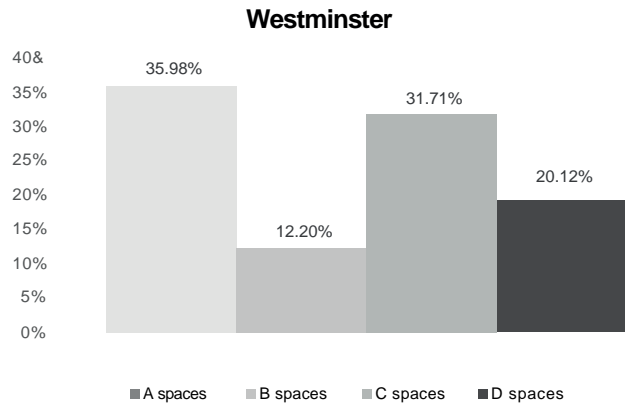


Fig. 6 - Percentage of

a-, b-, c-, d- spaces

Source: Psarra, S. Maldonado, G (2020). 'The Palace of Westminster and the Reichstag Building: Spatial Form and Political Culture'. *Parliament Buildings Conference I*, 12/13 November 2020. Available at: <https://www.parliamentbuildings.org.uk/abstracts/spatial-form-and-parliament-organisation/>  
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The integrated connections between the Lords, the Commons and the Central Lobby imply unrestricted access, while in reality public access is highly controlled and the two Houses “speak to one another as little as they can”.



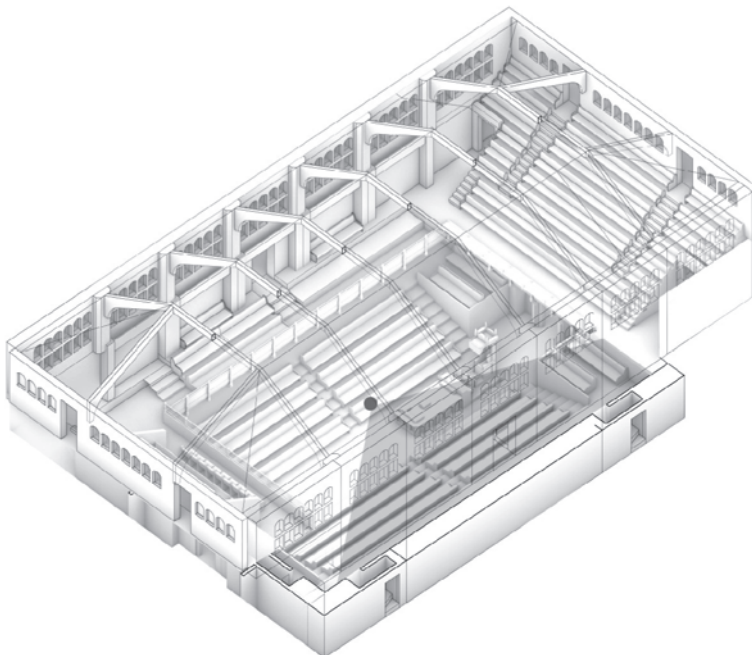
interaction and information exchange beyond formal process of communication. It is of course important to take into account rules and norms of behaviour, as this analysis captures the natural movement patterns in the layout. For example, the integrated connections between the Lords, the Commons and the Central Lobby imply unrestricted access, while in reality public access is highly controlled and the two Houses “speak to one another as little as they can” (Hollis, 2013: 107). However, various authors (Bold 2019; Norton 2018) and the interviewees confirmed that the corridors and social spaces in the UK Parliament enable informal meetings. Similar comments were made about the Division Lobbies in the Commons, which are part of a subcomplex of d-spaces, as one of the places of informal exchange for political influence.

#### *Inside the Chamber*

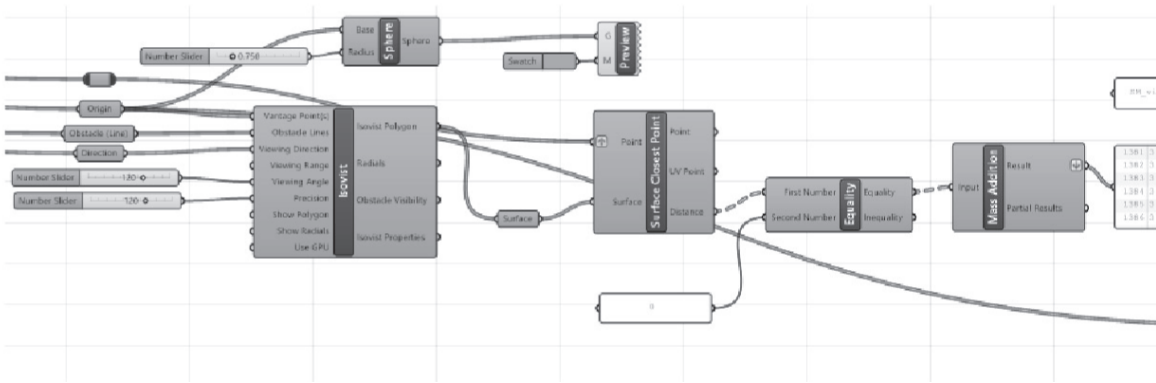
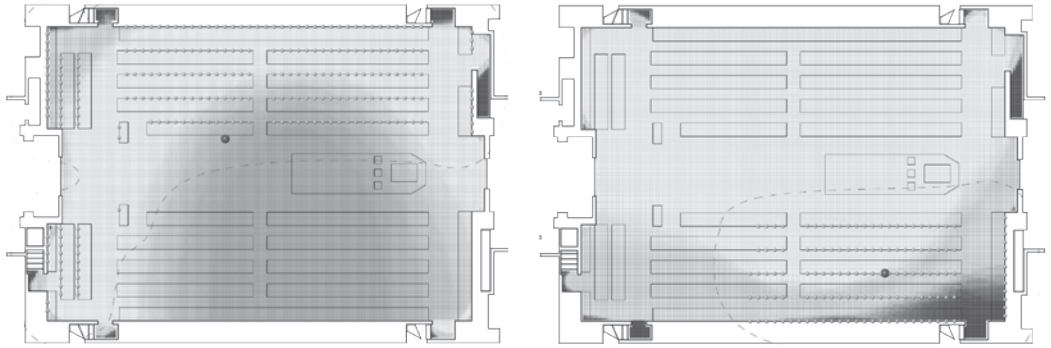
As some of the interviewees mentioned, plenary chambers are theatrical spaces of performance and ritual acted out in space and time. But there are also places where memories of the layout, people and power operate over long periods of time. The old chapel of St Stephen was the first room of the House of Commons which perished, but the seating arrangement within it has influenced the Commons Chamber, outliving fire, revolution and war (Hollis, 2013: 107). In our interviews one Member mentioned the dynamics of vision when seated in the Chamber as a different way to understand relations of power than looking at the symmetrical shape of this space. Using a computational script (Fig. 9), the view each person has

from their seat (Fig. 7) was defined, and subsequently the most observed areas in each chamber by overlapping views, employing a tone range from medium dark meaning high, to dark meaning low (Fig. 8) (Psarra, Maldonado, 2020). In spite of the current marked differences of political representation shown on the left in Fig. 10, the number of seats and area observed are broadly similar for all parties (Fig. 8). In addition there is strong visual inter-connectivity of the Speaker (Chair), front benches, dispatch boxes and much of the legislature. There are very few MPs who are not co-visible with other MPs in the Commons Chamber. Based on Churchill's comment that "a small chamber and a sense of intimacy are indispensable" (Goodsell, 1988: 298), we examined the density of seating, dividing the number of people by the chamber area in comparison to five other parliamentary chambers in Europe, (Gibson et al., 2021).<sup>7</sup> We also examined the distribution between high and low visibility areas, Fig. 11. The UK chamber is the most dense as a whole. It also has the highest density within its high visibility zone, exceeding capacity on occasions when there are not enough seats for all MPs, which pushes the density measure higher. With these characteristics described, it is easy to grasp the large impact that virtual com-

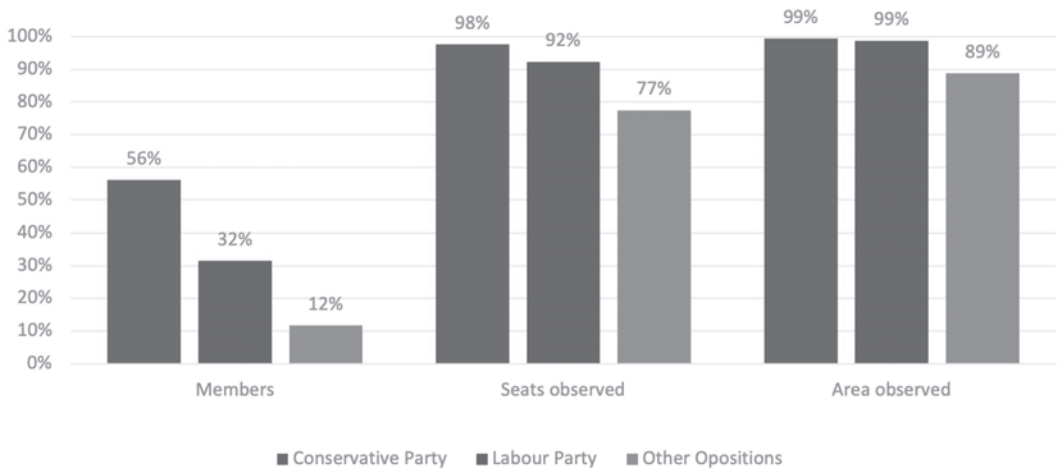
**7 - Belgium, The Netherlands, Estonia and Slovenia, each representing a different typology of plenary chamber.**



**Fig. 7 - The view of the Prime Minister in the Commons Chamber**  
 Source: Drawing by Carlotta Nunez-Barrañco Vallejo. © Naomi Gibson, Sophia Psarra and Gustavo Maldonado.



## Commons Chamber



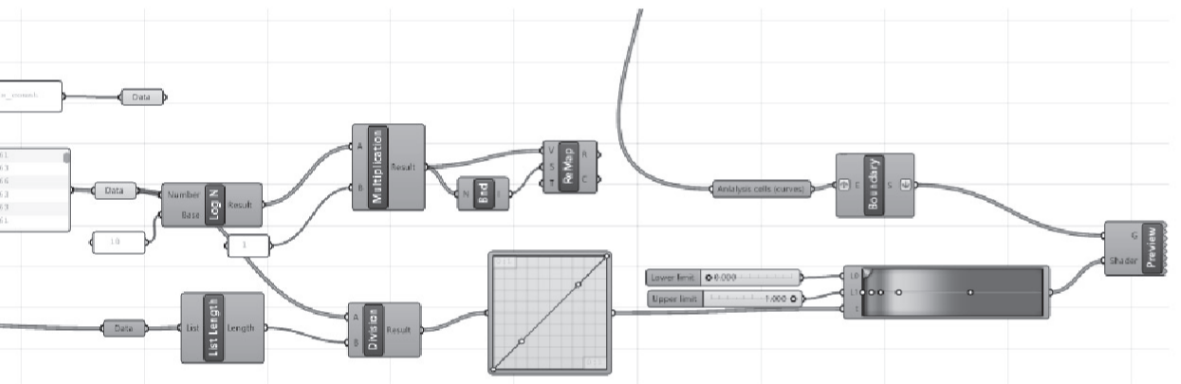
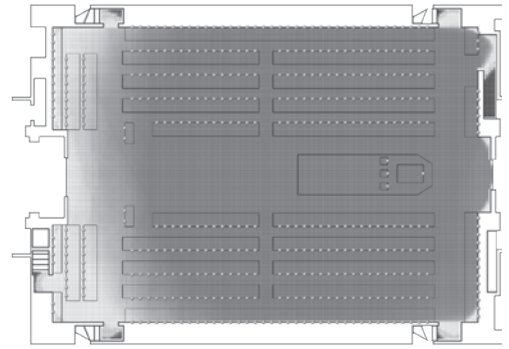
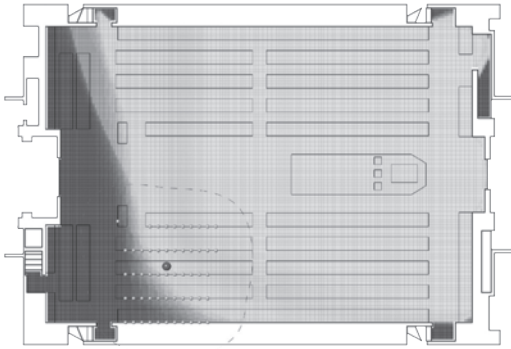
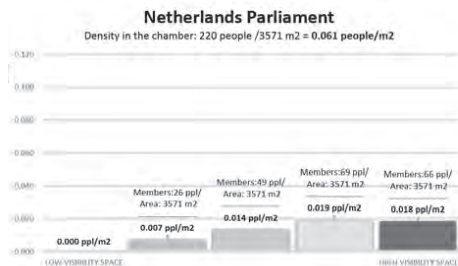
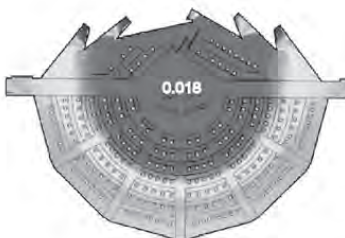
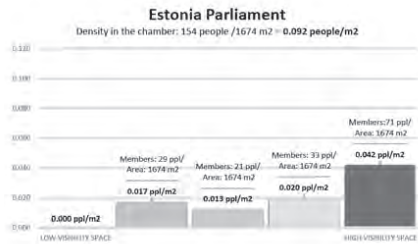
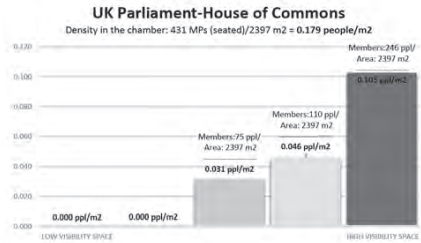
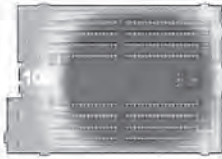
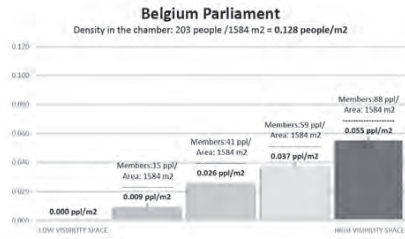


Fig. 8 - From left to right: Intervisibility at the Chamber from the governing party; from the opposition; from other parties; Intervisibility at the Chamber from all-to-all. Source: Psarra, S. Maldonado, G (2020). *The Palace of Westminster and the Reichstag Building: Spatial Form and Political Culture*. *Parliament Buildings Conference I*, 12/13 November 2020. Available at: <https://www.parliamentbuildings.org.uk/abstracts/spatial-form-and-parliament-organisation/> © Sophia Psarra and Gustavo Maldonado.

Fig. 9 - Computational script Source: Psarra, S. Maldonado, G (2020). *The Palace of Westminster and the Reichstag Building: Spatial Form and Political Culture*. *Parliament Buildings Conference I*, 12/13 November 2020. Available at: <https://www.parliamentbuildings.org.uk/abstracts/spatial-form-and-parliament-organisation/> © Gustavo Maldonado.

Fig. 10 - Representation at the House of Commons Chamber (left); seats observed (middle); area observed (right). Source: Psarra, S. Maldonado, G (2020). *The Palace of Westminster and the Reichstag Building: Spatial Form and Political Culture*. *Parliament Buildings Conference I*, 12/13 November 2020. Available at: <https://www.parliamentbuildings.org.uk/abstracts/spatial-form-and-parliament-organisation/> © Sophia Psarra and Gustavo Maldonado.

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munication had on the spatial culture of deliberative assemblies in the UK Parliament.

### *Constitutional order and the space of the UK Parliament*

In an analogy with language, this research conceptualises spatial competence as the knowledge that enables and limits users in employing the possibilities space offers; and spatial performance as the realisation of these possibilities for the exercise of power, negotiation and ritual through rules of behaviour and spatial practice. The relationship between competence and performance is closely related to the constitutional functions that create, enable and limit the institutions that govern society. The term constitution has two dimensions, constitution-as-form and constitution-as-function. Constitution-as-form is the written constitution. Constitution-as-function encompasses the larger constitutional order of a country, “an order that might include “super-statutes,” decisions of judges and agencies, and even informal institutions that make up some intersubjective consensus about what constitutes the fundamental law of the land.”<sup>8</sup>

The British constitution is constitution-as-function, where the limits of what Parliament can do are not law but rules of practice. Written constitutions around the world, argues Jonathan Sumption, are the work of revolution, invasion, civil war and decolonisation (2020). They can have certain rigidities and act as a barrier to socio-political adjustment and resilience. While these written constitutions may be amended, an “ancient country” (ibid.) which abides by an unwritten constitution like Britain has embodied the practice of adjustment and negotiation, absorbing numerous internal shocks through an uncodified consensus of socio-political culture. The capacity for probabilistic encounters and informal communications, as explained by the interviewees and embedded in the spatial form of the Palace, facilitates the political practices of power, socialisation and control as intrinsic parts of parliamentary life. It is possible to read this culture of political exchange in the building as akin to the general capacity of the British state to adjust its policy and identity so as to respond to historical crises with short-term adaptations. Tradition and continuity in the UK Parliament are not only expressed by the historical fabric, but also experienced by spatial

8 - UCL Constitution Unit. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/constitution-unit/what-uk-constitution/what-constitution>

[Accessed 18 November 2021].

The relationship between competence and performance is closely related to the constitutional functions that create, enable and limit the institutions that govern society.

The capacity to absorb shocks is embodied in a generative spatial system of social encounters facilitating the exercise of political invention.

practices that moderate and mitigate potential shocks in politics.

As to the adversarial nature of the Commons debate, it is not a matter of the shape of the Chamber. As this study reveals, density and the equally distributed views on the floor of the Chamber give an nearly equal spatial footing to the unequal distribution of power between the governing party and the opposition. The style of the debate is a matter of spontaneity and informality, moderating between the powers of the executive and the parliament, as much at the level of the building as a whole, as inside the Chamber.

### *Epilogue*

We recently had a glimpse of what it means to conduct work, politics and governance in virtual settings, and were given an insight into the risks associated with displacing government scrutiny into the world of the digital. This paper has shown that space has agency in terms of processes of socialisation, scrutiny and mobilisation of political support that cannot be exchanged with digital interactions, even those digital interactions that enable regular citizens to make their voices heard and engage directly with power in the digital space. As to the future of the Palace, interviews with parliamentarians exposed a diversity of views, from preserving the building to bequeathing it as a museum to the nation. The Palace of Westminster has served as one of the major carriers of institutional legacies and traditions in the UK. And yet, within this building some of the most radical reforms, associated with human rights, the dissolution of the empire, the diversification of parliamentarians and Brexit have also taken place, enabled by a spatial system that facilitates negotiation (while other aspects such as the iconographic narrative have been more resistant to decolonisation). It is apparent that the R&R Programme should not limit the future of the building to a heritage project, preventing innovation. On the contrary, as this paper argues, the capacity to absorb shocks is embodied in a generative spatial system of social encounters facilitating the exercise of political invention. Once the invisible spatial characteristics that define the mutable aspects of British politics and the immutable nature of old structures, such as the old St Stephen's chapel, are described, visualised and

theorised, it is possible to accommodate them through innovative design either by re-imagining the existing building or designing a new structure.

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