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Article

The Death and Life of UK Universities and the Cultural Spaces They Consume

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Abstract

The shift in focus in UK higher education since Thatcherism from the production of knowledge for civic betterment to the production and consumption of knowledge by the university for revenue generation can be read through the social rearrangement of space in the university town or city. A key spatial reconfiguration emerging from the shift in economic conditions is the collapse of the modern university as a singular, ideological construct. Like 'the city' before it, the modern university has, at its interior, been reformed into a newly defined, fragmented public–private social space, and, at its exterior, into a devourer of the space of the local community. This article showcases excerpts from a film made by the authors entitled *The Death and Life of UK Universities* – a title inspired by Jane Jacobs's critique of great

American cities. Our film is a cinematic database survey of the changing space of all British universities which considers this systematic spatial reprogramming of space within the city. The two-year research project is an audio-visual critique of the way in which neoliberalism, corporatization and commercial interests have co-opted the space of the British university. Referencing the films of Charlie Chaplin and Gordon Matta-Clark and the writings of Henri Lefebvre, the film focuses on university cities, critically observing the rise of university marketing material and the consumption of the city and of local community life for university student accommodation. We ask: How are UK universities being spatially reconfigured and what are the consequences?

Academic Capitalism and the Neoliberal City

Between 1962 and 1998, full-time university students who were 'ordinary residents' in the United Kingdom paid no tuition fees. Since 1998, UK universities have steadily been forced, because of the withdrawal of government funding, to focus on 'academic capitalism'[1] to better compete in the global higher education marketplace. As a consequence, universities, the cities they are in, and the bodies that occupy them, have transformed. Propelled in part by the shift towards neoliberal, institutional self-sufficiency and corporatization under Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government, the university has altered its purpose, and who and what it serves. Under neoliberalism,[2] the bodies of students and academics within the university have, to varying degrees, been purposely focused away from engaging in the 'possibility of immanent critique … locating the contradictions in the rules and systems necessary to production',[3] to quote Simon Sadler, to being required to be optimally economically productive. The service of the university is now to optimize the 'creative class'[4] – as Richard Florida defines it – that universities nurture to increase impact on real world production, and a government's global economic power and status through research *for* industry. The process is concomitant with the shift from a long-term vision of how students can contribute to society to the full becoming of the university as service provider centred on opportunistic, 'short-term' career progression, as Zygmunt Bauman recognizes.[5] As big businesses for the UK economy, universities also transform their identity and appearance, growing for greater spatial domination and thereby altering or flattening existing urban cultures.

Unlike most existing twenty-first-century research on universities, which records architectures and campus or estates planning,[6] or which endeavours to reinstate the value of university placemaking[7]) to showcase, sell and promote current trends in the university campus experience, this research is original because it is framed as a spatial critique of processes associated with academic capitalism. It aims to showcase an urban collage of social, cultural and material waste and excess associated with much UK university campus development, resulting from the neoliberal requirements to be contingent, resilient, flexible and all the other catchphrases that underpin 'liquid modernity'[8] for individual, institutional and governmental growth. It employs neo-Marxist critiques of urban space,[9] mainly from Henri Lefebvre, associated with construction and destruction of the space of the city, and it examines the newly invigorated role that many UK universities have taken on as 'urban developers'[10] in order to meet the demands of millennials as consumers of university education.[11] By positioning a spatial study of UK universities, the article argues that the consequence of embracing neoliberal values within the university has the same social and cultural impact on the university community as Wendy Brown[12] argues that it has on the *polis* at large. That is, rather than give greater democratic freedoms and powers through pedagogically enabled mobility to improve the status of all individuals, neoliberalism accentuates urban inequality and inaccessibility in the city and in nation states. The continuous upgrading cycle of university estates consumes local cultures. Using a research-led film-making methodology, this article asks, how have universities in the UK been spatially reconfigured under neoliberalism? And how has the rapid morphosis of their spatial reconfiguration influenced the city and society in which they are located today?

Filming *The Death and Life of UK Universities*

Since 2016, we have been filming the physical transformation that has been occurring in the life cycle of university campuses throughout the UK as part of an independent research film entitled *The Death and Life of UK Universities*,[13] screen grabs of which are included here (Figures 1–3). Inspired by Jane Jacobs's *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*,[14] the film offers a parallel critique of the phenomena of urban gentrification and societal cleansing which occurred in American cities in the 1950s and in UK universities in the early twenty-first century as a consequence of modernization. The film takes on the approach of Jacobs as an empirical study, survey and observation from within the city. Just as Jacobs understood that government policies for planning and development contravened the everyday life functions of city neighbourhoods in New York at that time, so we have developed a critique of contemporary, neoliberal policies and their capacity to undermine the function of the university and higher education in the UK. Jacobs's analysis is significant because it was an immersive, ethnographic approach of the city dweller bringing their everyday experience to bear on the spaces which they occupy. Here we

consider the inner workings and failings of the UK university under recent governance. Like Jacobs's city analysis, our film is a form of feminist discourse, situating the teleologies associated with the demise of existing urban cultures.

When we embarked on this project, we did not imagine the place in which UK universities would find themselves as a result of COVID-19. Up until January 2020, we had been undertaking a cinematic university survey, first, by recording onsite footage which we mostly shot ourselves and, second, by locating online source material, namely architectural animations showing planned new buildings, time-lapse videos of university buildings being demolished or new buildings under construction, and promotional university videos including historical documentary footage. Through the found documentary footage, the film records the lost physical university/city spaces such as libraries, laboratories and studios to question what is lost and what is gained by the wider society. Since the pandemic, we have been unable to visit any more campuses, and so our 'experience' of university campuses has been confined to online sources, or from memory, and which offers a space to consider the increasingly rapid shift towards the cybernetic university of the future.
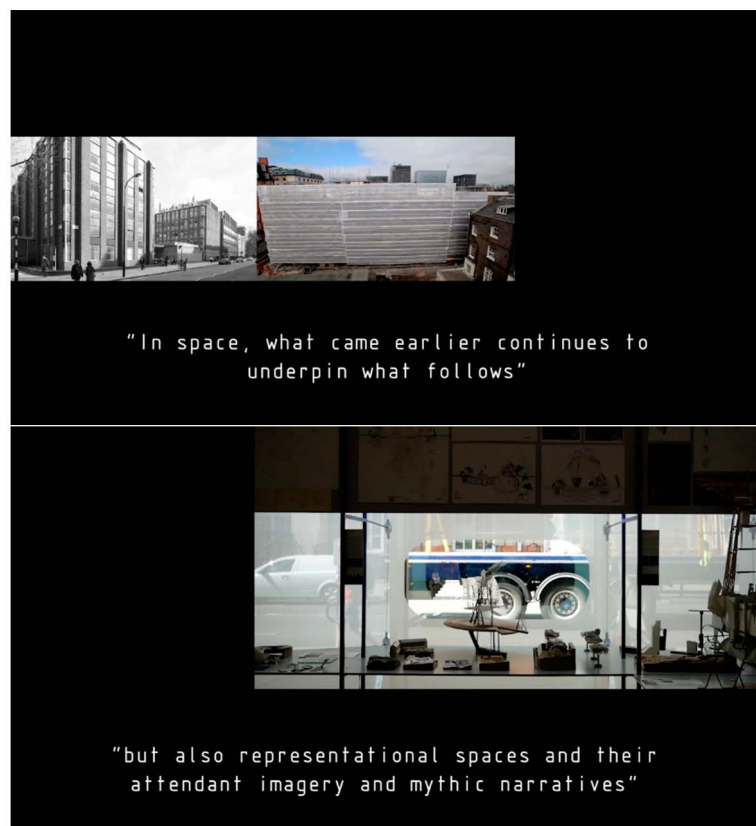

Figure 1   Screen grabs from the short film, *The Death and Life of UK Universities* (Source: © Igea Troiani and Tonia Carless, 2020). The top screen grab includes a photograph of Wates House (1975–2014) at UCL (foreground), and a photograph of the building under reconstruction (into what is now 22 Gordon Street). The bottom screengrab shows onsite footage shot by the authors looking outside from the ground floor interior of 22 Gordon Street during the Bartlett's 2019 End of Year Show, and the narrative overlay of quotation that 'Nothing disappears completely' from Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* (1991).

The Death and Life of UK Universities is a work in progress, evolving for as long as we choose to undertake the research. Since it is not externally funded, the research is not limited to a fixed period of time with clearly set deliverables. We have done this deliberately, for independent criticality. Instead, the research is a process of contemplating UK spaces of academic capitalism and their evolution. As a once sacred site, the university represents an extreme example of capitalist production and consumption. As a critical space in which to reconsider the university as institution, the film integrates relevant quotations

from Lefebvre (Figure 1) and other theorists, and excerpts from other films to add dramatic humour and tragedy. Because of their critiques of (factory) production processes and urban consumption (as gentrification) respectively, our film includes segments of Charlie Chaplin's 1936 film *Modern Times*[15] (Figure 2) and Gordon Matta-Clark's 1975 *Conical Intersect*[16] (Figure 3).
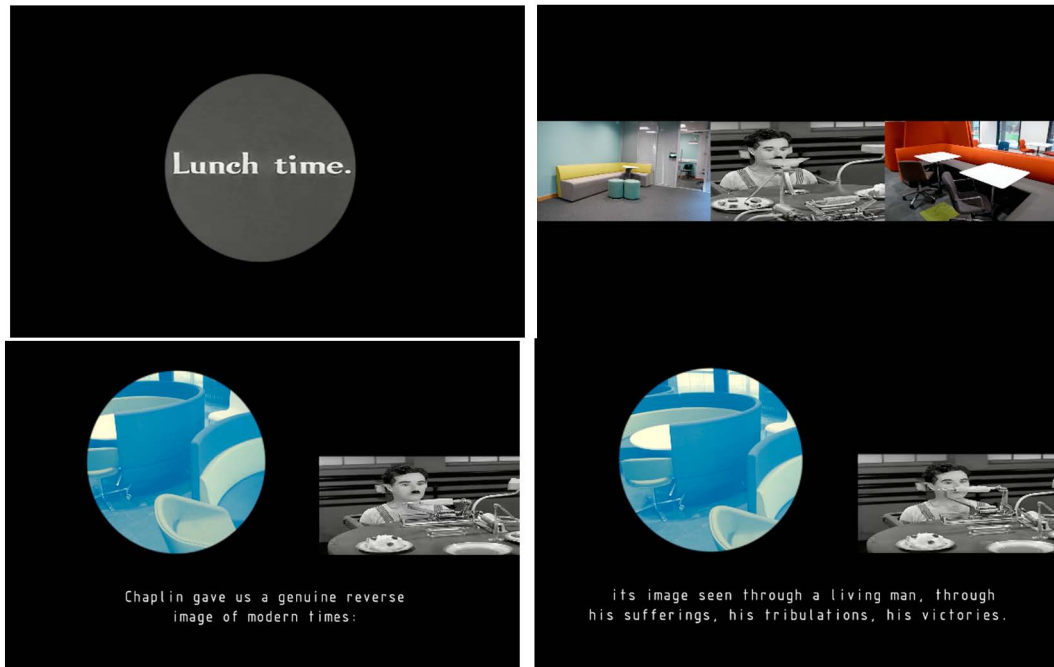

Figure 2 Screen grabs from the short film, *The Death and Life of UK Universities* (Source: © Igea Troiani and Tonia Carless, 2020). The four screen grabs include 'lounge learning' furniture in various UK universities, excerpts of new technologies for lunchtime hands-free work from *Modern Times* by Charlie Chaplin (1936) and musings by Lefebvre on *Modern Times* from *Critique of Everyday Life* (1991).
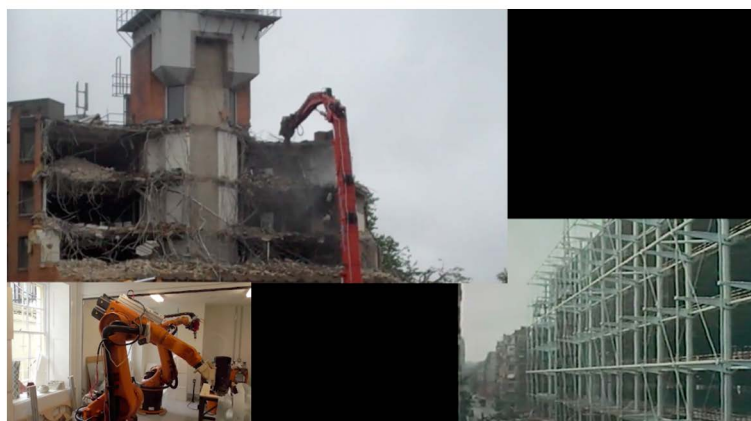

Figure 3 Stills from the short film, *The Death and Life of UK Universities* (Source: © Igea Troiani and Tonia Carless, 2020). The stills show documentary footage of the demolition of the Lloyd Building at Oxford Brookes University, which took place in summer 2010, and a robotic model building arm at the Architectural Association in London. The bottom right-hand still shows an excerpt from *Conical Intersect* by Gordon Matta-Clark (1975).

The Death and Life of UK Universities is inspired by Troiani's chapter entitled 'Academic Capitalism in Architecture Schools',[17] which refers to *Modern Times*, via Arlie Russell Hochschild's *The Time Bind*.[18] *Modern Times* is a feature-length silent comedy in which Chaplin's character is employed on an assembly line where he screws nuts on to pieces of machinery in a steel factory at an ever-increasing rate. As the

machine is sped up, and new technological devices that allow hands-free lunchtime work are brought in on the instruction of management, Chaplin's character is forced to be more productive. An analogy can be made with academics working on the university 'production line', speeding up production of architectural graduates: more students in, more employable, entrepreneurially thinking graduates out of the education factory, or 'edufactory'[19] as Pier Vittorio Aureli calls it. In order to sustain the increase of university-graduate production, new facilities need to be produced to satisfy increase in demand. To increase production, many universities have heightened their role as developers to grab land from local communities, thereby gentrifying areas in order to present a refreshed image of the global UK university for international learners.

The critique of the gentrification of areas of local heritage in favour of landmark building and property development was a driver in Gordon Matta-Clark's performative site-specific artworks and films of his artworks. In *Conical Intersect*, Matta-Clark records his performance of carving out a periscope cone so that passers-by in the Beaubourg area of Paris could peek from the street to see the Centre Pompidou capitalist 'art factory',[20] which was then under construction. In the artwork, Matta-Clark heightens the significance of soon to be demolished seventeenth-century French town houses by creating a short-lived anti-monument or 'nonument'. Describing the two town houses as 'an old couple', Matta-Clark saw them as 'literally the last of a vast neighborhood of buildings destroyed to "improve" the Les Halles-Plateau Beaubourg area'.[21] A condemnation of the gentrification of the area, and the construction of the Centre Pompidou as a part of that process, *Conical Intersect* has at its core a critique of 'the logics of urban renewal', 'the processes of modernization', to quote Xavier Wrona.[22] Matta-Clark's anarchitecture – a campaign 'against architecture' – was enacted through a praxis that is both 'creative and destructive',[23] replicating the process of urban transformation that the Plateau Beaubourg was undergoing to make space for the Pompidou Centre, and that has been going on in the death and life of UK universities. Everyday urban life and local traditions are demolished through the destruction of the town houses and, in much the same way, some university campuses buy up residential areas of cities in order to capture more land for campus upgrading, landmarking and rebranding.

Matta-Clark is an important reference for this project, both in terms of his critique of urban restructuring and his insistence on foregrounding 'The under-side of cities'.[24] Our film considers what lies beneath the operations on the surface of the university and its associated spaces, both real and representational, and, in this context, shows what has been lost of the historical, cultural space of the city as the university reconfigures. The use of collaging in the film is inspired in part by Matta-Clark's film-making practice, in that he understood that this might be a method of uncovering spaces that had previously been repressed and concealed. The uncovering of something that is already present but not acknowledged was inherent in *Conical Intersect* and many other of his projects. Matta-Clark provides a methodology for re-examining the newly dominant and hidden spaces of the reconfigured university, and his filming of events and works of this nature also provides a tangible approach to the recording of change over time, always with an emphasis on spaces that have been lost.

Matta-Clark's project of undoing space can be read throughout *The Death and Life of UK Universities*, not as a physical act but as a filmic reconstruction of the spaces and, as for Matta-Clark, the undoing is a mental rather than physical act of reconsidering the spaces through the undoing and re-presenting of the film. This intervenes in the otherwise inert and uncritical responses to the space of the modern university, and of the newly formed city spaces that are its extensions. The recognition and making visible of the existing system of denial is of both the lost space of the university and the consequential lost social and cultural space which are sacrificed for reasons of economic growth. Our film, instead exposes the consequences of tabula rasa neoliberally driven university development through splicing in historical footage and moments captured of previous economic configurations of both university and urban space.

The work of Matta-Clark, including his series of cuts and drawings for *Conical Intersect*, could also be seen to focus on the idea of a sequential un-building and morphosis of the existing urban space through a close study of demolition and examination of the material and spatial conditions contained within demolished space. Matta-Clark's work is concerned with creating a socio-political, spatial dialogue through installation intervention and through the films that record that intervention. *The Death and Life of*

UK Universities considers the opening up of the spaces of higher education as categories of redevelopment to retrieve a critical, spatial reconfiguration. The political intention of Matta-Clark is echoed in this project as a recognition of the way in which the urban reconfiguration of space, through the model of the university, serves the neoliberal economy.

University Formation, Landmarking and Rebranding in UK Cities

As Jessica Fernandez and Matthew Powers note in 'Before the Neoliberal Campus: University, Place, and the Business of Higher Education',[25] since the first universities were formed in Europe and Britain, cities have competed to attract the university life associated with such institutions, based on what the city could offer. They explain that 'While forms of higher education were evolving globally, the structure of institutionalizing the business of learning was exclusive to Europe', and in select European cities, namely Paris, Bologna and Oxford, in which the first universities emerged – 'Universities were only sustainable if a municipality had the resources to support them'.[26] Thomas Bender notes that any city in which a university's teachers lived permanently or temporarily benefited financially.[27] Local taverns, brothels and publishing houses, for instance, profited from the student and teacher population that the university drew in.

As commercial interests and the university have become more intertwined under neoliberalism, some universities with access to capital – in reserve or borrowed – have been 'eating up' the city in the name of the 'business of learning'.[28] After 2010, when fees increased three-fold, many UK universities – and in particular the majority of the post-1992 former polytechnic set of new 'modern universities', which had never before undergone major refurbishment – embarked on estate and campus redevelopments through ambitious master planning and rebranding of 'outdated' (only 40 to 50 years old) campus architectures so as to improve their brand identity in relation to their onsite experience. Christine Boyer highlights the process of remaking the capitalist project by identifying that 'spatial design codes and architectural pattern languages become increasingly important in selling the look of an up-market, upbeat environment. In this marketing war, the style of life visualised and represented in spaces of conspicuous consumption become important assets that cities display.'[29] These sometimes extreme makeovers of university buildings which were deemed ugly, cheaply built or dowdy (often brutalist concrete buildings or generic modernist concrete 'maison domino' frame boxes) involved a form of university-building genocide or superficial facade refurbishment for marketing and advertising.

As Graham Cairns notes, the complex relationship between architecture and advertising is one that has 'developed on the basis of converting buildings into promotional devices'.[30] Worldwide, whether in the city generally or in the university, 'landmarks are cultural currency',[31] and they therefore become important commodities in the global marketplace. The architectural style in which a university's buildings are built, whether Gothic, Georgian or brutalist, for example, conveys meaning about a university's uniqueness and exclusivity. University marketization capitalizes on the image of the city in which it is located and, in turn, can give back landmark architectures and campus designs which help promote the city as a destination to visit or in which to live. The symbolic relationship between university and city relies on selling the idea of place, which is exploited for global (academic) tourism. Sometimes reputable, foreign signature architects with their own global brand identity are employed to design new architecture that rebrands the university as global and modern.

But, as Arif Dirlik notes, foreign architecture 'contributes to the destruction of identity, memory and significance of place that characterizes today's global modernity'.[32] Different to globalization, 'global modernity' requires the relocation or destruction of less valued architectures, rituals and traditions in favour of new metropolitan culture, taste and corporate business. So, just as a city uses architectural landmarks to define its 'brandscape',[33] the image of a university's architectures visually defines its global brand image. The design of the campus and the city in which that university is located carry symbolic, cultural and economic capital which arguably carries to the teachers and students who attend them. Many contemporary UK universities have reconfigured their space to at once display and consume their local cultures, deploying contemporary music, art and collapsed industries as themes for their spatial

reconstruction. While the space of the city and its everyday life continues to be consumed by many 'upgrading' UK universities, the phenomenon is not new, being well noted by Lefebvre in 1960s France.

Lefebvre's analysis of the space of the city[34] was determined in part by an understanding that what was required was a study of the everyday practices of the production of space[35] and the architectures of dwelling, beyond the dominant structures of time and the space of contemporary capitalism. His writing in 1969 on the observation of the events of May 1968 and the uprising in Paris were informed by his participation in that moment as a professor at the university, observing the reclaiming of the right to the city by its displaced and marginal groups as a revolutionary act and, in this context, as dialectical conflict and rupture of the system.[36]

At the time, Lefebvre was teaching at the campus of Nanterre, which was built in the north-west suburbs of Paris. He understood its peripheral relation to the centrality of the city and the inherent conflicts arising from this. He called it a 'space of catastrophe', situating this as 'the limits where this space explodes'.[37] The positioning of the campus at the heart of the peripheral Parisian shanty towns – as described by Lefebvre – created multiple socio-spatial conflicts. Lefebvre likened this to Georges-Eugène Haussmann's reorganization of Paris, and here the university campus itself had become a tool of the dominant social order, in Lefebvre's words as 'an enterprise designed to produce mediocre intellectuals and "junior executives" for the management of this'.[38]

Lefebvre went on to analyse the production of centralities inherent in the dislodgement and then reclaiming of the city, both by the displaced populations and by the shifting of the university itself. He writes: 'Functionalised by initial design, culture was transported to a ghetto of students and teachers situated in the midst of other ghettos filled with the abandoned subject to the compulsions of production, and driven into an extra-urban existence.'[39] This condition that Lefebvre describes can be seen in many contemporary UK university cities or towns, where the campus becomes the new privileged ghetto, taking over, for instance, the space of abandoned industrial manufacturing, or urban cultural centres and the previously productive cityscapes of the post-Fordist economies. This is the relocation of Lefebvre's 'extra urban', relocated now into the central city.

Lefebvre's notions of how space is one of the productive forces of society, and how this occurs through the operation of both form and design, are well documented, and here it is the 'public space, space of representation, [which] "spontaneously" becomes a place of promenades, encounters, intrigues, diplomacy, trade and negotiations, theatricalising itself'.[40] Many university teaching and learning spaces have been converted into casual, generic corporate hubs for 'lounge space',[41] modelled on open-plan, flexible, Silicon Valley-style company headquarters with soda machines and communal lunches with sofa-style furniture that aims to make the university 'workplace' feel less like work and more like home, or, arguably, to make the two indistinguishable. The dissolution of the distinction between working at home and working at the university follows a neoliberal belief that one can work endlessly, 24/7, and that a life centred around a 24/7 academic life is the only route to success. Work becomes play, and the marketing of these new, casual university architectures is used to maximize returns. The ways in which universities can dominate or define the experience of a city are dependent on their consumption of it.

Consuming Local Everyday Life in the University Town

So, we ask, are the morphological changes taking place in cities in which universities have been growing, and increasingly promoting themselves, as vital or beneficial economically, socially and culturally to society as they are portrayed to be? One of the ambitions of the film has been to contest the historical and economic process subordinating the university, the city and their social bodies to market demand. The·assertion by universities is to be at once local and global, claiming and consuming specific spatial cultural contexts, and capitalizing on these within wider global markets. Pre-COVID-19, many UK universities were in hyperdrive in terms of their expansion plans. Their main impact on local community was the consumption of cultural spaces for financial return. This raises the problem with a neoliberal, laissez-faire mentality of feeding off and into a global economy, and of capitalism itself.

In Nanterre, Lefebvre understood that the design of the campus antagonized differences, as heterotopia. This is oppositional to the current emphasis of sameness in many UK universities of

the totalizing space of unified commodity, where there is seemingly no difference of lived experience, and all can be quantified according to commodity value. The neoliberal quantification is first of the city, then of the university, the teacher and the student as commodity. This relationship was highlighted by the leftist leaflet, *On the Poverty of Student Life*[42] from the Nanterre faculty of the time, where the campus was assessed, much like the 'edufactory', as 'introducing an economy of pace, activity and relations: discipline, morality, hygienic love and a level of concentration on work that is impossible in the politicized and distracted chatter of the Latin Quarter … so that Nanterre produces "apolitical intellectuals" in the service of the state'.[43] We argue that Lefebvre's account can be used to understand that the university can now produce apolitical consumers in the service of consumption, or the neoliberal economy. The dwindling lack of difference or 'otherness' of these spaces now means that this consumer appearance is replicated across multiple cities; it becomes normalized and has a heightened quality of both image and appearance. By using an audiovisual rather than a solely textual method of research, *The Death and Life of UK Universities* qualitatively analyses the processes of alienation inherent in the restructuring of the university through the city space, and interrogates the absence of the possibility of diversity in everyday life as a totalizing construct corporeally.

While we have never taken to intervening in the building work of any of the campuses we have studied and filmed, our performative critique is, like Matta-Clark's artwork, solidified in film, as a record outlasting live events. The film could be envisioned as a form of realization of Matta-Clark's 'Anarchitectural parade',[44] where the fabric of the university and its new territories in the city are dismantled and presented as a moving set of built fragments before the audience.[45] But unlike *Conical Intersect*, which watches on as the Centre Pompidou consumes the city, its local residents, rituals and cultures to buy and sell modern art, *The Death and Life of UK Universities* draws our attention to the growth of the 'edufactory', and the ways in which the university campus and its architectures can consume the city, its local residents, rituals and cultures in the name of global academic capitalism, knowing full well that the neoliberal model of university growth is neither sustainable or healthy long-term.

Declarations and Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests with this work.

Notes

[1] Slaughter and Leslie, *Academic Capitalism.*

[2] Neoliberalism is generally understood to be a laissez-faire economic liberalism that is driven by the desire for economic independence from the state.

[3] Sadler, 'The Varieties of Capitalist Experience', 125.

[4] Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class.*

[5] Bauman, *Liquid Times*, 3.

[6] Coulson, Roberts, and Taylor, *University Planning and Architecture*; Coulson, Roberts, and Taylor, 'The Future of the Campus'; Coulson, Roberts, and Taylor, *University Trends*; Edwards, *University Architecture.*

[7] Chapman, *American Places*; Kenney, Dumont, and Kenney, *Mission and Place.*

[8] Bauman, *Liquid Modernity.*

[9] 'Space' is the term used by Lefebvre because it clarifies that the focus is upon the social and occupational, over and above the geographic.

[10] Perry and Wiewel, *The University as Urban Developer.*

[11] Rickes, 'Make Way for Millennials!'.

[12] Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 107.

[13] Troiani and Carless, *The Death and Life of UK Universities.*

[14] Jacobs, *The Death and Life.*

[15] Chaplin, *Modern Times.*

[16] Matta-Clark, *Conical Intersect.*

[17] Troiani, 'Academic Capitalism in Architecture Schools'.

[18] Hochschild, *The Time Bind.*

[19] Aureli, 'Form and Labor'.

[20] Davidts, 'Art Factories'.

[21] Michalarou, 'Art Cities'.

[22] Wrona, 'Urbanism and Revolution'.

[23] Bessa and Fiore, *Gordon Matta-Clark: Anarchitect.*

[24]Crawford, 'Activities Programme', 458.
[25]Fernandez and Powers, 'Before the Neoliberal Campus'.
[26]Fernandez and Powers, 'Before the Neoliberal Campus'.
[27]Bender, *The University and the City*, 14. Originally teachers were mobile and not attached to a particular university position.
[28]Stern, 'The Colleges That Ate New York'.
[29]Boyer, 'Cities for Sale', 200.
[30]Cairns, *Deciphering Advertising, Art and Architecture*, 1.
[31]Dober, *Campus Design*, 5.
[32]Lee and Baumeister, *The Domestic and the Foreign*, 19.
[33]Klingmann, *Brandscapes*.
[34]Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities*.
[35]Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*; Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*.
[36]Lefebvre, *The Explosion*, 384.
[37]Lefebvre, 'Introduction à l'espace urbain', 25.
[38]Lefebvre, 'The Right to the City', 104.
[39]Lefebvre, 'The Right to the City', 105.
[40]Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities*, 237.
[41]Austin and Sharr, 'The University of Nonstop Society'.
[42]Situationist International and The Students of Strasbourg, *On the Poverty of Student Life*.
[43]Stanek, *Henri Lefebvre on Space*, 188.
[44]Matta-Clark, '1976'.
[45]Wigley, *Cutting Matta-Clark*, 458.

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