Parliament Buildings

The architecture of politics in Europe

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Guest Editor: Jeremy Melvin

UCL PRESS

First published in 2023 by
UCL Press
University College London
Gower Street
London WC1E 6BT

Available to download free: www.uclpress.co.uk

Cover image: © Naomi Gibson – produced with reference to documentation by TU Vienna (2014) and Google Maps

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from The British Library.

Psarra, S., Staiger, U. and Sternberg, C. (eds). 2023. *Parliament Buildings: The architecture of politics in Europe.* London: UCL Press. https://doi.org/10.14324/111.9781800085343

ISBN: 978-1-80008-536-7 (Hbk)
ISBN: 978-1-80008-535-0 (Pbk)
ISBN: 978-1-80008-534-3 (PDF)
ISBN: 978-1-80008-537-4 (epub)
DOI: https://doi.org/10.14324/111.9781800085343

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The architecture of political representation

A historiographical review

Remieg Aerts and Carla Hoetink

The cultural and spatial turns in political history

This chapter offers a historiographical survey of studies investigating the relationship between politics and the places in which it is mediated. In this it departs from the assumption that architecture has a sort of 'performative power' to shape political practice and political culture. The historical relationship between architecture and politics has been the subject of research for some time, albeit not in the mainstream study of political history. Yet since the 1990s, political history appears to have reinvented itself. In the preceding decades, the prevailing perspective of social and economic history and the French Annales school had effectively created the impression that politics was a mere epiphenomenon of deeper social and economic forces and relationships.

Three developments contributed to the renewal of political history. Perhaps the most important was the cultural turn, which inspired a much broader conception of politics. The concept of 'political culture' drew attention to the mental context and the language of politics, and to what Walter Bagehot (1867) once called the 'dignified parts' of the political system, such as the symbolic and ritual aspects, and its presentation forms, customs and practices. Tim Blanning and Peter Burke showed the relevance of both the power of culture and the culture of power in early modern politics (Burke 1991; Blanning 2002). The focus on political culture gave the study of the French Revolution an entirely new dimension (Baker 1987). Initially this innovative research focused on early modern politics, but the approach was subsequently extended to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The traditional understanding of 'politics' broadened to the study of 'the political'. In the German *Kulturgeschichte*

des Politischen and the research programmes of the Bielefelder School, politics has come to be conceived as a form of communication, persuasion and rhetoric (Stollberg-Rilinger 2005; Frevert and Haupt 2005; Braungart 2012). Accordingly, regal representation, monumental architecture, parliamentary rituals, language and street manifestations are understood and studied as means of political expression and persuasion (Paulmann 2000; Andres, Geisthövel and Schwengelbeck 2001; Schwengelbeck 2007).

That approach was supported by the 'spatial turn' that occurred in the humanities and the social sciences more broadly from the 1990s onwards. In fact, historians have long known that 'public constructions are the material expression of political power, its exercise, and its form' (Minkenberg 2014, p. 3). The central assumption of the spatial turn is that all space is defined by politics, power and interest. This applies to the public sphere as well as to spatial planning and the use of and access to public spaces. Squares, boulevards and parks facilitate parades, protests, demonstrations and national commemorations. The location and distance between the seats and centres of political authority is relevant. From the time of monarchical absolutism and colonialism, architectural styles such as classicism and baroque have been the visual expression of power and authority (Mumford 1961; Schlögel 2003). Architecture is a language, and spaces and buildings 'can be read' (Alofsin 2006).

Apart from the important sociological analyses of Michel Foucault, Henri Lefebvre, Harold Lasswell and other authors on the relationship between power and the design of public space, historical research initially focused on the function and design of capital cities, as in Lawrence Vale's *Architecture, Power and National Identity* (1992; about the 'spatial turn': Rau 2013; Tally 2013; Kümin and Usborne 2013; Minkenberg 2014). Surprisingly, the consequences of the spatial turn for the interpretation of parliamentary architecture and other government buildings have been recognised quite tardily.

Interpreting the architecture of parliaments

The American social scientist and professor of public administration Charles Goodsell was a pioneer in the field of parliamentary architecture. Already in the 1980s he had made a start with the political interpretation of public space and government buildings. In his view, their shape and location manifest the permanency of a political system. Their architecture embodies political values, influences the behaviour of the politicians and officials, and conveys an ideal of government, authority and national

sovereignty. Due to their design and layout, in particular of the plenary or assembly hall, they exert a major influence on the national political culture (Goodsell 1988a, 1988b, 2001). Although other social scientists or theoreticians of architecture showed some interest in related subjects, looking for a theoretical framework to systematise the relationship between architectural design and political practice, Goodsell's line of research did not meet with a wide following right away (Milne 1981; Seidel 1988; Mayo 1996).

Somewhat similar to Goodsell's work, though, is the type of research that has emerged in Germany. Problematic and ideologically charged as Germany's rich history is, it is no coincidence that German political scientists and historians even prior to Goodsell started to focus on the 'language' of political architecture. Some of the earliest reflections on the architectural effect and political meaning of parliament buildings can be found in German literature of the 1960s and 1970s (Götze 1960; Arndt 1961; von Beyme 1971; Münzing 1977; Warnke 1984). In the context of rebuilding democracy in West Germany after the Second World War, these first reflections were characterised by a normative stance on the interplay of architecture and politics. Up until today, the question of government and parliament buildings as embodiments of democratic values is at the heart of most German-language studies on the topic (Flagge and Stock 1992; Dörner and Vogt 1995; Lankes 1995; Wilhelm 2001; Brendger 2008; Paulus 2012). Apart from its common focus on the democratic and communicative aspect of architecture, the German body of literature stands out because of its interdisciplinary approach, with a strong emphasis on iconography, semiotics and attention to parliamentary architecture as part of the public sphere (von Beyme 1991; Döring 1995; Schirmer 1995; Biefang 2002, 2003, 2009).

Whereas German research is foremost interested in the consequences of architecture and the use of space for political, and in particular democratic, practice, the French- and English-language academic literature tends to take a more cultural and anthropological approach. In this type of research, parliamentary buildings are interpreted as architectural expressions of nationhood and the nation state, or of a conscious display of democratic values (Judge and Leston-Bandeira 2018; Leoussi and Brincker 2018; Leoussi, Payne and Sulak 2020). Political anthropologist Emma Crewe and political scientist Shirin Rai focus on parliament buildings as places of political performance or sites of work, debate and the image of the nation in miniature form. Another telling example of this approach offers the close reading of the French parliament building Palais Bourbon

by sociologist and historian Delphine Gardey (Crewe 2005 and 2021, see also Crewe in this volume; Gardey 2015; Rai and Sparry 2018).

Besides this body of interpretive, analytical academic literature, there is also a pile of general interest publications on parliament buildings that should not be ignored. Richly illustrated publications of this kind usually appear on the occasion of the opening of new or renovated parliament buildings, on anniversaries, or as a catalogue accompanying an exhibition. In projects by architectural firms and in photo books, the shapes and layouts of parliament buildings around the world are being recorded, to gain insight into common models, or as a graphic work of art in its own right (Sudjic and Jones 2001; van Riet and van Bakel 2002; Kühn and Österreichische Gesellschaft für Architektur 2014; Mulder van der Vegt and Cohen de Lara/XML 2016; Bick 2019). Although these occasional publications and coffee table books usually have little academic pretensions, this rich body of literature is valuable for comparative research, and may contain scholarly contributions (exemplary is Riding and Riding 2000). The same is true for a number of biographical studies of nineteenth-century parliamentary architects and their networks, who designed a common 'European' style of political architecture (see Shimizu and Naraoka 2014).

Two lines of research: the exterior and the interior

For the type of study of political architecture advocated by Goodsell, it is relevant to distinguish between analysis of the exterior and of the interior. In fact, in the current state of the art, they constitute two different lines of research. Interpretations of the usual models of the plenary hall – the semicircular theatre form, the oppositional Westminster model and the authoritarian school-class model – and of the mutual positioning of the lower and upper chambers are usually mainly interested in the consequences for political practice, or the relationship between the political powers within the political system. Studies focusing on the location, the design or the reuse of parliament buildings and other centres of political authority appear to be more interested in political culture in the broader sense, or in the relationship between parliament, history and nation.

The *exterior* comprises everything connected to the setting of parliament, the architecture of its building and the decoration scheme. First, this concerns the 'politics of place', the site where parliament is located and its surroundings, particularly in relation to other centres of political authority such as the royal palace, the seat of government, the

senate or government departments (Van der Wusten 2004; McNamara 2015; Gardey 2015). Second, of course, a study of the exterior deals with the architectural design: the style, shape and scale of the building. Third, exterior also includes decoration and ornamentation in terms of sculpture, paintings, texts, furniture, tapestry and more. This entails an analysis of invented traditions, the ideological programme of political, civic and national values that feeds the design of the building. After all, style, design conventions and location make the functions of public buildings immediately visible. Like nineteenth-century opera houses, theatres and universities, parliament buildings are a kind of *Gesamtkunstwerk* (an 'integral work of art'), a visual programme to place such institutions as the republic, democracy, law or science on a pedestal and to generate authority (see Aerts 2018; Aerts and van den Berg 2019).

In the nineteenth century, parliaments needed to create their own status and prestige. As an institution they were more or less new and faced the task of presenting themselves outwardly as the new high authority, next to or above the monarchy with its long tradition of majesty. To achieve this, they appealed to the tried and tested architectural rhetoric that had defined the face of the monarchy for so long. In order to boost their stature, the new parliaments provided themselves with a palace. In the first instance, these were former royal palaces or very substantial administrative buildings that were given a new use. The symbolic grasp of supreme power implied in a term like 'palace of the nation' alone was vividly felt by monarchists in the nineteenth century (see for instance, Krul 2011; Smit 2015). Many parliaments expressed their growing status in the second half of the nineteenth century with prestigious new buildings, when the old buildings were no longer adequate or had been damaged by fire. That was the moment to consciously express the representation of the nation, its history and its relationship with the executive and the head of state by choosing a location, a building style, a format, a layout and a decoration programme.

The allure of the parliament palaces was partly determined by their location. Both the older palaces or monasteries repurposed for parliamentary use and the newly constructed parliament buildings exploited the site's rhetoric to the extreme. They presented themselves visibly and grandly on a hill, on a wide square, in a historic location, on the main river of the capital and always above street level, visually elevated by a basement and stairs. The choice of locations was not only about the combination of visibility and size. Historical places, old strongholds of power or national *lieux de mémoire* were consciously chosen. In most cases the parliament buildings also sought a position next to or opposite

the royal or presidential palace, the seat of government, or the senate or upper house, in a bicameral parliament (more extensively in Aerts 2018; Aerts and van den Berg 2019).

Unlike royal or presidential palaces, parliament buildings derive their status and public appeal as much from the main rooms at the heart of the building as from their façade. The study of the *interior* first and foremost regards the plenary hall, as its main assembly room and – certainly since the camera made its entrance into parliament – the central stage of national politics (Goodsell 1988a, p. 302). Particularly here, the internal and external effects of architecture come together and interact: the plenary hall shapes the practice and the (self)understanding of parliament – for example, the style, norms and values – and in the long run also reflects and becomes symbolic for a national political culture. Analysis of the interior should at least cover the shape, design and seating order of the plenary hall – and preferably also of the surrounding rooms.

Figure 13.1 Plenary hall of the French Assemblée Nationale, Paris. © Coucouoeuf, taken 3 July 2010. Source: Wikimedia Commons, reproduced on the basis of a CC BY-SA 3.0 licence. Available at https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=21054979 (accessed 15 January 2023)

An intriguing intellectual-historical analysis of the shape of plenary halls as bearer of meaning comes from the German political scientist Philip Manow. In his *Im Schatten des Königs* (2008), Manow suggests that parliaments are an expression of a modern democratic mythology that grew directly out of the older monarchical mythology. After 1800, the traditional idea of the *body politic*, literally embodied by the monarch for centuries, gave way to the body of the sovereign people, the new *corpus morale*. The layout of modern democratic parliament rooms can still be seen as a schematic, symbolic representation, or deliberate replacement, of the aspects of the old body politic (Manow 2008, 2010).

With this, Manow introduces an important new perspective to explain why nation states all over the European continent after the French Revolution adopted a semicircular theatre arrangement for the plenary hall. While often explained by practical reasons and local circumstances, Manow points out that the adoption of the 'French model' on a deeper level refers to highly symbolic and fundamental thoughts on the new political order. The semicircle symbolised a post-monarchic order in which the 'body politic' of the monarch was replaced by parliament (Manow 2008, pp. 46–51 and chapter 2; Manow 2013; te Velde 2015).

Besides the basic layout of the plenary hall, the doings of parliament are reflected in and determined by other factors too. Careful reconstructions of parliamentary cultures and parliament as a working space, like those on the Weimar parliament by historian Thomas Mergel, and on the UK Houses of Parliament by political anthropologist Emma Crewe, provide us with evidence about a perceived influence of the physical surroundings of parliamentary debate on the style and form of the debate, as well as on constitutional and internal relations. Parliamentary cultures are likely to be swayed by circumstances such as the size, dimensions, design, arrangement and furnishing of the plenary hall (Mergel 2002; Crewe 2005; Hoetink 2018; see also Crewe in this volume).

Vice versa, certain norms of parliamentary debate, for example to what extent participants should reach out to the public, and ideals about the role of parliament as an institution, had an effect on the building itself and its use. Analysing the relation between political culture and parliamentary architecture means scrutinising a dynamic and interactive process, as Delphine Gardey argues in her stimulating microhistory of the French National Assembly in the long nineteenth century. Gardey demonstrates how fundamental political conceptions shaped the organisation of the National Assembly, which in turn had consequences for the building housing the Assembly, the design of which

then structured the political and legislative processes taking place in it (Gardey 2015).

Less well studied, though not less telling, are the rooms surrounding the plenary hall. Yet histories of national parliaments offer abundant indication that a better understanding of the complex, including reception rooms and working plane, would add to our understanding of the role orientation and priorities of parliament. The spatial layout and the appearance of the entrance for example, the location of the committee rooms or the space reserved for restoration and informal gathering (Norton 2019), libraries or working space for officers, can reveal just as much about ideas on representation and governance as the spatial arrangement of the plenary hall. In this context, it is also important to recognise the narrative behind seemingly functionalist reorganisations of the parliament building. Which rooms and facilities are 'upgraded' and located close(r) to the plenary hall, at the cost of other facilities? Which facilities apparently need to be available and present in the building? Are the rooms open to all, or is access restricted to certain groups (defined, say, by gender, class, professional status or political affiliation)?

Interdisciplinary and comparative approach

If this overview of literature demonstrates one thing, it is that to really understand how parliamentary architecture 'works' – both internally and externally, in the short run and in the long term – a systematic interdisciplinary approach is invaluable. Only this will bring about a greater understanding of the architectural effect of parliament buildings, in the sense that it shapes and structures political practice and, at the same time, reflects and produces a specific political culture (Hoetink and Kaal 2018). Since parliament buildings are part of a *Gesamtkunstwerk* as previously defined, with a complex and layered narrative about the national past, the political system and the balance of powers, adopting such an integrated perspective would be a first step forward in the study of parliamentary architecture.

Although parliaments are, by political and historiographic tradition, strongly embedded in national histories, many similarities in their architectural style, layout and 'rhetoric' seem to point to transnational patterns. In fact, there is a historical, European-Atlantic design repertoire with several variants. This design tradition has spread globally through colonialism and, very concretely, through the British Commonwealth, so that parliaments as far as Sri Lanka and New Zealand could have been

located in any European capital and contain numerous British furnishing elements that also influence the functioning of the order (Sudjic and Jones 2001, pp. 88–93; Roberts 2009). Goodsell only came as far as hinting to such transnational patterns. Other attempts to juxtapose several parliament buildings, such as the work of Minta and Nicolai, rather prove the point but fall short on explaining how ideas of parliamentary architecture spread the world (Minta and Nicolai 2014; Sablin and Bandeira 2021). Manow makes a convincing attempt to explain why the semicircle became the main seating plan for modern parliaments, but his study is also limited to that aspect.

A second important advancement in the study of parliamentary architecture, therefore, would be to adopt a systematic comparative approach. Or more precisely, to investigate parliament buildings along the lines of transfer and adaptation between different political cultures. In many ways this opens a whole new programme of research. The design, location and layout of the parliament buildings provide insight not only into the in-depth structure of national political cultures, but also into patterns of transnational imitation and exchange. Why do many parliament buildings look so similar, when in fact they are intended to represent the national political community and nationhood as such (Sudjic and Jones 2001, pp. 42–57; Aerts 2018, p. 109)?

Throughout time, culture, architecture and political power appear to be intertwined in all sorts of ways. The study of political culture, or of culture-specific aspects of politics, or of politics as culture, nowadays is considered an established paradigm within political history and political science. The spatial turn, which has manifested itself in many disciplines, has also given historians and political scientists a new angle for analysis and explanation. Now seems the time to start materialising this in the comparative and transnational study of parliament buildings.

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