

How our built environment affects the psyche: the clinical "therapeutic" spaces of UCL

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Background

- The research question we are outlining in this poster was part of a broader research project - 'Edible Campus' (EC).
- EC is concerned with how the current UCL Campus facilitates sustainable food and health. We interpreted "sustainable health" as maintaining and improving physical and mental health in some way.

Our question

- Our specific research question within EC was: **how have therapeutic spaces been incorporated into UCL's existing architecture?**
- We understood "therapeutic spaces" as **self-defined** spaces that made us relaxed, felt healing (socially, mentally, or physically), or were just pleasant to be in.

Objectives

We used **researcher-led photography** to explore the therapeutic spaces of UCL, or lack thereof, to consider the impacts on sustainable student health.

Methodology

- Verbal & written mindmapping what both questions meant to us
- Went on campus tour led by one of the researchers, Holly
- Evaluated numerous spaces before deciding on one we found therapeutic — considering our lived experiences in each space
- Researcher-led photography: took photos capturing our perspective on what we found to be therapeutic -- alone to not be influenced by other researchers
- All photos were taken on the same day and time as spaces are malleable and change with external forces like weather

Results



Photo 1 Student Centre during lunchtime, by Angela

Student Centre (above) by Angela, **Photo 1:**

- Materials were very concrete, brutalist architecture
- Staircase and basement (not shown) felt almost dystopian with harsh lighting; felt remote and impersonal
- Window area felt more open; layout and outside view

Angela chose this space as:

- It is a building not primarily meant for teaching but studying, and socialization
- It is a very accessible space, in that it is open 24/7 & for all students, regardless of degree or level of study

Anthropology Common Room (next column) by Holly, **Photo 2:**

- Harsh fluorescent lighting, feels clinical and uneasy
- Very cramped space, a lot of desks but few sofas
- Classroom setting -- of layout and interior architecture

Holly chose the Anthropology Common Room (undergrad) as:

- We talked about how a social space can be a therapeutic space in itself
- It is a place to socialize with people within the course and study, and it is one of the places Holly spends the most time in on campus.



Photo 2 Anthropology common room, by Holly



Photo 3 Wilkins Terrace during lunchtime, by Jaz

Wilkins Terrace (below, left) by Jaz, **Photo 3:**

- Environment and materials created gray and brown color palette
- Integration of plant-life and greenery is an attempt to involve calming objects
- Middle area was taken up by event; usually, it is an open area with few areas to sit (besides the ground)

Jaz chose the Wilkins Terrace due to its multifaceted nature, where students eat, socialize, and work while interacting with nature. The space can also be transformed to host recreational events, which contrasts to the fact that it is situated in an academic institution.

Discussion

- This project involved using our bodies as research tools; taking note of everything we felt and using this to analyse the space (Tilley, 2019).
- This led to us

struggling to pick therapeutic spaces, as we found many spaces *intended* as therapeutic were not *experienced* as therapeutic.

- This requires reflection on what the priority of UCL is, as "therapeutic" may be a difficult objective to reach.

1. Lighting of the Common Room conveyed a sterility
2. Uniformity of all spaces felt cohesive yet impersonal
3. Lack of decor in all spaces expressed unfamiliarity
4. Uncomfortable and impersonal materials
5. Attempts at integrating plants too sparse to be therapeutic

We found that these spaces meant to encourage student sociability were mostly used for academic purposes. We propose this pattern of social spaces becoming used for studying is because UCL lacks adequate, variable, and comfortable study spaces.

Spaces embody human life and experience (Lawrence-Zúñiga, Low 2003) -- UCL's architecture fails to be therapeutic and thus facilitate sustainable health is because it fails to embody human life and experience.

Another reason for this confusion of space is that they did not express the comfort required for sociability; all environments had a clinical nature. The Student Centre and Anthropology Common Room are used as an alternative to libraries, as non-library study spaces are scattered and often unavailable. The Wilkins Terrace's status as an outdoor study space was restricted by a lack of greenery and temporary events.

Based on our findings, UCL should...

Implement more calming spaces meant for socialization, focused on feeling welcoming, calming, and comforting and not meant solely for studying **to facilitate sustainable health.** This means integrating comfortable furniture and more greenery, displaying art, and adding homely touches e.g. rugs.