Public, Private, and Protest Spaces:
Negotiations of Power through Architecture in the Charles Murray Protest

Public and private are often referred to as separate spheres, a western ideology that emerged from the Industrial Revolution in the 19th century; jobs moved out of the home or the farm and created a binary separating men’s world of work (public) and women’s realm in the home (private). Though this structure only applied to upper-middle class, semi-urban people who could afford to have only one wage-earning spouse, its language has become widespread and created a strict dichotomy between public and private spaces. Dominic Davies (2018) writes that access to supposedly public spaces is an important metric for understanding the kinds of oppression imposed by the state and the potential for rights. Such forces as neoliberalism, privatization, and militarization all restrict people’s access to nominally public spaces (89-90). By protesting in those spaces, people create a “semi-public” domain in which they are able to show the violations by the state, assert their own humanity, and demand the rights they are currently denied (Davies 89, 96; Butler 26). These concepts of conditional, restricted “public” spaces and the creation of “semi-public” spaces via protest demonstrate the inefficacy of examining spaces distinctly public or private.

This fluid, malleable, temporal nature of public-private spaces is exemplified on campuses like that of Middlebury College, which is a private institution with an open-access campus. The administration of the College functions in many ways that are analogous to the state, such as providing services to its residents while also restricting certain types of access and behaviors. This paper will use theories of embodied space, state violence, precarity, and protest
to analyze the ways the “state” of Middlebury articulates its power through uses of space, specifically in McCullough Student Center and the protest of Charles Murray’s presence there on March 2, 2017. The administration’s decision to use Wilson Hall for the talk and then to move the speaker to the Mitchell Green Room to continue via livestream represents the administration’s attempts to privatize a semi-public space and enforce McCullough’s historical purpose of providing a space for building the physical and mental strength of white men. The protesters’ positioning within Wilson Hall and their disruption of the livestream audio from outside of the building constitute a demand for full recognition by the speaker and the College, embodied in a call for expanded access to a space that is only nominally a “Student Center,” and a powerful disruption of the boundaries between internal and external, public and private.

To begin with, it is necessary to have a clear understanding of the physical building of McCullough and its history. Buildings are grounded in both time and space; their appearance is never neutrally constructed and, thus, is always a mirror of the values and priorities of the time and culture in which it was built (Ziolkowski 190; Gülsüm 2004, 19). In order to understand the meaning of McCullough’s aesthetics and use today, we must peel back the layers of renovations it has undergone and unearth its original purpose and appearance. (See Figures 1 and 2.) The central section of today’s McCullough was opened in 1912, and it was originally used as the school’s athletics facility. Despite women’s admission to the college in 1886, the facility was only opened to women in 1949 (“A People’s History of Middlebury College”; “Middlebury History Online”). The first students of color at Middlebury were admitted in the 1840s, but it is unclear what kind of access they were granted to the McCullough facility (“A People’s History of Middlebury College”). From 1988-2000, as the gym facilities moved to their current location
on South Main Street, the College began converting the McCullough facilities for other uses and expanding the building to accommodate its new purposes. The exterior of the central, oldest section of the building was preserved. It resembles the stone mill architecture typical of New England throughout the mid-19th century. Its coupled windows with vaulted, keystone masonry above the upper levels, its central white cupola, its broken ashlar stone exterior, and its marble staircase leading to the main entrance allow it to become altogether unassuming among the other buildings on campus at that time. The additions on the eastern and western sides of the central section were constructed in a post-modern style that makes the building appear somewhat friendlier, though its internal functions become illegible from the outside because of this amalgamation of styles. (See Figure 3.)

Aaron Helfand (2013) discusses the ways early architectural styles at Yale, Princeton, Harvard, and the University of Pennsylvania emerged from a search for “institutional identity” (7). That desired identity was found in medieval English universities’ Gothic style and Tudor influences, but Helfand argues it was adapted and re-articulated by the American universities (8). Jan Ziolkowski (2018), in an examination of architecture at Yale, Princeton, Duke, and Rhodes College, argues that revival movements are deeply reflective of both the historical moments they attempt to revive and the contemporary moment during which that revival is enacted (190). Helfand provides an example of this in arguing that universities’ medieval architecture was reflective of a desire to emanate the medieval English universities while also resisting modernism. This identity quest in architecture involved recreating images of historical, prestigious institutions while creating a deeply local identity (Helfand, 7, 26). A similar, intentional construction of an institutional self through architecture is visible in
McCullough: its beaux-arts style with hints of Tudor architecture aligned it with other famous institutions; whereas, its more local, New England influences were made visible through its reminiscence of mill architecture, its cupola, its use of granite, and its marble and granite entrance stairs, which gestured to the booming marble industry along Otter Creek. (See Figures 1 and 5.)

McCullough’s transition away from its athletic days in the late 1980s is representative of a broader cultural shift in college athletics architecture: Body and Podhora (2002) describe a transitional moment, beginning in the 1970s, in which “old gym” facilities (characterized as unspecialized, general spaces for male fitness) were transformed into “Student Recreation Center” facilities (more specialized, expansive, and inclusive of people and purposes). They identify this shift as a product of American colleges’ growing emphasis on athletics as important to health and combating student drug and alcohol use (44). As Middlebury’s student body and athletics program grew, this expansion of athletics facilities became more pressing. A similar phenomenon is discussed by Scott et al. (2006) regarding the development of a separate athletics campus at the University of Iowa. Scott et al. argue that the Athletic Department was gradually pushed towards the western part of campus until it eventually developed its own campus, which represents tensions within the school over the space allotted to athletics vs. academics (187). Though the importance of athletics at Middlebury is arguably reaffirmed rather than undermined by the movement of the athletics facilities from McCullough to much more expansive and expensive facilities on South Street, Scott et al.’s argument is a useful indication of the power and importance imbued in centrality of location.
McCullough was and is positioned at the center of Middlebury’s campus. (See Figure 4.) As the campus grew, it expanded outwards on all sides of McCullough — with the athletics facilities on South Street, the development of a campus across College Street, and the gradual construction of houses and academic buildings closer to town and further west towards what is now the Knoll. Today, McCullough hosts a wide array of offices and services, ranging from the school’s mail center, to spiritual reflection spaces, to Crossroads Café and the Grille, to art galleries and performance spaces, to the Office of Student Activities and the Student Government Association. The centrality of its location lends a certain level of importance to each of these offices and spaces. The building has been renovated since its gym days, but its history is kept alive by the preserved exterior of the central part of the building, various commemorative pictures and plaques located inside the building, and the preservation of a split-level, open space in what is now the Grille and Crossroads, which used to be the College’s swimming pool.

Within the building today, there is a clear tension between preserving a complicated history and making a usable space for contemporary purposes: the general layout of the building creates a circular, winding pattern of motion, as one can walk through curved and angled hallways, up and down ramps and short stairways and easily become lost amid its variety of offices and program spaces. The main staircases and elevator are located towards the center of the building, thus marking it as a nominally accessible building but making the full experience of the building inaccessible to people who cannot easily climb stairs. The jumbled layout and multipurpose nature of McCullough keeps its layered history alive; it acts as a constant reminder that the building today was originally built for another purpose: the physical fitness of white
men, before women and people of Color were allowed on campus — and for almost four decades after they were first admitted.

This history, kept alive through the physical appearance and embodied experience of moving through the building, was more fully resurrected on March 2, 2017. The Middlebury chapter of the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), a conservative think-tank, invited Charles Murray to speak on campus about his book: *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960-2010* (published 2012). Murray is an AEI affiliate, pseudo-scientist, author of *The Bell Curve* (1994), and was labeled a white supremacist by the Southern Poverty Law Center (splcenter.org). Below, I provide a brief timeline of the events of March 2, not including efforts by protesters before the event\(^1\) or any of the events in the aftermath of the talk/livestream\(^2\):

- Students, staff, faculty, and community protesters assembled on quad on the northern side of McCullough, holding signs and chanting, then entered through the north entrance.
- The audience assembled in Wilson Hall, sitting on chairs in the open floor space below the stage and on the bleachers at the back of the hall, and standing in the doorway and hallway just outside of the room. All seating and overflow was full to capacity.

\(^1\) Efforts before the event included letters and petitions, requesting that Laurie Patton not introduce Charles Murray and that the Political Science Department withdraw its co-sponsorship of the event. When these efforts failed, students prepared to protest during the event.

\(^2\) A range of goals existed among protesters, and it is important to recognize that the narrative I provide here may not align with others’ accounts of the protest. Here, my information emerges from my own recollections, journal entries, and conversations with other students and faculty involved. There are many conflicting narratives of what occurred when Murray and Stanger left the building and were driven off campus by Burger. I had left the protest at that point, so I restrict my timeline and analysis to the events up until that point. For first-hand accounts of what happened, please see https://beyondthegreenmidd.wordpress.com/
• Students from AEI introduced the event; Bill Burger, Chair of Communications, requested that protesters adhere to school protest guidelines; President Patton introduced the event.3
• Murray approached the podium, and student protesters collectively stood, turned their backs on him, and began reciting a speech they had written. The speech was intended to prevent Murray from being heard, and to explain the violence his false scholarship perpetuates and the ways that violence is validated and emboldened by his presence on our campus, which itself has an unacknowledged and ongoing history of violence against minorities. Protesters did call-and-response chants after the speech ended.
• Berger and other administrators made the executive decision to move Murray and Allison Stanger (the International Politics and Economics professor who was to engage in a conversation on stage with Murray after his lecture) to an “undisclosed location” where they could continue the talk via livestream.
• The audience began to disperse; a fire alarm went off; most protesters reassembled outside of the building entrances, waiting to see where Murray and Stanger would relocate to, in order to continue the protest there. Some protesters remained in Wilson Hall.
• Murray and Stanger moved to the Mitchell Green Room, located on the top floor of the eastern section of the building, which was not part of the original gym. Protesters

3 In her introduction, President Patton attempted to position herself in support of the students organizing the event and not the speaker himself. Many protesters took issue with this because her introduction validated Murray as a scholar worth engaging with, and her willingness to give him a podium, a microphone, and a stage to speak on constituted the very violence against which the protesters were protesting.
gathered outside the building, below the Mitchell Green Room, and continued chanting for the duration of the livestream. Their chants were audible on the livestream.

In my analysis of these events, I focus on the use of space in three administrative decisions during the event: the decision to use the old, north-facing entrance for the event, to locate the event in Wilson Hall and within a lecture format, and to move Murray and Stanger to the Mitchell Green Room to livestream the event.

The north-facing entrance to McCullough leads directly into Wilson Hall, thus streamlining the audience into their intended location. (See Figure 5.) Yet, it is also the most traditional entrance (architecturally), the most grand and domineering entrance (visually), and the least accessible entrance (physically/experientially). It is incredibly rare for an event to use that entrance; it is not an open entrance or exit in the daily use of the building. Its grandiose nature in comparison to McCullough’s other entrances highlighted the event as something important and powerful, thus further validating Murray’s false scholarship and its violent implications. The north entrance is also the only remaining entrance from the original iteration of McCullough, and its physical inaccessibility (it is comprised of steep marble stairs that lead to two heavy doors, making it an impossible entrance for people who are not able-bodied) evokes those early days of McCullough in which women and people of color — the very people most targeted by Murray’s rhetoric and presence — were barred from the building.

Within Wilson Hall, the structure of the event as a lecture was enabled and enforced by the physical layout of the room. (See Figure 6.) The presence of a stage, raised above the general audience space, gives power and authority to the designated speaker, who stands behind a podium at the center of the stage, in front of royal red curtains. This kind of importance and
validity was exactly the capital that Murray already possessed in enormous quantities and which made his rhetoric especially violent. Protesters attempted to renegotiate the power imbued in Wilson’s architecture through several corporal avenues: those who were able to stand, stood up when he began to speak, thus challenging the power he embodied in his position of standing on a raised platform above the seated audience. The standing protesters turned their backs on him, in an effort to subvert the abundance of architectural features — the chairs that face the stage, the speakers that broadcast outward from the stage, the bleachers that stagger the audience to allow more people to see and hear what occurs on stage — which position the audience as the recipients of knowledge imparted by the speaker on the stage. The protesters spoke collectively to drown out the microphones, asserting a collective power and stealing the spotlight (almost literally) from the intended speaker. This performance also acted as a transgression and renegotiation of the unspoken contract between performer and audience: their collective action pushed Murray into the role of audience, and their decision to turn their backs on the stage made him a secondary audience to their peers in the room to whom they intended to speak.

Finally, the decision to move Murray and Stanger to a location determined to be “private” within the “Student Center,” — which is supposedly a public space for all students — represented a violent re-articulation by the administration of the architecture of McCullough. Though Wilson Hall was a deeply flawed, hierarchical location for the event, it was more public than the Green Room. (See Figure 7.) It forced Murray to look at and speak directly to those who opposed him and to those whom he harms the most. By unilaterally deciding to move him and Stanger to a secluded room that allowed them to look down upon the protesters without being seen by them, the administration recoded McCullough: they transformed a nominally public
space for students into a private space meant to protect a faculty member and a guest, rather than a space that offers protection from Murray’s dangerous rhetoric to the students for whom the “Student Center” is named.

The movement of Murray and Stanger from the old part of the building to the new additions also represents a movement through time of the ideologies the speakers represent: the white supremacy Murray spews aligned with the space of Wilson Hall as it was originally built — a space for white men to build camaraderie and physical strength — and by moving him to the Mitchell Green Room, the administration physically and symbolically elevated his rhetoric and allowed him to take over a new space. Though McCullough has been renovated countless times in its century of existence, in efforts to better suit it to the needs of the students, the administration’s use of both old and new spaces within it represents a merging of the past and the present, at the expense of today’s most vulnerable and marginalized students.

In Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly, Judith Butler (2015) writes:

For when bodies gather as they do to express their indignation and to enact their plural existence in public space, they are also making broader demands: they are demanding to be recognized, to be valued, they are exercising a right to appear, to exercise freedom, and they are demanding a livable life (26). This is precisely what the protesters did on March 2, 2017: they asserted their collective humanity in a restricted public space and demanded a “livable life;” one in which their value as humans is not put up for questioning by a man on a stage with the backing of the institution that purports itself to protect and promote students’ well-being. When Murray and Stanger were relocated to the Mitchell Green Room, protesters continued “demanding to be recognized” and to assert their “right to appear,” in Butler’s words, by chanting from outside and below their secluded room. The livestream attempted to deterritorialize the conversation between Murray
and Stanger, which highlighted critics of the protests’ main argument: that it was just inconsequential words in the ether. Perhaps the most powerful piece of the protest, then, is that the protesters were able to be within the livestream; their chants were audible for the entire duration of the livestream. They were barred from the room, but present in every minute of the conversation. In this way, the digital, deterritorialized conversation on the livestream was re-grounded spatially and materially; the protesters served as a persistent reminder of the consequences of Murray and Stanger’s words. Their presence and their voices, through a re-articulation of the false dichotomy between being inside and outside the building and rendering the virtual conversation physical, represented a deconstruction of the binaries of public and private space, of history and present day, and of theoretical discourse and its human impact.

Figure 1: The Original McCullough (http://midddigital.middlebury.edu/walking_history/college_campus/page_3.html)
Figure 2: Cross-Sectional Plan (www.michaeldennis.com/mccullough-student-center--middlebury-college.html)

Figure 4: Campus Map (http://www.middlebury.edu/about/campus/campusmap)

Figure 5: The North Entrance (http://www.middlebury.edu/student-life/activities/mccullough)
Figure 6: Wilson Hall (www.michaeldennis.com/mccullough-student-center--middlebury-college.html)

Figure 7: Mitchell Green Room (www.middlebury.edu/student-life/activities/mccullough)
Bibliography


