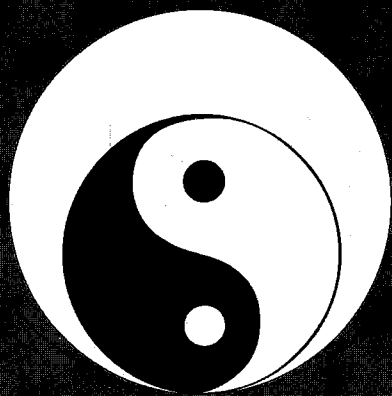


语言学的适用研究

王振华 王 品 主编

Linguistics and Its Applicability



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
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Introducing Spatial Discourse Analysis: A Multimodal Case Study of a University Library in China

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1. Introducing Spatial Discourse Analysis

Multimodal studies have already demonstrated the importance of expanding our analytical and theoretical lens beyond the confines of language, to recognize not just the inherently multimodal nature of all communication, but that a framework is needed to account for this. (Jewitt 2009) In this paper, we demonstrate how a multimodal approach can be extended to texts of the built environment, using *Spatial Discourse Analysis* (Ravelli & McMurtrie 2016a). Multimodal scholars have long established the importance of this enterprise, particularly Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), O'Toole (2011), Ravelli (2000), and Stenglin (2004). The built environment has also been approached from other 'perspectives' where history, style, form and meaning are discussed, for instance, Ching's (2007) comprehensive account of form, space and order; Unwin's (2009) perspectives on the concepts of stratification, social geometries, transitional space; as well as Leach's (2010) account of architectural history. However, it is the social semiotic approach to space that is of immediate relevance to this paper as

it has a number of distinctive features. Social semiotics sees meaning as being multi-pronged: that is, several types of meaning work together to create the whole, and that “these meanings arise in and from social and cultural contexts, simultaneously contributing to those contexts also” (Ravelli & McMurtrie 2016a: 3). Social semiotics also proposes explicit links between materiality and meaning, that is, interpretation needs to be based on explicit evidence. And it is concerned with the ways people use semiotic resources to make and interpret meanings in the context of specific social situations and practices (van Leeuwen 2005: xi).

Although this approach draws on a wide range of works, the key impetus is Halliday’s (1978) social semiotic view of language, including Halliday’s notion of agency and the idea that meaning is made and expressed, and also emphasizing that meaning-making is not just about choosing from existing resources but about actively making signs (Hodge & Kress 1988). Social semiotics argues that signs are always newly made in the act of sign-making, so “it is a theory not of use but of constant remaking” (Kress 1997: 286). It is also argued that these systems change over history in specific ways by “the actions of many individual social actors in the system, with the system and on the system” (Kress 1997: 285). In other words, social semiotics recognizes the potentials and effects of human actions and puts innovation, transformation, creativity, at the centre, as entirely usual.

Following Ravelli and McMurtrie, spatial texts are understood as “the synthesis of building, space, content and users.” (2016a: 1) As McMurtrie says, spatial texts refer to “the built structure, the content within that structure as well as people’s movement through the built structure and their engagement with the content.” (2013: vi-vii) Their definition of space indicates the inherent multimodal nature of space, that is, spatial texts are made up of a multiplicity of semiotic resources and these multiple semiotic resources all contribute to meaning-making

in spatial texts. Drawing on Halliday's (1978) metafunctional hypothesis, adapted by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) to the study of images, spatial texts need to be understood in terms of three different types of meaning, all co-occurring and intersecting: *representational meaning*, which constructs representations of human experience; *interactional meaning*, which enacts social relationships, and *organizational meaning*, which organizes the text into a meaningful whole. A fourth type of meaning, *relational*, is also included by Ravelli and McMurtrie, but will not be addressed in this paper.

This paper will outline the framework of Spatial Discourse Analysis, and apply it to the analysis of a newly-built university library in China. Libraries are particularly important places for communities to come together. As Barclay says, a “library space makes it possible for people to learn, socialize, escape, and connect in ways that no other present-day space—private, governmental, or commercial—can.” (2017: 272) Even in the context of the digital age, where some might argue that physical libraries could become irrelevant (e. g. Buss 2016; Carlson 2002; Scott 2011), it seems that physical libraries are not only surviving, but thriving (Bailin 2011; Barclay 2017; Hill 2009; Jolly & White 2016; Novacek 2001; Watson 2010). In the context of a university, libraries play an especially important role, not only establishing the “persona” of the institution in relation to users (Ravelli & McMurtrie 2016b), but forming an integral part of the learning landscape (Holmgren 2010). In other words, “learning spaces convey an image of the institution’s philosophy about teaching and learning” (Somerville & Harlan 2008: 17), and it is argued that spatial design affects learning behaviours (Oblinger 2006). Studies suggest that changes over the past decade in academic libraries correspond to the re-orientation of knowledge in higher education (e. g. Sullivan 2010), when the pedagogy in higher education has shifted “away from a

teaching culture and toward a learning culture" (Bennett 2003: 10).

Studies so far have demonstrated the value of physical library spaces, validated the interconnection among library design, learning activities and community building, and advocated the need to couple library studies with social contexts. Yet, there is a paucity of empirical studies that investigates exactly how library design facilitates community building and affords learning activities, and how such design relates to its social contexts. Further, the studies which do exist are primarily concerned with libraries in the west (e. g. Willingham 2008) and little is known about libraries in China. On this basis, we argue for a complementary approach using a social semiotic perspective that prioritizes users' interpretation of and response to the built library spaces. Instead of focusing on how library spaces can be designed to satisfy user needs via such strategies as surveys and interviews, we argue that the design of library spaces interacts and communicates with users and that these communicative meanings can affect how users engage with libraries. In sum, we propose a social semiotic meaning-based approach to library studies.

Our focus is Southwest University Library^① in Chongqing, China. This library system consists of three individual libraries, and we further focus on just one of them, the recently-built Central Library. This enables a contrast to be made with the two older libraries, which are still in operation, in terms of the design of the physical environment and how this might affect users' experience. The Central Library Building, built in 2013, represents an image of a modern university library building in China. While it is only one example, the aim is to

① Further information about the libraries can be found at <http://www.lib.swu.edu.cn> (accessed 11 December, 2021) as well as <https://baike.baidu.com/item/西南大学图书馆> (accessed 11 December, 2021).

demonstrate the nature of Spatial Discourse Analysis and how this can be applied to a specific text. We aim to reveal the metafunctional nature of the built environment, and how the design of this specific library affords different user behaviours, especially in relation to community building and learning activities.

2. Contextualizing the Research: Library History and Higher Education in China

Inspired by aspects of Marxism, one of the key theoretical understandings in social semiotics is that a social and economic base produces superstructural categories such as representation and communication. As such, representation and communication are socially and economically shaped. Representation and communication are closely bound up with the social, the political and the economic and have to be seen in these wider frameworks. (Kress 2005) A social semiotic approach to space necessitates an understanding of social contexts as, in the words of Kress, “meanings are socially made, socially agreed and consequently socially and culturally specific.”(2010: 93)

The history of libraries in China can be dated back to 3000—4000 years ago, when libraries functioned as private book storage for prominent officials and eminent personages. (Chen 2002) In other words, the possession of a library was largely considered a symbol of economic wealth and high social status. Exclusivity was a key feature of libraries' at that time. (Chen 2002) In ancient times, *fu* (府, storehouse), *ge* (阁, pavilion), *shi* (室, section), *tai* (台, tower), *dian* (殿, palace), *yuan* (院, college), *tang* (堂, hall), *zhai* (斋, study), *lou* (楼, building) were often used to refer to buildings that stored books. The term *library* (*tushuguan*/图书馆) was in fact borrowed from Japan at the end of the 19th century. (Liu 2018) The

first university library, *cangshulou* (藏书楼, library trove), was established in 1898 at the Imperial University of Peking.^① Also at this time, the functionality of libraries in China was expanded to include book lending services. (Yao 2013)

Libraries in China have experienced two major historical transformations: the transformation from ancient book storage to education-oriented libraries by the end of the 19th century, and the transformation from education-oriented libraries to information-oriented libraries by the end of the 20th century. (Lu 2002) As in the west, modern libraries in China are regarded as a social and cultural mechanism to spread knowledge and exchange ideas, rather than just a place to store books. (Wu 2002) In the mid-1980s, China also experienced similar concerns as in western countries, that the rise of information technology and the Internet could lead to the demise of physical libraries. However, also as in the west, there has in fact been an unprecedented upsurge of new library construction in China towards and since the end of the 20th century (Wu 2002), with new systems of information storage and transmission not replacing the original systems, but supplementing them.

China also has a long history of higher education. Higher education in ancient China can be traced back to the Shang Dynasty^②(c. 1600 BC—c. 1046 BC) and today 2560 Higher Education Institutions are accommodating over 36 million university students (over 28 million full-timers; Gu, Li & Wang 2018). Corresponding to other aspects of economic reform and development, higher education in China has experienced several stages of change since the founding of the People's

① Imperial University of Peking has been known as Peking University since 1912.

② According to Gu, Li and Wang (2018: 1), there is no consensus among historians about the exact origin of higher education in China, but they claim that most scholars agree that the institution of university in China originates from *youxue* (右学) in Shang Dynasty.

Republic of China in 1949. In the era of planned economy, higher education was considered a pure public good in China, meaning that the government undertook all responsibility for education and no fees were charged to students. (Tian & Liu 2019) In the 1990s, with the development of a socialist market economy, higher education in China shifted from a dominating national power to a focus on social needs, and students have been charged fees. (Tian & Liu 2019) Since China's accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001, the view that higher education has the property of a service commodity has also been recognized. (Tian & Liu 2019) On this basis, Tian and Liu suggest that higher education in China, as in many other countries, manifests a tendency to marketisation and privatization that legitimizes the sale and purchase of higher education.

Despite the ongoing changes in the functions of libraries and higher education, one feature remains constant in them both and that is the unchanging “hard-working learning spirit” that is endorsed throughout Chinese history. It is documented that students of the ancient era^① sometimes tied their hair to a beam and pricked their thigh with an awl in order to prevent sleepiness and continue learning at late night (see Figure 12-1). This is known as *touxuanliang zhuicigu*^②(头悬梁锥刺股, hair tied to a beam and thigh pricking with an awl), a practice in ancient China. Today such practices are no longer promoted but the hard-working learning spirit is still the mainstream and is even legalized and reflected in the *Higher Education Law of the People's Republic of*

① In ancient China, students were typically males with long hair. Women were of low social status, and mediocrity/being illiterate was regarded as a virtue for women. Filial piety was highly valued and the basic filial piety was to protect the body, hair and skin that were deemed as a gift from parents. Thus, male students would not cut their hair as that was deemed disrespectful.

② This is documented in the ancient book *Taiping Yulan* 《太平御览》.

China^①(Gu, Li & Wang 2018). It is against this broad social and educational background that this study is carried out.



Figure 12-1 Ancient learning practice — hair tied to a beam;
piercing thigh with an awl

3. Data and Method

After gaining copyright consent from Southwest University to take and use photos of the libraries as well other relevant information on websites, a three-day observation was conducted in June 2019^② at all three libraries. Photos of the design and use of the libraries were taken and casual interviews were conducted with random users to collect

① In Article 53: “Students of higher education institutions shall abide by laws and regulations ... respect teachers, work hard in their studies, build up their physiques and the concepts of patriotism, collectivism and socialism...” In Article 59: “The State encourages graduates of higher education institutions to go and work in outlying areas and places where conditions are hard.” *Higher Education Law of the People’s Republic of China*, http://en.moe.gov.cn/documents/laws_policies/201506/t20150626_191386.html, accessed 28 September, 2022.

② This is close to the final semester examinations in China so a high frequency of library use is expected.

information about their experience and evaluation of the libraries. The analysis is largely based on the observation and collected photos. However, it is important to emphasize that the analysis is not of the photos per se but of the space itself.

The analysis proceeds on a metafunctional basis, as described further below. Two additional principles are important to remember for Spatial Discourse Analysis. Firstly, spatial texts need to be considered in terms of three perspectives: “*looking at*” the spatial text, almost as if it is a two-dimensional object; “*moving through/being in*” the spatial text, that is, accounting for its three-dimensionality; and “*looking around*” the spatial text, considering how spatial texts connect with each other, including across time. (Ravelli & McMurtrie 2016a: 15)

Secondly, spatial texts need to be considered in terms of the concept of rank. Rank is a scale of abstraction in Halliday’s grammar, providing a hierarchical arrangement of constituents, with a fixed number of layers, whereby each rank defines a point of origin for structures and systems. (Halliday 2002: 120) This means that each rank has its own system networks and its idiosyncratic structural patterns. Constituency refers to the way in which larger units are constituted of smaller units, while smaller units create larger units. (Eggs 2004) Any meaningful unit can be split into smaller units at the rank below, each with its unique grammatical organization, “until we arrive at the units of the lowest rank, which have no internal constituent structure.” (Matthiessen & Halliday 2009: 71) Rank has been a useful concept in linguistic analysis but its utility in other semiotic analyses remains contested^①. Following Ravelli (2005), O’Toole (2011) and McMurtrie (2013), we argue that rank can inform our analysis of space

① For further discussion on how rank informs analysis of other types of texts, see Ravelli (2005) and McMurtrie (2013).

and we draw on the notion of rank in the built environment as proposed by O'Toole (2011: 65), who suggests a building can be split into floors, rooms and elements. Therefore, in this paper, we will explore the library building from three perspectives^① in combination with rank and on a metafunctional basis.

Spatial Discourse Analysis proceeds with a number of steps. First, the text being analyzed needs to be described verbally, so that readers can “see” what the analyst is examining. Photos and figures are important to supplement this but cannot on their own identify exactly what is being described. (see Ravelli 2019) Following the description, a metafunctional analysis is undertaken and this analysis is always tied to specific meaning-making resources, as meaning is expressed by specific resources that are analyzable and explicable, and so the analysis is not dependent on a “gift of insight” (Ravelli & McMurtrie 2016a).

As noted, representational meaning is concerned with “what the building is, what it is used for and what types of processes or activities configured with participants and circumstances are enabled through the spatial settings” (Ravelli & McMurtrie 2016a: 20). Representational analysis begins with a simple account of what is denoted and connoted by the shapes, materials and general design features of a spatial text, and thus what functions and uses are indicated. Then processes, participants and circumstances are identified. Following Kress and van Leeuwen’s analysis of images (2006), Ravelli and McMurtrie (2016a) propose two different types of processes: narrative processes that are of a dynamic nature, and conceptual processes that are of a static nature.

① In Ravelli and McMurtrie’s model, the three perspectives apply to all ranks in spatial texts while in this paper for a more focused analysis, the “looking at” perspective is mainly applied to the rank of building on its exterior; the “moving in” perspective is mainly applied to the rank of floor on the interior, and the “looking around” perspective is mainly applied to the rank of building on the exterior.

The criteria to distinguish narrative processes and conceptual processes is based on the presence or absence of a vector that suggests movement. Further sub-categorizations of each type are also possible (see Figure 12-2) as discussed in Ravelli and McMurtrie (2016a). A system network for representational process types in spatial texts is illustrated in Figure 12-2.

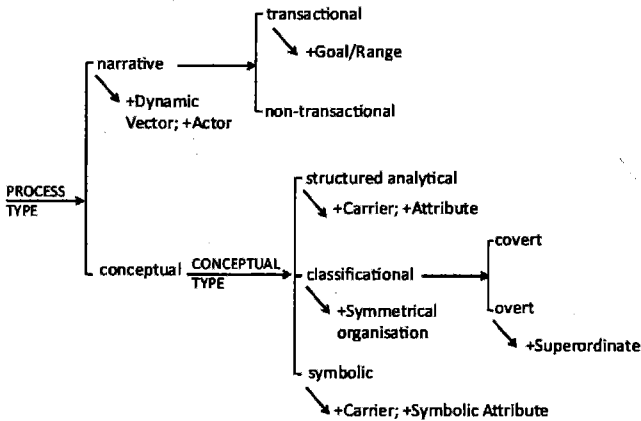


Figure 12-2 System Network for Spatial Representational Process (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006:45—78)

Interactional meaning is concerned with social relations between the institution and users, enacted through the design and use of space. Variables contributing to the interactional meaning are CONTACT, POWER, INVOLVEMENT, SOCIAL DISTANCE (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006) and CONTROL (Ravelli 2008) and these variables are gradable. In spatial texts, CONTACT refers to the visibility enabled between the institution and its users, through windows, signage and so on. POWER refers to the relative equality or dominance of user to institution, typically created by height on the vertical line or heaviness on the base plane. INVOLVEMENT refers to the extent of engagement between institution and user that is often enabled by the orientation to the horizontal plane. SOCIAL DISTANCE establishes how close users

and institution are to each other, enabled by factors such as spatial distance and accessibility. CONTROL refers to the degree of freedom afforded to users by the institution, created by the presence or absence of gates, restrictions, and so on. A system network for interactional meaning is presented in Figure 12-3.

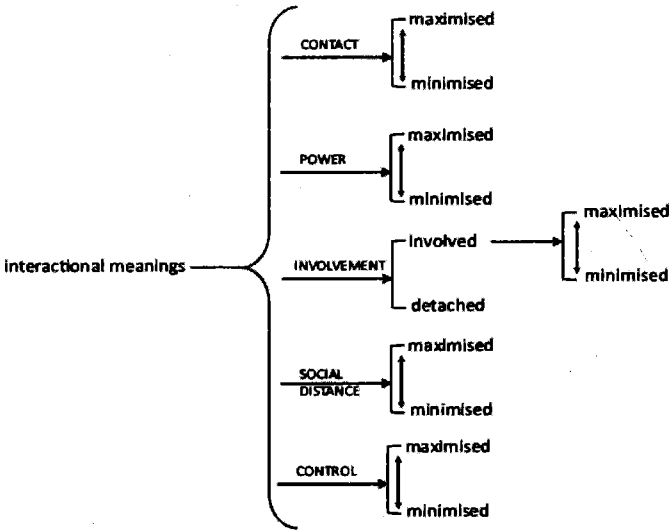


Figure 12-3 System Network for Interactional Meaning by Ravelli and
McMurtrie (2016a: 55). Options in the system are gradable
and realizations are not included

Organizational meaning is concerned with “the way in which the representational and interactive elements are made to relate to each other, the way they are integrated into a meaningful whole” (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006: 176). Variables contributing to the organizational meaning of spatial texts are INFORMATION VALUE, SALIENCE, FRAMING as well as NAVIGATION PATH. INFORMATION VALUE in spatial texts is concerned with the relative value of elements dependent on their placement within a space, or on the order in which they are experienced. SALIENCE is a semiotic principle that creates a hierarchy of importance among different elements (Kress & van

Leeuwen 2006: 201), created by a range of devices including size, cultural value, lighting and so on. FRAMING is concerned with the degree of connectivity or separation between different components (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006: 176) and may be indicated by literal frames such as doorways and walls, or by the continuity or otherwise of decoration and furnishing. NAVIGATION PATHS are related to vectors and can be realized by literal pathways such as footpaths, elevators and staircases which facilitate movement, or are indicated by lighting and furniture placement (Ravelli 2008: 21). A system network for organizational meaning is presented in Figure 12-4. Together, the three metafunctional analyses in combination with rank and the three perspectives provide a framework for analyzing the meaning of spatial texts, which includes the denotation and connotation of space, the activity types, the social relations between institution and user as well as the organization of elements in relation to the whole.

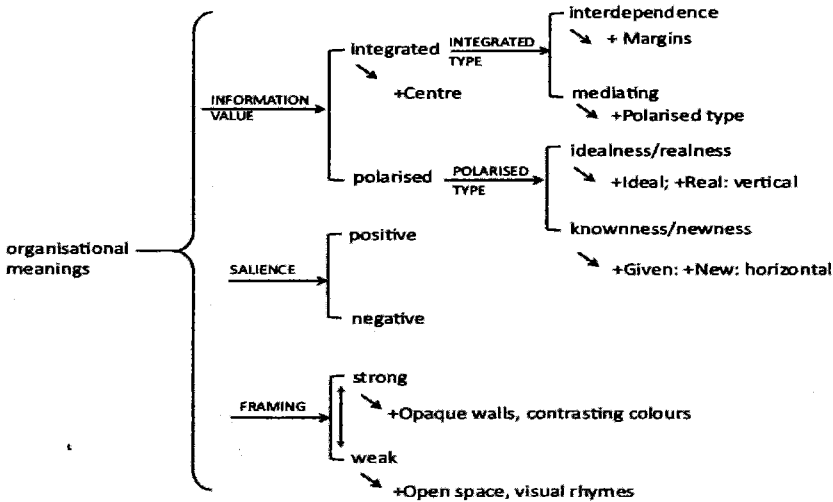


Figure 12-4 System Network for Organizational Meaning.

Fundamental organizational meanings — INFORMATION VALUE, SALIENCE, and FRAMING (NAVIGATION not included), adapted from Kress and van Leeuwen (2006: 210) and McMurtrie (2013: 128)

4. Description and Metafunctional Analyses

Southwest University Library is situated at Southwest University (西南大学), in the city of Chongqing in the southwest part of China. As one of the top five teacher-training universities in China, this university was built in 1906 and has more than 50,000 staff and students as well as an area of 6,000,000 square meters. There are three libraries at Southwest University including Central Library, North Library and South Library. Our focus is on the newly-built Central Library.

As indicated by its name, Central Library is the nub and centre in the library system at Southwest University. It was built in 2013 with a total investment of 134,968,212.53 yuan (about 20 million USD). Integrating the services of borrowing, reading, collecting and consulting, it can provide nearly 6700 reading seats. With a building area of 37213.12 square meters, it has 15 floors above ground and 1 floor below ground. Floor B1 is separated from the other floors and is where a cafe is located. Floors 1 to 5 are for locating books, reading and studying, and are equipped with advanced multimedia information technology tools as well as other amenities. Floors 4 and 5 include some exhibition-style displays of special books. Floor 1 includes many comfortable (easy) chairs and a sofa, as well as some conventional chairs and tables, of high quality but mostly plain and in light colours. Floors 2 to 5 have predominantly conventional furniture, in the same style and some comfortable furniture as well. Floors 1—5 also have exterior balconies, with casual seating available, though the doors to the balconies are often locked.

From floors 6 to 10, there is an increased heaviness and luxury in the decoration. The use of dark colours and materials connotes a more traditional Chinese aesthetic and conveys a serious and old-fashioned

sense. The functions of these floors include safe storage of rare and precious literature (not accessible without special permission) and studying. From floors 11 to 15, the furniture and decorations become plain and modest again and the functions of these floors include office administration and academic exchange in designated seminar rooms, used for meetings and small conferences.

To enter the library, users need to swipe their campus card or show their ID card. Once they enter the first floor, users have free access to floors 2 to 5 as well as floors 11 to 15. However, users need to show their ID card or campus card again, as well as register the purpose of their visit, to enter floors 6 to 10. With the increased heaviness of furnishings, there is an increase in entry condition and a decrease in accessibility. The cafe is open to everyone and free of entry conditions and is directly accessible from the outside, as it is isolated and attached to Central Library Building on its right side.

Although the management models are the same in the three libraries at this university, the infrastructure within the libraries varies. It is immediately clear that Central Library is equipped with abundant digital equipment such as computers, robots, retrieval machines and so on, while in the older libraries only a limited number of retrieval machines are available. Central Library also manifests a more human-centred design and an obvious objective to build community by catering to different user needs. For instance, seminar rooms with projectors are provided so that students can give presentations and have group discussions. Stools are provided around the bookshelves so that readers can sit and rest if tired, while in the older libraries users need to stand to read. Various aspects of the library are illustrated in Figures 12-5 and 12-6.



Figure 12-5 An overall view of Central Library — top row: a bird's view of the campus landscape and floor signage of Central Library; bottom row: Central Library floor plan from above, two exterior views of Central Library.

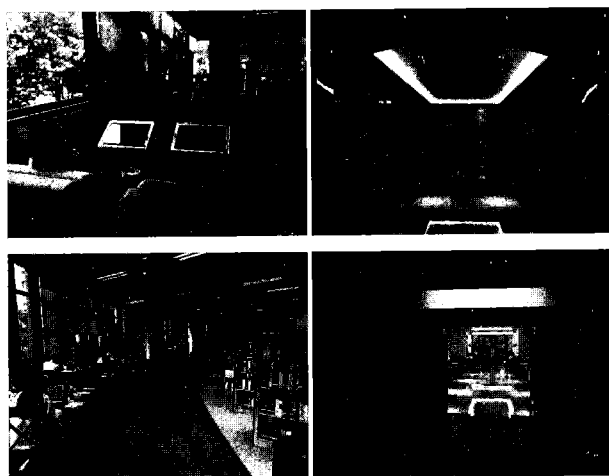


Figure 12-6 Contrast of Central Library with older libraries — top row: digital equipment of Central Library (left) and older libraries (right); bottom row: learning spaces at Central Library (left) and the older libraries (right).

In sum, there is an increased level of comfort and range of choices

for learning at Central Library. However, what is noticeable in our observation is that despite the increased comfort in the new library, the older libraries are in fact quite busy while the new library, even on the lower floors, is relatively empty. Users of the site have suggested to us that this is because the older libraries are closer to student accommodation and cafeterias, and therefore more convenient in terms of time taken to reach them. This further suggests that user activities cluster together to influence user choices, and that in this case, the choice of one learning space over another seems to be conditioned by time cost, and not just the quality of the facility.

The analysis presented here will focus on the first floor and the ninth floor, as these are representative of the majority of floors in their design. We will also include an analysis of the café, for its contrast with more typical floors. A number of photos of these floors are illustrated in Figure 12-7:



Figure 12-7 Photos of Central Library from left to right: cafe, floor 1 and floor 9

4.1 Representational meaning

The representational analysis in spatial texts begins with a simple identification of the space. The footprint of the library is divided into three sections (A, B, and C, see Figure 12-5, bottom row, left) and comprised of two different shapes: a vertical rectangle that represents section A, a horizontal rectangle that represents section B, and a three-quarter circle that represents section C. Section B bridges sections

A and C and links them as a whole. Section A has 15 floors, while section B and Section C have 5 floors each. The interfacing of section A and section B is commonly said by users to represent the inserting of a USB drive^①, which symbolizes one of the key functions of a library: information transaction. The integration of the two sections also symbolizes the historical fact that Southwest University was a combination of Southwest Normal University and Southwest Agriculture University.^② Section B (see Figure 12-5, bottom row, right) has the shape of an opening ancient book^③ that represents knowledge and functions as the entrance of the building. This suggests that the journey toward the library building represents the acquisition of knowledge^④.

Looking at the building from the front, as if it is in two dimensions, the overall shape of section B is rectilinear, but also concave (U-shaped; see Figure 12-5, bottom row, left and middle) as if the library is embedded within the surrounding environment. The curved section, C, is convex, as if the library is engaging with the surrounding environment. The simultaneous use of round and square shapes in this building carries culture-specific meaning, as it manifests the ideology of *tianyuan difang* (天圓地方, round heaven and square earth). This represents an ancient conceptualization of the universe where the “round” and the “square” do not simply refer to a narrow sense of geometry. Rather, the “round” indicates a sense of mobility, change and flexibility (as heaven is a dome above the earth, embracing it but also always changing), while the “square” indicates a sense of

① This building is sometimes referred to by its users as *the USB building*.

② These two universities merged and formed Southwest University in 2005.

③ Ancient book in China refers to inscribed bamboo strips that are linked with thin ropes.

④ This interpretation is based on the design document of Central Library, which for copyright reason will not be available to readers.

immobility, stability and bearing (as earth is fixed, and should be ordered). This ideology indicates a balance of stability and mobility in buildings and has become an indispensable part of all kinds of buildings in China. (Wang 2003)

Looking around the Central Library Building as well as the two other library buildings, the location and surroundings of these buildings stand out and communicate culture-specific meanings as well, especially the *fengshui* culture in Chinese architecture. A bird's eye view of the whole campus (see Figure 12-5, top row, left) indicates that all library buildings have a north-south orientation, all facing water, located on hills, and surrounded by trees. These features reflect some architectural concepts in *fengshui* (风水, geomantic omen) such as *zuobei chaonan* (坐北朝南, a north-south direction), *mianshui* (面水, face water) and *tianren heyi* (天人合一, the harmony between man and nature). (Dong & Li 2008) Located on a hill with a lake in the front, the Central Library building manifests a Chinese-specific ideology that the learning environment has an edifying effect on people, as the mountain view can please people and water can calm people down. It is believed that a peaceful learning environment can help cultivate a correct view of life and a calm disposition. (Liu & Zhang 2014) As the building is set up on a hill and away from the main road on campus, users need to climb stairs and walk along a pathway to get to the entrance. Interestingly, in the middle of the pathway, there is a round water pond that is made of small curved stones in the shape of waves. The trees are framed and protected by stone fences in the shape of boats. Arguably the pathway can be interpreted as a representation of the bumpy road to the knowledge mountain, the water pond and stone waves can be interpreted as a representation of the surging ocean of knowledge and the boat as a representation of the journey of acquiring knowledge. These actually vividly represent a famous poem by Han Yu, a poet in

Tang Dynasty, *shushan youlu qinweijing*, *xuehai wuya kuzuo Zhou* (书山有路勤为径, 学海无涯苦作舟), meaning “there is no royal road to learning”^① and this is translated as: *If you want to succeed in reaching the top of the knowledge mountain, diligence is the only way to reach the top; if you want to swim in the boundless ocean of knowledge, patience, effort and assiduous learning attitude will be a ship that can carry you to the other side of success.* A number of photos of this design feature are illustrated in Figure 12-8.



Figure 12-8 Pathway, trees and water pond around Central
Library co-construing learning ideology

As suggested by Somerville & Harlan (2008: 17), learning spaces reflect the institution's philosophy about learning. A simple identification of the space from “looking at” and “looking around” perspective indicates that the educational value of calmness and hard work is promoted and materialized through a combination of shapes, location and collocation of elements.

Moving within the Central Library, floors 1 to 5 contain books on shelves, tables with seating on either side, individual seating in comfortable chairs, computer terminals, staff desk at the entrance of each floor and in the centre of floor 1, decorative elements such as pot

① This interpretation is also based on the design document of Central Library, which for copyright reason will not be available to readers.

plants, and some signage, e. g. forbidding talking. It's notable that the books are grouped together and separated from the tables and chairs for working. Staff and students are clearly distinguished by their different attributes of dress: staff in uniforms, and students in casual clothes. They are also distinguished by their circumstances of location: only staff can be behind the service desks.

Overall, the placement and configuration of furniture and other elements afford multiple user activities. In the words of Goodyear and Carvalho, "activity is shaped by the physical setting in which it unfolds." (2014: 62) Narrative processes are particularly prioritized. Both transactional processes such as communicating with staff and non-transactional processes such as walking and meandering are observed in all three parts of the library. Sleeping is also observed, e. g. at desks, even though no specific provision has been made for this (as might be the case in other contemporary libraries, see Ravelli & McMurtrie 2016b), indicating that users can transform the meaning potential of spatial designs. Learning activities such as browsing for and selecting books, reading, note-taking and so on are afforded, in both individual and collaborative settings. However, what stands out in the observation is the low noise level and the tendency to use the library for individual learning. Chairs and tables are often grouped in the same space, suggesting the potential for collaborative learning^①. However, as speaking is not allowed in most parts of the library (see Figure 12-9), only individual activity is afforded. Therefore, narrative processes with one participant are common in the observation, which indicates learning in this library is often intransitive and individual. Following the

① In combination with social geometries (Ravelli & McMurtrie 2016a), users who sit side-to-side typically create the meaning of collaborating.

argument of Ravelli and McMurtrie (2016b), users^① who sit relatively motionlessly reading books represent a symbolic attributive process where the Carrier (users) is ascribed the Attribute of knowledge, represented by books. This symbolizes the transmission model of learning whereby knowledge is transferred to students by the authorial institution through books. The absence of collaboration as a mode of learning on these levels is notable.

The café, with the additional provision of food and drink for sale, a service counter, and collaboratively-arranged chairs and tables, along with the absence of signage preventing talking, evidently enables processes of eating and drinking (in addition to reading, note-taking and so on, which also occur here), and suggests that talking is more welcome. And yet the café is also very quiet, with speakers keeping their voices to a minimum, indicating that the behaviour established elsewhere in the library is carried over to this space.

The presence of the café, as well as the book exhibition, indicates that apart from learning, users can relax and entertain themselves, expanding users' participatory roles and social relations. This relates to the concept of hybridization and bonding where the functionality of space has been hybridized by providing users with more activity choices and aligning people into "a complex communality" (Stenglin 2004: 404). On floors B1–5, hybridization is primarily in terms of individual versus collective learning (through different seating arrangements), and

① This points to the issue of rank in spatial discourse analysis. At the rank of floor (looking at the activity), the act of users reading alone in the library can be interpreted as a narrative process, with users acting as *Senser* in the narrative process of reading, or *Actor* in the narrative process of holding the book. However, at the rank of element (looking at the users in isolation) they can be interpreted in terms of a conceptual process, with users as *Carrier* and their book as *Attribute of book—knowledge*, which symbolizes the transmission model of learning. van Leeuwen (2005) discusses this phenomenon in his analysis of image as embedding. For further discussion on rank, see McMurtrie (2013).

learning versus pleasure (through the learning spaces versus the café). On the upper floors, hybridization includes more formal activities, such as presentations and seminars, group meetings, and library administration. Hybridization and bonding in fact relate primarily to the interactional aspect of meaning, but have a clear representational impact also, which suggests that the same resources contribute to different strands of meaning and that different strands of meaning are co-presented in one text and work together to achieve communicative effects. A number of photos of taboo signs and user activities in different parts of the library are shown in Figures 12-9 and 12-10.



Figure 12-9 Taboo signs



Figure 12-10 Spatial layouts in the Central Library which afford hybridized activities

Thus in terms of representational meaning, the design of the library indicates contrary trends. On the one hand, design choices on the exterior and behavioural choices enforced and self-imposed on the interior maintain the “hard-working learning spirit” of ancient scholars. On the other hand, the provision of diverse seating configurations, functional elements, and relaxation opportunities as in the café, along with high-quality fixtures and furnishings, all suggest that pleasure and relaxation can also be a part of the learning culture.

4.2 Interactional meaning

Looking at the exterior of the overall building as illustrated in Figure 12-11, a strong sense of dominance and therefore strong institutional power is conveyed by the library's position as the highest building on campus. The heavy base plane (see Figure 12-5) reinforces the dominant effect. This is potentially intimidating as some users might be hesitant to enter and use the building if they feel overwhelmed by the institutional power^①. This is especially true if the building directly faces users on entry, presenting a confronting angle. However, this building is situated on an oblique angle to the road and there is a meandering pathway on approach to the building^②. The pathway can serve as a buffer and in this sense, the oblique angle^③ actually facilitates Involvement between users and the institution, as suggested by Ravelli and McMurtrie (2016a). Walking along the pathway, users face Section

① The dominating effect conveyed by the height of a building is likely to affect first-time users. It may decrease and fade out as users become more familiar with the building. This view relates to early work on interpersonal meaning in language where Cate Poynton (1985) noted the effect of FREQUENCY of contact (*cf.* Eggins 2004).

② However, the abundant trees surrounding the building reduce the visibility to some extent.

③ This is different from face to face human interaction where an oblique angle will reduce involvement.

B which is only five floors high and the highest part, section A, is located to the side, therefore peripheral in their vision. Further, there is strong institutional Contact because of the exterior glass wall that affords high visibility to its interior. This enables users to see some of the activities within the library, increasing a sense of familiarity and decreasing a sense of alienation. Thus, despite the library's impressive overall exterior and location, a number of other features serve to mitigate the potentially dominating effect, and suggest an invitation to users to enter.

Moving into the library, there continues to be a counter-balancing of potentially contradictory elements, but also a distinction between sections in interactional terms. At the entrance, power is indicated by a particularly high ceiling (Figure 12-11, right), but mitigated by an oblique, zig-zagging pathway. There are numerous staff, all in uniforms, and they stand and face users behind a counter that is about waist-height, and users are required to swipe in in order to enter. This indicates Power and Control to the institution, as users' entry is explicitly monitored by staff, but their clear visibility and only minimal framing (behind the counter) also increases Contact, so the Power and Control are not hidden. The physical distance between users and the institution is relatively close, as the entry space is relatively small overall, but the framing of the barriers and service counter separates users from staff, and thus increases Social Distance.

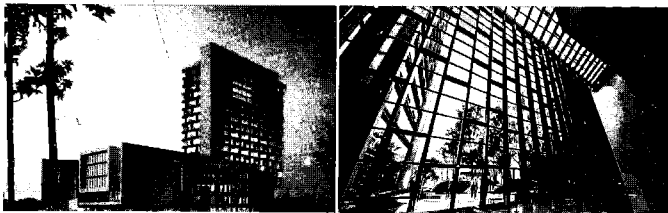


Figure 12-11 Interpersonal resource: height on the exterior and entrance construing power

Moving from the entry-level up to floor 5, there is decreased institutional Contact, as there are fewer members of staff, and they may be sitting behind computers which hinders their visibility. While physical distance between staff and users is still distinct (as they use different areas), users are free to navigate the space and so can achieve a personal Social Distance by approaching a member of staff, or vice-versa. Nevertheless, some Social Distance is maintained due to the differences in dress, with staff wearing uniforms. Students seated side-by-side at a group table have evident Contact, and are ostensibly in personal Social Distance with each other, but the separation afforded by individuated activities and silence elides this potential. The furniture is not fixed in place, but nor are students allowed to move it around. The presence of staff and the fact that they can enforce regulations means that the institution retains its Control.

Moving from floor 5 to the upper floors, the majority of the interactional variables change. Contact, Control, and Social Distance increase again, as there is another service counter to enter here, and further requirements to swipe in and justify entrance. Power is indicated by a distinct change in decorations, with more luxurious fittings and furniture and a greater heaviness of elements on the base plane (ethnicity; O'Toole 2011), particularly on floors 6–10, although this reduces again from floors 11–15, where office administration is located. Thus a sense of hierarchy is construed across the different floors through the changes in design and regulation.

Overall, the design of the library construes strong institutional Control over its users, which distinguishes it from many contemporary libraries in the west where users are relatively free to use and reconfigure the learning spaces and to speak to and work with each other. (Ravelli & McMurtrie 2016b) This strong institutional Control is manifested in a variety of ways — in the presence of staff who wear

uniforms and supervise entry; in strong regulations that prohibit speaking and eating, which are enforced through staff patrol; and in taboo signs that are placed throughout the library to remind users of correct behaviour.

In contrast, however, the interactional variables in the café are different again. Here, no staff are visibly present, nor are there explicit taboo signs reinforcing regulations, nor are there any specific barriers to entry. Thus, anyone can enter and use the café, and the presence and Control of the institution is backgrounded. Curiously, however, users seem to bring and obey the rules themselves: user behaviour observed in the café is very similar to behaviour elsewhere in the library — quiet and (largely) individuated. A number of photos that suggest social relations in the design of the library are illustrated in Figures 12-11, 12-12 and 12-13.



Figure 12-12 Interpersonal resource: variable institutional Contact indicated by varying potential of staff placement



Figure 12-13 Interpersonal resource: an increased heaviness of furniture and increased binding on the base plane above the fifth floor

A further important observation regarding interactional meanings in the library is that there is a social hierarchy of users according to user affiliation and educational qualification, indicated by users' entry conditions and afforded activities. Users affiliated with Southwest University can enter the library by swiping their student or staff card, and they are also able to borrow books. Users not affiliated with the university need to show their ID card to the security staff and then state the purpose of their visit, and they cannot borrow books. Affiliated users with higher educational qualification are afforded further choices. For instance, they have priority to place orders for restricted literature, and with prior permission from the relevant department, they can also have access to the Ancient Books Documentation Center^① on the eighth floor. In this sense, an implicit and unequal social relation is construed among different groups of users, with institutional practices according a higher value to some rather than others.

4.3 Organizational meaning

Looking around the building and at its exterior, the library is salient in comparison with other buildings on campus because of its newness, its particular size and height as well as its central location. Both geographically and symbolically, the library functions as apparently a centre to all the other buildings on campus, the nucleus of its activities (see Ravelli 2008). However, as noted above, usage of the library does not always reinforce this role, with students often preferring to study in the older libraries, because of their proximity to accommodation. As users navigate their way towards the library, going up the hill, there is a Before/After information structure, with what

^① This floor is typically closed to users and access is only given under the conditions described.

comes before (being outside the library/on the path to learning) construed as Given, and what comes after (being inside the library, in the place of learning) as New^①. Thus the transformative nature of this journey reinforces the symbolic elements of the exterior design which reference the Han Yu poem. While the library is strongly framed as being different from its surrounding environment — an inorganic, built structure, as opposed to the trees and meandering path outside — the strength of this frame is weakened by the transparency of the glass, and the meandering nature of the path. In this way, the overall frame is evident and visible, but also permeable (Boeriis & Norgaard 2013), enabling users to cross the threshold. There is a certain degree of framing between the three sections A, B, and C as evidenced by differences in their shape, height, and window design. However, the uniform use of glass, concrete and white colour weakens the framing, unifying them.

At the rank of a floor, floors 1 — 5 each have an integrated information value, as there is a Center/Margin configuration. From above, the central space of Section B mediates Sections A and C to either side^② (see Figure 12-14). In Section B, diverse functions are present, such as service counters, book borrowing, and seating. Sections A and C are predominantly allocated to bookshelves and books, with a small number of tables and some retrieval machines, etc. Thus, the diversity of functions associated with learning, and the (potentially) more social and collaborative nature of these activities, are given salience by being informationally central in the layout of these floors.

① This of course reverses on exiting, with learning/knowledge construed as Given, and the world outside construed as New. (See McMurtrie 2011)

② In a two-dimensional image, this would suggest a triptych (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006), but in a three-dimensional space, moving through the spaces makes Section B centre, as Sections A and C are hypotactically dependent on B (*cf.* Ravelli & McMurtrie 2006: 136).

However, no specific elements are inherently salient within these floors; salience will depend on users' preferences: do they need a book? need to sit? need help from the service counter? The floor plan (floors 1–5) “from above” is illustrated in Figure 12-14.

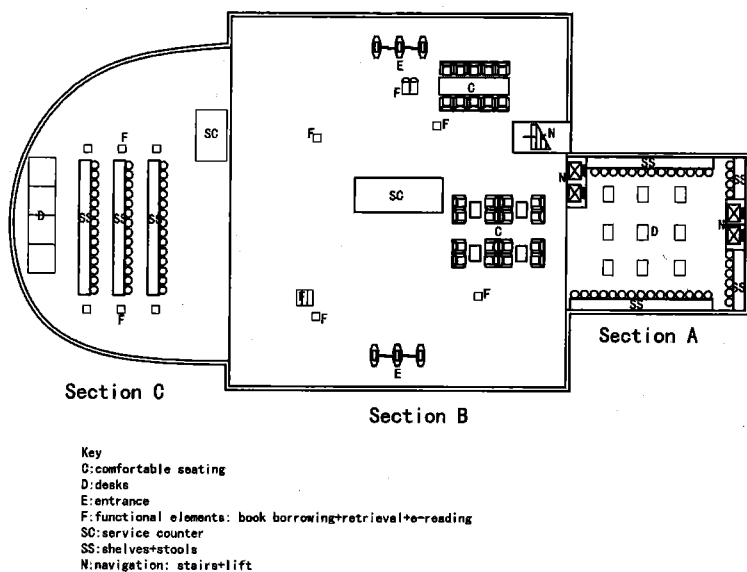


Figure 12-14 Floor plan “from above” (floors 1–5), approximate

The regular placement of furniture such as bookshelves and tables indicates orderly navigation around them, but open space between such areas indicates otherwise free navigation for users. This is reinforced by framing which is distinct but also weak: the different functions and furnishings of the seating area versus the book storage separate the spaces, but the absence of dividing walls and doors, along with uniform flooring, enables them to be integrated. Between floors 1–5 the framing is also relatively weak. Each floor is evidently its own physical entity, but they share a similar design aesthetic, and movement between them is facilitated by stairs and an elevator, both of which have free access. Thus floors 1–5 function together as a unit.

The transition from floors 1—5 to floors 6—15 is highly marked, however, by the reinsertion of explicit institutional control and strong framing at this point. Control is asserted through the additional entry requirements to reach these levels, as described above, and by a clear change in design and decoration, towards a more traditional style, which contrasts with the floors below. In this way, the activities associated with floors 6—15 and the users who are allowed there, are construed as being different and, indeed, highly valuable.

The café is equally marked, but in other ways, and with other effects. It is highly salient within the context of the library as a whole, because of its physical separation away from the main floors, clearly indicating the separation of the functions of learning and relaxation^①. The absence of explicit institutional control, through the free access to it, suggests that it is a space where users are welcome. Its furnishing and decoration maintain continuity with floors 1—5 through similar chairs and tables (see again Figure 12-7), but also mark its difference through the functional elements which indicate eating and drinking (coffee bar, drink machines), and “fun” elements such as irregular book shelves. Thus, a combination of weak and strong framing counterbalances both continuity and separation from floors 1—5. The design contrast with floors 6—15 reinforces the strong framing and separation of these areas, indicating that the café serves students more than staff and special guests.

At the rank of element, there is a certain degree of framing between students and staff as indicated by their different clothing and association with specific areas.

① The café is isolated and attached to Central Library Building on its right side. From the outside, as a result of abundant trees, it is mostly hidden from sight.

5. Conclusion

By recasting space as a communicative text, this paper has proposed an alternative meaning-based social semiotic approach to library studies that focuses on the interpretation of meaning in relation to social context. We have demonstrated how a newly-built university library in China manifests both continuities with and differences from traditional ideologies around learning and higher education in China. The status and achievement indicated by learning is sustained by the quality, placement and presence of this building, and by the traditional references to learning featured on the exterior. On the interior, the higher status accorded to some learners and some learning practices continues to be manifested on the upper floors, with their restricted access and particular decorations and furnishings, affording a range of specific functions. However, distinct changes in cultural attitudes are evident in other ways. Even on the upper levels, the degree of luxury and comfort in the fittings suggests that learning does not have to be unpleasant. On the lower levels, the open-access between floors 1–5 and between spaces within floors, the variety of seating configurations and seating styles, the abundant light, presence of the café and pot plants and so on, indicate that here, too, learning should be pleasant, and can take place in multiple ways.

The Spatial Discourse Analysis presented here indicates that the new library provides users with a more comfortable learning environment and more types of activities, which corresponds to the changing educational and technological realities in China. The fact that the design of spaces is responsive to social changes and human needs relates to the concept of generic transmutation (McMurtrie 2011) and adds further evidence to the social aspect of semiotics. However, in our

observation, although the changing spatial design affords an increase of comfort and choice, the strict institutional regulations exclude many such choices and make it challenging to fully satisfy different user needs. This suggests that the overarching institutional ideology is relatively stable and potentially at odds with a rapidly changing social reality. It also points to the fact that spatial affordance is not only materially built but also socially and culturally shaped. The relatively quiet behaviour observed in the café indicates that users indeed play a significant role in the meaning-making process, and thus it is important to extend the famous Winston Churchill quote, “We shape our buildings, and afterwards our buildings shape us” (cited in Hall 1966: 106), to include “and we continue to reshape our buildings” (Ravelli & McMurtrie 2016a: 18).

A metafunctional analysis of representational, interactional, and organizational meanings reveals that the design of the Central Library at Southwest University manifests culture-specific meanings such as *tianyuan difang* and *fengshui*. It is also clear that relative to the older libraries, the functionality and comfort of learning spaces has been increased for users, and that the library is presented as open and inviting. As in the west, a library such as this in China manages the potential threats posed by the digital environment by expanding the functions the library offers, and building community with users in its physical spaces.

Nevertheless, it is also the case that the institution retains — on the whole — strong Control over users’ behaviour, and that users extend these practices themselves into areas where such Control is not necessarily exerted, such as the café, perhaps cognizant of the “hard-working learning spirit” that has imbued histories of learning in China. Thus, some of the potentials for collaboration afforded by the

arrangement of seating in the learning spaces, and for relaxation and casual encounters afforded by the café, is negated.

The framework of Spatial Discourse Analysis provides a rich array of tools for analyzing how spaces of the built environment make use of multimodal resources to structure social life and convey its values. With a building as large and complex as the Central Library, it is not possible to present a fully systematic analysis in the space available here, but the analysis reveals the potential of a metafunctional approach which takes some account of rank, and the role that expressive resources such as layout, furnishing and decoration play alongside actual users' practices in the construal of meaning, and how it is necessary to interpret these in relation to both the historical and current social context. Texts of the built environment do communicate powerful meanings to and through us, and we believe that a social semiotic study of space opens up an exciting area for future explorations.

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