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Heterotopia

Is It or Isn't it?

Six Principles for Identifying a Heterotopia (1984)

Gregory Bracken

French philosopher Michel Foucault first mentioned heterotopia in a lecture to architects in 1967. Up to this time it had been a medical term (one also used in biology and zoology). It denoted the presence of unusual tissue that can co-exist with normal tissue in a body; the heterotopic tissue shouldn't be there but it does no harm. Foucault applied this term to 'those singular spaces to be found in some given social spaces whose functions are different or even the opposite of others' (Foucault, 1991). Places that contain layers of meaning or relationships that aren't immediately obvious.

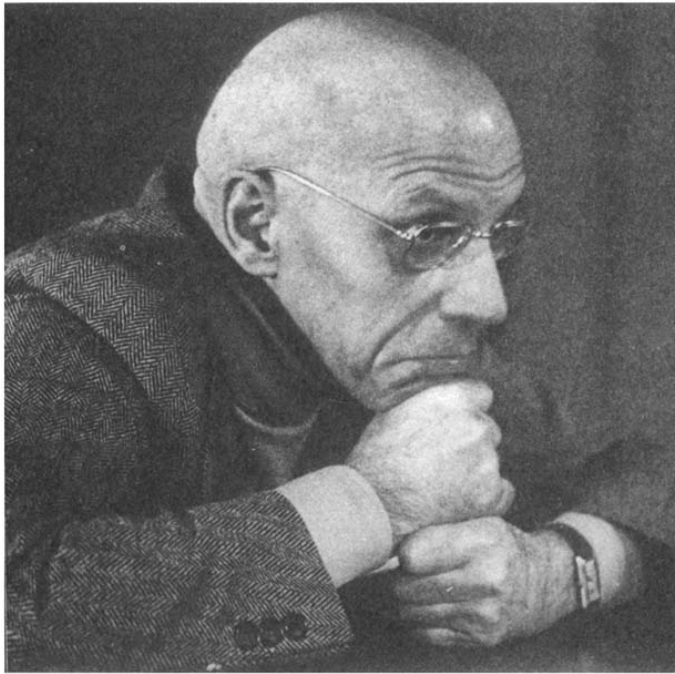


Fig. 1: Michel Foucault

The heterotopia is not particularly representative of Foucault's work and remained something of an afterthought. The concept was eventually published in an article, 'Des espaces autres' (other spaces), in *Architecture/Mouvement/Continuité* in 1984. This also happened to be the year of Foucault's premature death, which may account for why he never developed or clarified the concept further. It certainly lacks the scholarly rigour of his investigations into madness, sexuality, and power. Most theoretical commentators barely acknowledge its existence. Most architects and urbanists, however, seem to focus on little else. I've seen many students over the years, both in Architecture and Urbanism, who have attempted to use this concept in their work – and why wouldn't they? it's so beguiling, so intriguing. Some get it right, to be sure, but quite a few have fallen into the trap of attaching it as a sort of label to places they don't fully understand. While some of these places do indeed show differences to their surroundings, they lack that essential ingredient of Otherness which sets the true heterotopia apart. Foucault related the heterotopia to the utopia, a site with no real place. This was a well-established concept in Western literature. Utopia literally means 'no place' in Greek and was the title of Thomas More's famous book of 1516. More himself was tapping into a long tradition of thinkers who used idealised mythical places as a mirror to show up contemporary shortcomings.

The most famous is perhaps in Plato's *Timaeus and Critias* (2008), where Critias describes the lost civilisation of this magazine's namesake, Atlantis. Clearly intended as a cautionary tale to Athens, it has spawned crackpot theories ever since.

The heterotopia, on the other hand, is a place which *does* exist. It is the physical representation or approximation of the utopia; a parallel space that makes real utopian space possible. Foucault gives the examples of hospitals, prisons, and schools as places that contain undesirables with the aim of altering them (curing the ill; reforming the criminal; educating the ignorant) so that they can (re)take their place in society.

The link between utopia and heterotopia is illustrated by Foucault using the mirror, where the image reflected is a utopia because it shows a placeless place, an unreal virtuality that allows viewers to see themselves. The mirror is, however, also a heterotopia because it is a real thing. The heterotopia of the mirror is at one and the same time absolutely real (because it relates to the real space surrounding it) and absolutely unreal (by creating a virtual image). You can see why some of us might have difficulty with the concept. Fortunately, Foucault outlines six principles (or types) of heterotopia, with examples showing how different spaces can contain this dual meaning.

Six principles of the heterotopia

The first type is the crisis heterotopia, where people are kept away from society while undergoing change. We saw the school mentioned above. Foucault specifically means the boarding school, but really any kind of school (or university) will do. He also mentions the military barracks. Both of these spaces were for men in the nineteenth century, the era he takes his examples from; for women, he suggests the honeymoon. All three are places where people undergo change (adolescence, losing virginity), so removing them from society as they undergo these changes preserves its stability. Foucault sees crisis heterotopias increasingly being replaced by heterotopias of deviation: institutions for people whose behaviour falls more permanently outside of society's norms, e.g., asylums, retirement homes, and prisons. People can go there to get better (physically or morally) but they might also be kept out of circulation if they can't be cured – this relates to his work on madness and sexuality and the question of who gets to define what is 'normal' in society. The Enlightenment was an era in which the differently abled or sexually diverse were simply locked up: 'madness' was not tolerated in the Age of Reason.

Society's attitude to death informs the second principle, which states that a heterotopia can change function over time. Here Foucault gives the example of the cemetery and (Western) society's changing attitudes to death, depending on religious or scientific views.

A heterotopia can also be a place which juxtaposes several spaces. Here he cites the theatre and garden (and, oddly, the carpet – but he links this to the carpet's garden-like capacity for gath-

ering visual elements). The theatre and garden are, however, real spaces that act as microcosms representing the world and its variety.

The fourth principle is linked to what he calls 'slices of time'. These are heterotopias that enclose objects from all times and styles, like a museum or library. They exist in time but are also outside of it because they're intended to withstand the ravages of time so as to preserve the things that are most important to society.

The fifth principle is that heterotopias always presuppose systems of opening and closing. These isolate them yet also make them accessible; spaces that can be visited, even if they're not freely accessible to the public. Entry to some, like the prison or barracks, is compulsory. There are also heterotopias dedicated to purification, like the hammam or sauna, with rituals that are religious, hygienic, or both.

Finally, the heterotopia can be 1) a space of illusion that feels more real than surrounding reality (here he gives the example of the brothel) or 2) a space of compensation; tidy and meticulous, a reaction to the messy space it seeks to distance itself from (like a religious colony). These are two extreme types of heterotopia.

Foucault ends his article by citing the ship as the 'heterotopia par excellence'. It is a floating piece of space, a place without a place, closed in on itself. Echoing his concern for the down-trodden and the Other which informs so much of his work, Foucault says that a civilisation without ships is inherently repressive. Society needs heterotopias, not only as spaces for the affirmation of difference, but also as a way of escaping authoritarianism and repression.



Fig. 2: The author's boarding School, Newbridge College in Ireland

Applying the concept

It is interesting, given the political climate in the Netherlands at the time of writing – when Geert Wilders' Partij voor de Vrijheid has just romped to victory in the recent general election on a xenophobic platform of anti-refugee rhetoric – that one of the country's recent strategies for dealing with refugees (the very issue which also brought down the last government) has been to house them in old cruise ships. This is Foucault's heterotopia par excellence. An old cruise ship crammed with the displaced and disenfranchised, a ship going nowhere, bottling up those who are different, who do not (yet) belong. Who, given the current political climate, may never get to belong. Sadly, this is a modern-day reincarnation of an age-old strategy, like the Jewish ghetto in Venice (which was instituted in 1516, the same year Thomas More's *Utopia* was published).

If you're interested in the heterotopia, or think you can apply it to places you're studying, then you need to check it very carefully. First of all, read Foucault's article (and also some other commentators, such as Paul Rabinow (1991), Gary Gutting (2006), or David Grahame Shane

(2005)). Just because your place contains people or spaces (or both) that seem different from their surroundings does not make it a heterotopia. You need to check that it is a space of Otherness, not merely difference.

Otherness is real opposition to the norms of society. The City of London, Zhongnanhai in Beijing, or Beverly Hills are not heterotopias, they are spaces of difference because they house people who are richer or more powerful (or both) than the rest of society, but these are what I would call 'apex enclaves' (developing Shane's concept of the enclave). They're different, they're hard to get into, but they are places where the real power and wealth resides; they are at the top of their respective societies, financially, politically, and/or culturally. That makes them different, but not Other. They are, in fact, the very opposite of Other since they are at the apex of their given systems and have the power to change their societies. Remember, a heterotopia is a place where people are different but not powerful.

Finally, once you've identified a place with real potential, then simply go through Foucault's six principles to see if you're right. Good luck!

Fig. 3: Cruise ship as refugee accommodation in the Netherlands



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Fig. 1: Michel Foucault (<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/245588413>

[Body-and_Image-Space_Re-Reading_Walter_Benjamin/figures?lo=1](#))

Fig. 2: The author's boarding School, Newbridge College in Ireland (<https://www.flickr.com/photos/infomatique/8317170085>).

Fig. 3: Cruise ship as refugee accommodation in the Netherlands (<https://www.aneews.com.tr/world/2023/08/09/cruise-ship-to-become-refugee-accommodation-in-the-netherlands>).

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